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Gaenor's Quest:

Book Three

The Rainbow of Dusk

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Foreword

If you go back and read the Foreword of the first book of this series, *The Red Light of Dawn*, you will notice that at the time I said this would be a three volume story. Well, I was wrong. I didn't intentionally extend the story, but I did seriously underestimate how long it would take to write about Artur's and Gaenor's search for fellow adepts. As I started plotting what I thought was the middle volume, I got as far as what turned out to be the end of the second book and thought, "Hmm, that would have been a good place to end," but even then didn't believe it would be long enough to stand on its own, so I continued plotting until I got to the end of this volume. I made a note at the end of the plot outline that said, "Book 2 will probably end here. If not I'll have to keep writing." It still wasn't as far as I expected to get in the second book, but that's just as well, since I realize now that it would have left the final book rather short.

As I prepare this volume for posting, I'm in the process of plotting the fourth and final volume of Gaenor's Quest; *The Cold, Clear Skies of Midnight*. Unlike this book which had many pages of notes, photocopies, sketches etc, all I have from my original description of the series to go on was a single sentence. I've decided not to do that to myself again. It's too much work to have to work out the details of the conclusion after having written this much. It's a basic difference in how I used to write when I started this series and how I plan a series these days.

Anyway, in this book readers will discover that the World Gaenor lives in is not quite how it appeared in the previous volumes. This was planned from the start, by the way. Mishanda is a technological backwater because of the prevalent use of magic there, although in magic it is most advanced. Imperial Cilbe is a bit behind the times as well, but from hereon we'll be visiting countries that are decades ahead of those of the north and some countries that are miserably behind as well. It's a very full world with many diverse cultures. I hope you'll enjoy the trip.

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 E. Feinstein
Westport, MA
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The Rainbow of Dusk

Prologue

"What the hell are we doing in Colch?" General Arturus Cornelian Marmo wondered out loud. The rain continued to beat down on his steel helmet as he looked across the flood plain of the normally small stream that separated the might of the Cilben Twelfth Legion from the final stronghold of the last autonomous nation on the southwest coast.

"Sir?" Centurion Thallius Caspero Vasro asked.

"I'm sorry, Thallius," Arturus replied. "I didn't mean to say that out loud, but I'll repeat it anyway. What are we doing in Colch?"

"Uh, strengthening the Empire for the glory of Jube, sir," Thallius replied uncertainly.

"Are we?" Arturus replied sourly. "Oh, yes, I suppose. It just seems like a long way to come for apples and cheese."

"And wine, sir," Thallius added quickly. "Colch is known for her wine."

“And for what it’s going to cost Emperor Balto, it had better be the best in the world, because I can buy a hogshead of decent plonk back home in any good market for a hell of a lot less than anything likely to come out of Colch over the next decade!”

Centurion Thallius looked at his commander, uncertain what to say. Coming from another man the words might have been treasonous, but there was no man in all Cilbe more loyal than General Arturus. Off to their left came a shout and four large catapults lobbed boulders at the ColchCity walls. They crashed into the tall fortifications and broke large chunks of stonework off the top. A vision of Cilben soldiers and engineers rebuilding those walls passed across Thallius’ eyes and he sighed, “Yes, sir. Why are we here then?”

“Seriously?” Arturus asked, but did not wait for an answer. “You ought to know, Thallius. King Werlta has been annexing bits and pieces of southern Archatu for the last few years. In the interest of peace, Emperor Balto has tried to warn him off even though there’s a powerful faction in the Senate who thought we should have retaliated immediately.”

“Would that be the ones who follow Sentor Girdecus, sir?” Thallius inquired.

“Shh!” Arturus admonished his adjutant. “That toady of his is wandering around like he owns the place. Roton only knows what he’ll report on his return to the city.”

“Who? Flacco?” Thallius laughed. “Don’t worry about him. He’s still sleeping last night off.”

“He got drunk last night?” Arturus frowned. “That doesn’t sound like him at all, unless he was trying to convince you all to get drunk so he could report it.” The catapults were fired once more.

“He might have, had we been the Eighth Legion,” Thallius replied after still more damage had been done to the city’s walls, “but we couldn’t stand the sight or sound of him any more going on about his days in the army, so Beryllius slipped a few knock-out drops into Flacco’s evening tea. Can’t say he liked the taste after that. We had to tell him it was some special leaf that grows here in Colch before he would finish it.”

“Terrific,” Arturus commented sourly. “He’s going to remember that, you know.”

“We told him the tea was a nice soothing drink, perfect before bedtime,” Thallius smirked.

“You weren’t technically lying, I suppose,” Arturus sighed.

“No, sir,” Thallius replied seriously, but with a glint of humor in his eyes. The catapults were nearly ready to fire again when a white flag was raised on what was left of the battlements. “Is that a flag of truce, sir? Are they surrendering?”

“They certainly look ready to talk,” Arturus noted. “Have the catapults hold fire.”

Thallius shouted the order and it was repeated down the line. “Sir, if they’re surrendering, they’re certainly doing it sooner than most.”

“Perhaps,” Arturus replied. “On the other side of the coin, we did sweep through northern Colch in spite of King Werlta’s best cavalry and infantry units. I imagine the writing’s on the wall. Come on. At the very least we’re under a flag of truce. Let’s go see what they have in mind.”

“Could be treachery,” Thallius warned. “Lure you in close then have their archers start shooting.”

“Then I’ll rest easy, knowing the Twelfth Legion avenged me,” Arturus replied calmly as he started walking forward. Thallius just stood there a moment, then ran a few steps to catch up.

They crossed a low bridge that was nearly swamped by the flooded stream and as they approached the city gate, it opened slightly and the king of Colch came out with a few followers to meet them.

“I would like to discuss terms of surrender, illustrious Arturus,” the king said by way of greeting.

Several responses ran through Arturus’ mind including the old cliché that he didn’t have to grant any terms. Instead, he nodded and replied, “I’ll listen. What do you propose?”

“Amnesty for my people,” King Werlta replied. “No further reprisals against them for my actions.” There wasn’t a lot of certainty in the king’s voice and Arturus had noticed he failed to use the “Royal We.”

“That’s it?” Arturus asked. “No future autonomy for Colch? No special privileges for you?”

“Would you grant that?” the king countered flatly.

“It’s not within my power to grant it,” Arturus replied.

“Of course not,” Werlta replied. “I imagine you’ll be dragging me in chains to Cilbe to be humiliated in your Great Forum and then put to death as an example to my people and any people who might be tempted to rebel against Cilben rule.”

“We’re not savages, Your Majesty,” Arturus replied, shocked. “You’ll have to go to Cilbe to formally surrender to Emperor Balto, of course. But I’ll be damned if I’m going to take you in chains. You and your family may even be allowed to continue living in your palace afterward; it wouldn’t be the first time, although that isn’t up to me. You won’t be an autonomous monarch, of course; the emperor will assign someone to act here as his governor. However so long as you facilitate Cilben rule in Colch you won’t be humiliated – not by us anyway – and your people will prosper.”

The king looked at General Arturus a long moment. “Is that true?”

“There is no profit to the Empire in punishing you any further nor in oppressing the people of Colch,” Arturus replied seriously in spite of the insult. He wasn’t used to having anyone doubt his word. Then any feeling of insult vanished when he saw the open look of relief on the king’s face.

“I thought,” the king began. “That is, I thank you, sir. You are most kind and honorable in victory, especially since I declared war on your emperor.”

“We all make mistakes,” Arturus replied dryly. For some reason King Werlta thought that was amazingly funny.

Cilbe

One

"I think I really screwed up this time," Artur told Gaenor sadly as they looked down into the courtyard of the Imperial Palace. Below them Cilben legionaries and Temi alike were chanting his name.

"I'll say," she agreed. "This is really going to slow us down, Emperor Artur."

"Jube!" Artur swore, "if I'd wanted to be emperor, I could have done so years ago when Balto died."

"Are you sure you never regretted that decision?" Gaenor asked softly.

"Never!" Artur told her firmly. "Not even when I was running for my life and especially never since I met you, dear."

Gaenor smiled warmly at him.

"Excuse me," a palace servant interrupted, obviously unnerved by the sudden death of Emperor Lusius. "Are you really the new emperor?"

Artur was about to deny it but one of the senators in the room spoke first. "Only the Senate can declare an emperor," he pronounced haughtily.

"Fine," Artur told the man, "then you tell the two armies out there that they're wrong."

"Two armies?" another senator asked, timidly looking out the window. "I see legionaries and..." he gasped. "Temi! Jube and Sellae, preserve us! There are hundreds of Temi out there!"

"Oh don't be ridiculous," the first senator replied, going to see for himself. He turned back from the window dumbstruck.

"Senator Arturus," still another senator asked, "are you really intent on being emperor? I don't suppose we can do much to stop you, but..."

"I'm really sure I don't want the job," Artur replied, "but I also didn't come all this way to see the Senate replace Lusius with someone just as bad or worse either. I'll be damned if I can understand why you put up with him so long anyway. Who the heck are you lot anyway? None of you were in the Senate last time I was here."

Four of the senators bristled at that but the man who spoke third was calm. "Other than Old Girdecus and a small handful of cronies, there's no one in the Senate whose family was of Senatorial rank the last time you were here. I'm Caralus Renolian Carn, by the way. I doubt you'll know of me or my antecedents, we're from Kolme."

"I always thought we should have senatorial families in the provinces," Artur replied. "My congratulations."

"Thank you, I suppose," Caralus replied. "I doubt I was elevated to the Senate because the Emperor recognized my innate nobility. Actually, I was just in the right place at the right time, if you can call it that."

I came to Cilbe as a merchant and the Emperor happened by the booth I was selling from. He was having some sort of argument with another Senator – one he later forced to commit suicide – and claimed that anyone else was more deserving of senatorial rank. Next thing I know I was whisked off to the palace and put in senatorial robes.”

“Well,” Artur replied, “it sounds like I’m in a similar situation. I suggest you lot go back to the Senate and start making a few decisions as to how the empire is going to continue from now on.”

“Emperor,” General Tarsus said from the doorway. He and the Temi chief, Leracus had entered the palace and come up from the courtyard. “The streets are too dangerous at this time. There are still bands of Imperial Guard out there attacking any group of people they out-number.”

“There are others who are using the opportunity to loot the shops in the *fora* of the city,” Leracus added. “I have assigned warriors to suppress that.”

“Good,” Artur replied. “Try to do so without killing, however. I’m afraid too much blood has already been spilled.”

“Of course, my chief,” Leracus replied in an injured tone, as though he had never considered any alternative.

“I suppose we had better assign an honor guard to each of the members of the Senate,” Gaenor considered, “including staff workers.”

“Yes,” Artur agreed. “Good idea. General, please see to that. Then please work with Chief Leracus to establish a temporary guardian force for the city.”

“So you’re taking over already?” Senator Caralus observed.

“Somebody has to,” Artur snapped back. “History tells us that times like these are chaotic at best. If we don’t establish peace in the city immediately and establish a sufficient military force we’re likely to have anyone with a thousand or more troops at his disposal trying for a quick promotion to emperor. “I’ll remind you there are several legions not all that far away on the Barbarian border and probably still more to the north and south of us. I’ll need a briefing on that as soon as we can find someone who knows.”

“But you say you aren’t the emperor,” Caralus pressed slyly, “or are you just waiting to be confirmed by the Senate?”

“No, I have more important business to take care of than to sit around and rule an empire. However, I cannot leave Cilbe in chaos, so I’ll stay in the city for a while until power can be transferred peaceably to a suitable candidate.”

“Like old Valeratus of ancient legend,” one of the other senators murmured, “who in the time of the Republic was called upon to serve Cilbe as her leader when we were in crisis.”

“Yes,” Gaenor agreed, “and when the crisis was over he stepped down from his position of power and went back to his private life. Even in Mishanda we have heard of him.”

“But how do we know you will step down?” Caralus pressed.

“You already looked out that window, didn’t you?” Gaenor asked “Are you trying to say that if Artur

wanted to be emperor there is anything you can do to stop him?"

"Who are you, girl?" Caralus asked nastily.

"Girl?" Gaenor echoed angrily, motioning to Artur to stay out of this. "Girl? Okay, fine have it your way, I'm the nice Temi girl who will have your guts for garters if you don't stop making a fool of yourself."

Caralus stared at the sword in Gaenor's hand. She had never actually sheathed the blade after entering Lusius' throne room and now had unconsciously raised the tip until it was pointing at Caralus' belly.

"You know me, Senator Caralus," Leracus said dispassionately. Caralus turned to look at the red-clad Tem chieftain. "You know I never lie, correct? So you should know that if you do not apologize to my chief, Lady Gaenor of Narmouth, you will not live to see the other side of that door, and if you anger me the way you have my chief, I'll allow her to play with you first. I suggest you apologize. You wouldn't like what Temi women do for fun."

"I... I'm sorry, Lady Gaenor," Caralus told her with a tremor in his voice. "I misspoke. Please forgive me." Gaenor said nothing, but kept a solemn expression on her face and nodded very slightly.

"General Tarsus, Chief Leracus," Artur interrupted, "Please see these senators safely to their homes and then to the Senate tomorrow morning. Senators, I shall meet with you, or with whomever you choose as a delegation to discuss whatever you decide tomorrow afternoon."

"That soon?" Caralus asked.

"Yes, that soon," Artur replied implacably. "You'll have to cut through the usual amenities, I'm afraid and just get down to the matter at hand, but frankly I don't have the time to let you lot blather on for the next two years. You see I do remember what life in the Senate was like. No, for tomorrow at least, you'll have to forget the long-winded speeches and clever oratory."

The senators took it for the dismissal that it was. Leracus and Tarsus led them out of the throne room.

"Now what?" Gaenor asked Artur as she finally sheathed her sword.

"I'm not really sure," Artur admitted. "Obviously we can't leave until the situation settles down. I wasn't kidding about what would happen if there was a real power vacuum. We need to find a good candidate for emperor. We won't have a shortage to choose from, of course. Nearly every general and senator will want the job if he thinks he can snatch it. The problem is that most of the people who want it either aren't capable of doing the job or will be even worse than Lusius was."

"So how do we choose a new emperor?" Gaenor asked. "For that matter, who are we to choose a new emperor at all?"

"We're the ones who stumbled into the job," Artur told her with none of his usual humor. "How do we do it? As best we can, I suppose. Let's see what the Senate comes up with."

"Emperor Arturus," Tarsus called from the door to the throne room as he and Leracus re-entered. "We have sent guards home with the senators as you ordered."

"Please don't call me 'Emperor,'" Artur told him. "Caralus was right on one count. The Legions aren't supposed to declare an emperor, no matter how often it has happened in the past. That power is solely

held by the Senate. In many ways it's the only power they have, since once an emperor is declared, they generally do whatever he tells them to."

"My chief, we have also sent teams throughout the palace to make certain it is secure," Leracus told him.

"Good idea," Artur told him, "We need to secure the city as well. There are still too many of the former Imperial Guard at large."

"That is already underway," Leracus assured him.

"Where is Cornellya?" Artur asked, suddenly realizing he had not seen his god-daughter in quite some time, "and Vito?"

"We're here," Cornellya's voice replied from an apparently empty corner. As everyone turned to look, she and the Wanlarian adept suddenly appeared as Cornellya released her invisibility spell. "With everything else going on, I thought it might be best if we stayed in the corner. Then I forgot the spell was still working. Sorry."

"No, that's okay," Artur told her. "I'm glad you had the presence of mind to stay out of the way. Had the people in here been a little less spineless or a little more loyal to Lusius, we could have been in big trouble when we burst into this room."

"I don't think anyone was really loyal to Emperor Lusius," General Tarsus opined. "We were loyal to Cilbe, but never to Lusius. Well, maybe the Imperial Guard were loyal to him. He pulled them up from the lowest classes of the city and put them in a place of honor with permission to bully the populace, especially the patricians. They owed him everything."

"If any of them survive, we'll have to find another place for them."

"Jail in most cases," Tarsus replied. "If half of what I've heard is true most of them were petty thugs before Lusius recruited them."

"We'll treat them fairly anyway. If they deserve prison, that is what they'll get. If they deserve a new life somewhere else... Well, we'll see. It's too soon to start making a decision like that," Artur replied. "Listen to me. I'm sounding like an emperor and I've already turned that job down."

"It will be offered again if you really want it, my chief," Leracus told him.

"I don't. Gaenor and I have told you what we're up to. There's no way we could ever continue if I chose to rule the empire. Besides, if I'd wanted it, the Twelfth Legion would have given it to me... How long ago was it? Thirty years ago? More? Too long ago, anyway. I didn't want the job then and I don't want it now."

"Excuse me," a servant said uncertainly from the doorway. "I'm from the kitchen and the head cook wants to know what the new emperor would like for dinner."

"Gently, my chief," Leracus advised. "Go along with it for now. It makes it easier for us all."

"Very well," Artur sighed. He turned to the servant and replied, "It's hot this afternoon and probably will be this evening as well. Please ask the cook to provide something simple and satisfying but not too heavy. Alright?" The servant bowed and left quickly.

“I never had slaves in my life,” Artur grumbled.

“You can always manumit them,” Gaenor told him.

“They aren’t my slaves, dear,” he replied.

“I’m not sure they’re anyone’s right now,” Gaenor disagreed. “Did Lusius have any heirs?”

“We’ll have to find his will, I suppose. It should be filed at the Temple of Lemma.”

“I doubt he has much family left,” Tarsus put in. “Balto didn’t have a lot of heirs by the time he died and most of them died mysteriously while Lusius was on the throne.”

“Not so mysteriously,” Leracus supplied. “The Ridec clan was hired to assassinate a number of them.”

“I’m not surprised,” both Artur and Tarsus replied.

“What’s being done about Lusius’ body?” Artur asked.

“He’s still down there, I think,” Tarsus remarked.

“Let’s have a detail take him off to a mortuary. Give him the respect in death none of us were inclined to do when he was still alive,” Artur suggested. It didn’t occur to him that his suggestions were being received as orders.

“I’ll see to it immediately, sir” Tarsus replied and left the room again.

“Leracus?” Gaenor asked, “I’m curious. What do Temi women do for fun?”

“Sew, embroider, write and perform songs, dance,” Leracus replied. “Whatever strikes their fancy. Why?”

“You told Senator Caralus he wouldn’t like what they do for fun,” Gaenor pointed out, knowing a Tem would never lie.

Leracus shrugged. “He didn’t seem the type.”

Two

It was after dark before the palace was entirely secured. From the hill the palace sat on, the city seemed quiet, but legionaries and Temi brought reports of sporadic fighting with the remaining Imperial Guard. However, none of these skirmishes were particularly serious and by dawn they had become isolated incidents.

Having nowhere else to go, Artur, Gaenor, Cornellya and Vito stayed in the palace, although Artur refused to move into Lusius’ former suite. At Gaenor’s suggestion, they enjoyed a small informal breakfast together before getting on with the business at hand. It was during that breakfast, however, that their first visitor of the day arrived.

Locius Armenius Flacco was escorted into the dining room with a Tem warrior on either side of him and Leracus directly behind him. In spite of this heavy guard and ostentatious display of distrust, Flacco strolled into the room without any sign of concern. "Congratulations, Arturus," he said by way of greeting. "I must say you took even me by surprise this time."

"Welcome to the club," Artur replied dryly. "I dare say much of what happened yesterday was a surprise to me as well."

"No doubt," Flacco nodded. "But I really thought you honestly had no interest in taking the throne, and now here you are, Emperor of all Cilbe."

"Not if I have anything to say about it," Artur told him. "Look, Flacco, it was not my intention to do anything more than see a party of Barbarian legates safely to their embassy and slip quietly out of town."

"Old boy," Flacco laughed, "you must be losing your touch then. Didn't it ever occur to you that using the entire Temi nation to hijack a legion and then using both the Temi and the legion to enter the city might possibly be misconstrued?"

"You really had to be there. Trust me, it seemed like a good idea at the time. So what brings you here this morning? I hope you didn't have an appointment with Lusius."

"Hard to say, really," Flacco shrugged. "Had you not blown into town so precipitously, who's to say what I might have had on my docket this bright and sunny morning? However, you did and as it happens my calendar is unexpectedly empty."

"Come again?" Artur asked.

"You did more than just kill Lusius yesterday, old boy."

"I did not kill him," Artur told him sternly. "He jumped out the window."

"Really? How classic. Well, then you probably didn't mean to kill old Girdecus either."

"What?"

"Girdecus," Flacco repeated. "When word came to him that your army had put paid to the Imperial Guard's tab, he just collapsed. Another heart attack, I'm afraid. I suppose I ought to give you more than just a supply of tobacco this time, but instead it appears I've come to ask something from you."

"And that would be?" Artur asked warily.

"A job. I am, as the Mishandans might say, at leisure."

"Really?" Gaenor asked, "I've never heard the expression."

"Perhaps it's only used in Misha then," Flacco amended. "I must admit I never had the chance to visit much beyond the capital city."

"You do now," Gaenor pointed out.

“So I do,” Flacco agreed easily, “but I think I’d prefer to work for the new emperor here.”

“I am not the emperor,” Artur told him flatly.

“The de facto emperor then, for you are that whether or not you want to admit it.”

“Girdecus wasn’t the only member of his family,” Artur pointed out. “What about his son, Martius?”

“Girdecus may have been a bitter old man, but at least he listened when I advised him. Martius won’t listen to anyone. There is not enough money in the world to convince me to work for him. This is my chance to wash my hands of the little brat and that’s just what I’m going to do, whether you hire me or not.”

“It seems to me you have enough contacts to set yourself up fairly well without having to work for someone else, Flacco,” Artur pointed out.

“But I do not have the money. Oh, I’m well enough off, I suppose, but I’m a political animal by nature and I’m not even of the equestrian rank. The only way to properly exercise my talents, and you must admit I am talented in the political arena, is by working for someone who is rich.”

“I’m hardly rich,” Artur pointed out. “Lusius saw to that. And I get the feeling you had something to do with it as well.”

“Just doing my job,” Flacco admitted without a trace of embarrassment. “But in your case the power of your position more than makes up for your lack of liquidity.”

“You want a job, huh? Maybe I might have one for you. I’ll be darned if I can figure out how I’ll be able to pay you, however.”

“You let me worry about that,” Flacco told him confidently.

“Whoa, we’re going to need a few ground rules here,” Artur told him firmly. “We are not going to be ruining people here. Nor are we going to have anyone killed.”

“Isn’t it a little late to start with that policy?” Flacco asked archly.

“I’m not particularly happy about it,” Artur replied, “but so far everyone who died has done so as a consequence of Lusius’s actions and policies. If you want to work for me, everything is going to be honest and above board.”

“I can live with that. I always did admire your honesty and I must admit it will be refreshing to work that way for a change. Sure, I can work honestly too. It’ll be a bit of a challenge, but if I’m as good as I think...”

“And you also won’t do anything behind my back,” Artur added.

Flacco paused just a moment. Had Artur not been watching him like a hawk, he might not even have noticed it. “Yes, of course,” he replied, sounding a bit bemused. “I wouldn’t think of working otherwise.”

“All right, stick around and let’s see what happens today. Leracus, what is the city like out on the streets this morning?”

“Quiet for the moment, my chief,” Leracus replied. “General Tarsus informs me that we killed at least two thirds of the Imperial Guard yesterday and last night my warriors saw many of the survivors leaving the city. I would bow to the general’s experience in this, but it would be my guess that we should have the city under control by the end of the day.”

“Good news in that quarter at least,” Artur replied.

“Leracus,” Gaenor asked. “What’s going on in the city? Is there still fighting going on?”

“In a few places, my chief,” Leracus replied, “but the shop keepers are opening their shops in the fora and citizens are coming cautiously out of their homes.”

“Life goes on,” Flacco remarked dryly.

“Would it be safe to go out?” Gaenor asked. “I don’t like the idea of being locked up in the palace as large and luxurious as it may be.”

“You are truly a Tem at heart, my chief,” Leracus told her, “however, I would advise you stay within the palace until General Tarsus assures us it is safe to venture out.”

“Gaenor,” Cornellya added, “The palace is so large that it will take us days to fully explore it in any case.”

“There are quite a few public offices in the palace compound,” Artur put in. “Leracus, are we certain the entire palace is secure?”

“There are no Imperial Guardsmen in the palace,” Leracus replied after consideration. “It is possible that there may be some who are loyal to the Emperor Lusius, I suppose. It may be best if you will allow me to assign some Temi women to accompany you for a day or two.”

“Perhaps tomorrow,” Artur decided. “Until the Senate lets us know its decision, we may as well stay within the private sections of the palace.”

“Why not merely go to the Senate?” Flacco suggested. “You’re still of Senatorial rank, you know.”

“I resigned from the Senate,” Artur replied, “as I’m sure you remember.”

“Yes,” Flacco agreed, “but you were never removed from the Senatorial rolls.”

“I wasn’t?”

“No,” Flacco informed him. “Lusius’ hold on power was not quite as firm at the time as it eventually became. Officially, he allowed you to retire, and later, after he thought you were dead, removing you from the rolls would have been a meaningless gesture even for him. So by law you could come out of retirement merely by showing up while the Senate is in session.”

“Interesting, but I think I will wait for a bit,” Artur decided.

“What, may I ask, are you waiting for them to do?” Flacco inquired.

"I'm hoping they can come up with a plan that won't involve me staying in Cilbe the rest of my life," Artur replied.

"I wouldn't hold my breath waiting for one," Flacco retorted. "This lot isn't the same Senate you remember. Most of the spirit has been whipped out of them, and they haven't done anything Lusus didn't tell them to do first in years."

"They sound like a disaster waiting to happen," Vito opined. He hadn't been very vocal since their arrival at the palace and, aside from grunting good morning to the other mages, had been silent all throughout breakfast.

Flacco considered that, but after a moment just shook his head. "I don't think I'd go that far."

"I would," Vito insisted. "I've seen this sort of thing before. It happened in Wanlaria when I was young. Not the whole kingdom, but in my province. The old gonfalonier – uh the full title is Gonfalonier of Justice, but very few ever say it in long form, it's really just a fancy title for governor - was quite autocratic, which I suppose was his prerogative, but in Wanlaria, our gonfalonieri are elected by the nobles and gentry in the province. This one ruled his province with a closer grip than the king would have dared over all Wanlaria. Everything went well enough however, until the year of the great tide. Most folks say it was actually a land-falling hurricane. The suddenness with which it hit took everyone by surprise, including the gonfalonier who had gone fishing that day."

"Fishing?" Flacco asked, perplexed.

"It's a passtime as well as a means of sustenance. We have some large fish that many consider fun to catch and the old gonfalonier was an enthusiast," Vito explained. "When he was lost there was no one among the electors capable of leading. The result was chaos in the province. Eventually the king had to step in and appoint a governor, but until that happened we had an upsurge of burglaries, gangs of organized criminals and toward the end, riots in the streets. It seems to me it could only be worse if an entire nation suffered that way."

"Perhaps," Flacco admitted. "Instead of organized criminals, or maybe in addition to them, we would have a dozen or two generals all vying for the imperial throne. I think you have made your point, sir."

"Regardless," Artur interjected, "it will be best for Cilbe if we can effect a speedy and peaceful transition from the Bassian Dynasty to whoever is going to replace them."

"I just hope the Sentate doesn't decide to restore the Republic," Flacco muttered.

"Why not?" Gaenor asked. "From the histories I have read, the time of the Republic was one of great prosperity."

"It was, Lady Gaenor," Flacco agreed, "Almost two thousand years ago. Since then, however, there have been several attempts to restore republican rule in the empire. Unfortunately, Cilbe doesn't stay a republic very long when that happens. There are always a few unscrupulous senators or generals who decide they can do a better job. When the dust settles we have a new dynasty and a somewhat smaller urban population for a while. No, it will be better if we just install Artur here as the new emperor and go on from there."

"Flacco, that is out of the question," Artur told him firmly. "I have more important things to do."

“Oh really, old boy...” Flacco began to object, but Gaenor cut him off.

“If you gentlemen don’t mind I’m going to take a walk. I assume the courtyard is safe?”

“Of course, my chief,” Leracus told her.

“Good,” Gaenor remarked. “Join me, Cornellya?”

“Yes, please,” Artur’s godchild replied and together the two women left the dining room. “Those men don’t understand,” Cornellya remarked as soon as they were unable to hear the arguing behind them.

“They are Cilbens,” Gaenor sighed. “They don’t truly believe there’s anything more important than Cilbe.”

“These Cilbens are crazy,” Cornellya remarked, shaking her head. “Too bad we can’t go into town. This city looks so unlike any of the others I’ve seen since I followed you and Arturus out of the Parch. I thought it would look like Wahton, maybe a bit bigger, but still very similar.”

“Artur told me that Wahton is typical of Cilben cities, but that Cilbe is more like a dozen Cilben cities,” Gaenor explained. “It’s much larger than any of the others. Why this palace complex covers almost as much land as the entire city of Wahton. So instead of a single city center, it actually has several and is even split into several boroughs, or whatever they call them in Cilben, each with its own council.”

“So there’s no single city government?” Cornellya asked.

“It doesn’t appear so, unless you count the emperor, when they have one. It’s really his city, although I believe there are two tribunes appointed at a time by the Senate to whom the day to day matters are delegated. At least I think that’s how it works. It’s very complicated and I’m not sure I understand it completely.”

They were just passing the gate to the palace compound when they heard a woman arguing with the legionary and Temi guards who were posted there. “We really are friends of Senator Arturus Cornellian Marno and Miss Gaenor of Narmouth. Why don’t you just ask them, for goodness sake?”

“I’m sorry miss, but the emperor and his lady are very busy people,” the decurion at the gate began, but Gaenor interrupted him.

“Tallicia? Clortius? Nua and Hannor! What are you doing in Cilbe? Let them in, immediately,” she told the guards. They hastened to comply even as she continued. “Really, you let in that scoundrel Flacco, but you try to screen out people who really are friends? I hope they didn’t give you two too hard a time.”

“Not really, child,” Clortius told her as he hobbled in, leaning on his cane a bit more than he had in Wahton. Gaenor guessed this was one of those days on which his left knee was more painful.

“We just got here a few minutes ago,” Tallicia added. “I think they would have allowed us to leave a message if you hadn’t shown up just now.”

“But what are you doing in Cilbe?”

“Business trip, Gaenor,” Clortius told her simply. “We generally come to the city twice a year to deal with my coastal suppliers.”

“And I generally come with grandpapa,” Tallicia added brightly, but she paused as she got her first glimpse of Cornellya. At first glance the Vari looked like a small human with delicate features, but a closer look at her pointed ears which protruded slightly through her long hair and the cast of her eyes made it obvious she was not human.

“Ah,” Gaenor said, noticing Tallicia’s reaction, “This is Cornellya Vasylya, Artur’s godchild. You would call her a Parchite, but she prefers the term ‘Vari.’”

“Pleased to meet you, my dear,” Clortius replied before Tallicia could grasp what Gaenor had said. “You are truly a legend come to life.”

“Um, yes,” Tallicia agreed, still staring at Cornellya’s ears. “Grandfather raised me on stories about your people. I always thought they were just stories. Are they true?”

“I haven’t heard the stories, so I wouldn’t know,” Cornellya replied. “Were they at least nice stories?”

“Probably none of them were true,” Gaenor added. “Few outsiders have ever encountered a real Vari.”

“I’m sorry,” Tallicia apologized to Cornellya at last, “I shouldn’t stare so. It’s not like Gaenor didn’t tell me she had been to your Village. I guess I never actually expected to meet you or one of your people. Forgive me?”

“Of course,” Cornellya agreed easily. “I stared at Gaenor a lot when I first met her, so I guess it’s only natural.”

“Anyway, in answer to Gaenor’s earlier question,” Tallicia continued as they walked across the courtyard, “we’ve been in the city for a week now and when we heard that Arturus had invaded with an army, we waited until everything had quieted down and then came to find out if it was true.”

“That is pretty much true, yes,” Gaenor agreed. “The problem is that we weren’t trying to overthrow the emperor, just help some ambassadors from the Barbarian Kingdoms enter the city. Along the way we picked up some allies, a few too many it seems in retrospect, and our intentions were mistaken. By the time it was over, Lusius threw himself from that window up there and now everyone is trying to make Artur accept the throne.”

“A fat lot of luck they’ll have; forcing it on him,” Clortius laughed. “If there was ever a man who did not want to be emperor, he’s the one. Probably the only patrician I could say that about too.”

Artur was delighted to see his old friend and wasted no time inviting him and Tallicia to stay in the palace for the remainder of their visit in the city. Clortius was inclined against that, but the look in Tallicia’s eyes at the chance to actually live in the palace for a few days changed his mind and he finally agreed.

It was the middle of the afternoon before a delegation from the Senate arrived. As on the day before, Senator Caralus was the spokesman. On the previous day he had been wearing a modern Cilben business outfit - a short, colorful silk tunic tucked into a pair of dark trousers. The only mark of his rank had been a pair of broad, vertical, purple stripes on the tunic that stretched from hem to hem by way of his shoulders. Today, however, he and the other senators were wearing the archaic, formal robes or togae of senatorial rank. A correctly made toga is a perilous garment being nothing more than a long piece of cloth wrapped around one’s body in a specific manner. Because there were no buttons or pins holding it together, it was not unheard of for a toga to come undone on a windy day or if the wearer

became excited and waved his arms around too much. There were several well-known stories of senators giving impassioned orations only to find themselves standing on the Senate floor in their underwear.

“Senator Arturus Cornellian Marno,” Caralus began in formal oratorical style. Artur noted privately that Caralus, a provincial by birth, was going out of his way to sound more Cilben than Cilbens born in the capital city. “Your colleagues implore you to come out of retirement and accept the oak wreath and throne of the Empire of Cilbe.”

“You are the same Senator Caralus Renolian Carn who was here yesterday?” Artur asked with deceptive calm, “aren’t you?” Artur had considered meeting the Senatorial delegates in one of the public rooms, but decided that might seem as though he were holding court and in spite of his words he really did intend to be emperor. Instead, he had them escorted into a small room that Lusius had set aside for recreation. There were two couches and several padded chairs with various game boards between them. Artur knew Gaenor had been disappointed not to find a caroms table and privately he thought a Mishandan caroms room would have set the exact mood he wanted. He did not meet the senators alone, but had Gaenor and Cornellya with him. He would have had Clortius and Tallicia there as well, but the room was not quite big enough to fit them all comfortably. The only thing that marred the non-imperial picture he tried to paint was the trio of Temi guards Leracus had assigned to them. They stood silently by the door, but in their bright red combat togs, they were hardly inconspicuous and the senators couldn’t help looking at them nervously over their shoulders.

“Yes, Your Serenity, I am.”

“Then you were here when I said I would not be your emperor. I’m going to trust that you aren’t mentally impaired and I refuse to believe that the Cilben language has changed so much over the last twenty-five years or so that ‘No, I won’t’ now means ‘Yes, I will.’ So what didn’t you understand?”

“We understand your natural modesty, Serenity,” Caralus tried again.

“We, Caralus?” Artur asked skeptically. “Have you suddenly developed a twin?”

“By ‘we’, I mean the Senate, Serenity.”

“Excuse me, my ears must be failing me in my advanced age. What was that last word?”

“Uh, Serenity?”

“That’s what I thought I heard you say. Now as I recall that title is reserved, isn’t it. Would you care to tell me to whom it is reserved?”

“The emperor, Your Serenity,” Caralus replied.

“Caralus, did someone drop you on your head when you were a baby?”

“If it pleases you to think so, Your Serenity,” Caralus replied. The three other senators with him were starting to back away from him.

“If I were Lusius and it pleased me to think so, your head would have been on a spike five minutes ago,” Arturus told him. “Perhaps the fact that I am keeping my temper confuses you, so please allow me to put you straight. I will not now nor will I ever be the emperor of Cilbe. I have far too many more important

things to do. Understand?”

“Not really, no,” Caralus admitted fearfully.

“Well you’re being honest at last. Try to make it a habit and I might forgive your earlier blunder. Now has the Senate empowered you to do more than make unwelcome offers or am I going to have to send you back until they come up with some other idea?”

“Your S... I mean, illustrious Arturus, we have offered you the highest honor in all Cilbe. What more can we give you?”

“Think smaller, Caralus,” Artur replied. “Think smaller.”

Carus was confused. There were legends of early emperors who refused the oak wreath until it had been offered a third time. Was that what Senator Arturus was waiting for; a third offer? Somehow Caralus didn’t think so. “Illustrious Arturus, what do you want?”

“I want to go back two or three weeks and try this all over,” Arturus snapped at him. “The gods, however, don’t seem to be favoring me at the moment. All right, I half expected this to happen anyway. Tell the Senate that if it so pleases them I will accept the ancient title of ‘Dictator,’ and in case they have forgotten that means I will rule absolutely in Cilbe for the duration of the current crisis at the end of which I will retire and return the power to the Senate.”

“Rule absolutely?” Caralus echoed. “It’s unheard of!”

“Caralus, we discussed this yesterday,” Arturus replied tiredly. “One of your fellow senators remembered the name Valeratus. Is that why he isn’t here today? Anyway, that is my offer. I serve the Empire as Dictator and step down as soon as absolutely possible.”

“How do we know you’ll relinquish the power you want us to grant you?” Caralus asked.

“You asked that yesterday as well,” Artur reminded him. “The answer is you don’t. You’re just going to have to trust me. If you think about it, asking me to serve as emperor already proves you trust me. The emperor rules absolutely *de facto* if not *de jure*, so if I really wanted to rule Cilbe I would have just accepted your first offer.”

“Well, yes, I suppose,” Caralus replied, “but...”

“Chief Arturus has given you his decision,” one of the Temi informed the senators. “I would suggest you act on it immediately.”

Carus blanched and swallowed hard. “Very well, Senator, if that is what you want.”

“Very good,” Artur told him dismissively. “Oh, and Caralus!” he called before the senators could quite leave the room. “Just in case the Senate has forgotten, there is no particular ceremony investing a dictator. Just draw up a declaration turning the power over to me, sign it, and run a copy over. Understand?”

Three

Artur and Gaenor awoke abruptly in the early morning hours when a loud klaxon was sounded in the nearby city.

“What is that?” Gaenor asked, sitting up.

“Fire alarm,” Artur told her as he hurried toward the window. “Uh oh! It’s not just one fire.” As he peered out the window he could see several buildings ablaze on the next hill. “So much for Tarsus’ belief we had the city pacified.”

“Are you sure?” Gaenor asked as she joined him at the window. “Nevermind, I see what you mean. That many different fires can’t be an accident, can they?”

“Not likely, no. I’d better go see what’s going on. Now that the Senate has declared me dictator I’m as likely to take the blame for the fires as the credit for when they are extinguished. You may go back to sleep if you like.”

“As if I could?” Gaenor laughed as she rushed toward the changing room. “I’ll meet you downstairs in a few minutes.”

Gaenor quickly changed into a simple Mishandan blouse and skirt and was about to leave the suite when Cornelya appeared at the door.

“What’s happening?” she asked worriedly. Gaenor explained as they rushed down the stairs. “Fire? How did it get out of control?”

“I imagine they were set intentionally,” Gaenor replied, shocking Cornelya.

“Why would anyone want that?”

“I’m sure there are still remnants of the Imperial Guard about somewhere,” Gaenor replied as they joined Artur at the bottom of the stairs.

“Alternatively,” Artur added, “there might be a senator or two about who is already trying to usurp the Imperial throne. Flacco,” he called as Flacco entered the palace’s atrium, “what’s going on out there?”

“I don’t know,” Flacco admitted as he followed Artur, Gaenor and Cornelya into a small conference room just off the atrium. “The city’s fire companies are on duty, but I fear they are going to need backup. General Tarsus is deploying the Twelfth to do that. It’s a damned good thing you have the Temi. This would have left you vulnerable to attack if you had taken the city with conventional forces only.”

“Serendipity,” Artur replied, sitting down by a long table. “I never intended to displace Lusius, as you know, so I certainly did not make any plans for holding the city. The Temi are good at security, however, so I got lucky on that count. I’ll have to do something for them.”

“Officially recognize them,” Flacco suggested. “No emperor has ever done that. Bring them formally into the empire instead of forcing them to live a quasi-legal existence.”

“Yes, at the very least I should do that. I am technically a Tem as well now, so it should be legal for them to enter the city, and I think citizenship should be extended as well.”

“That might be more than the Senate is prepared to accept,” Flacco pointed out.

“They can deal with it after I am no longer dictator, in the meantime it seems right to me.”

“Discuss the matter with Leracus,” Gaenor suggested. “It wouldn’t surprise me if the Temi would prefer not to be citizens of Cilbe.”

“Now, that is an interesting thought, Lady Gaenor,” Flacco admitted. “And you are right. The Temi may not want to be citizens.”

“What are you working on, Gaenor?” Cornellya asked. As soon as they had sat down at the conference table, Gaenor had taken one of her signature small notebooks out of her purse and started writing in it.

“I just had an idea,” Gaenor told her, “but I don’t think it’s going to work. You see?” she showed Cornellya what she had been writing.

“It’s a fire-making spell,” Cornellya identified the spell notation on the page, “but this symbol means it’s reversed?”

“Right I wondered if I could cast a spell that created fire, could I do just the opposite by reversing it.”

“No, I guess not,” Cornellya shook her head. This would only serve to temporarily make something fireproof.”

“Very temporarily,” Gaenor agreed. “Only for an instant, in fact. I’d need an entirely different spell to make it permanent,” she said scribbling out some more notation. “Something like this.”

“That could be useful,” Artur commented.

“It could?” Gaenor asked.

“Of course,” Artur laughed at her confusion. “You remember the three requirements for fire, don’t you?”

“Heat, fuel and oxygen,” Gaenor recited. “Take away any one of those and the fire will be extinguished. But this spell won’t work on something already burning.”

“No, but fire spreads by radiational heating even more than by contact, This spell could help contain the fires by keeping them from spreading to nearby buildings.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Gaenor replied.

“You were too close to the problem,” Artur told her.

“I guess,” Gaenor agreed. “I was caught up in trying to just stop the fires.”

“This will help a lot,” Artur told her.

“Better let me notate it fully with the subtext,” Gaenor told him. “So far I only think this will work. I don’t want another repeat of what happened in Fasri.”

“That wasn’t so bad,” Artur chuckled. “You’ve certainly been getting a lot of mileage out of it.”

“What happened in Fasri?” Flacco asked curiously. “That was where I met you two when I was on my way back here, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. When Gaenor left us that evening she got nervous when she thought someone was following her. She reached into her purse to grab the tools for a simple defensive spell involving a bright light to temporarily blind the stalker and allow her to get away, however in her haste she grabbed the wrong objects and instead turned all the gas light flames bright green. Fortunately the man behind her was just a conscientious constable on patrol, but it could have been a lot worse.”

“Maybe not,” Flacco disagreed. “Many attackers would have been unnerved merely because she used magic.”

“Fortunately I never had to find out,” Gaenor told him. “However, I learned my lesson and these days I keep spell tools in their proper places so I won’t get confused that way.”

“In all fairness, Gaenor,” Cornellya commented, “that was always your habit.” She turned to Flacco. “She and Arturus had been shopping earlier that day and some of her purchases were in the purse, that’s why the wrong tool was there in the first place.”

“I still should have been more careful,” Gaenor protested.

“We all learn from our mistakes, Lady Gaenor,” Flacco told her.

“Well, let’s hope this doesn’t turn out to be another object lesson,” Gaenor remarked. “Where’s Vito, by the way?”

“Probably in his room,” Artur replied. “His window doesn’t face in the direction of the fires so the alarms may not have awakened him.”

“He has bad hearing in one ear,” Cornellya told them. “He told me so while we were riding across Barbaria. He said it comes in very handy when trying to sleep in a city. He just puts his good ear down to the pillow and then can barely hear a thing.”

“We should probably wake him up,” Artur noted. “We’ll need his help when we start casting Gaenor’s spell.”

“I’ll have one of the palace servants do that,” Flacco offered. “However there is one minor issue. It is still illegal to use magic in the empire.”

“And what will it take to correct that?” Artur asked.

“Normally it would involve an act of the Senate, but at the moment all power is invested in the dictator.”

“Me then,” Artur translated. “I suppose my word is law, but let’s not set the dangerous precedent of making that literally true. Let’s make certain that nothing is the law until I put it in writing.”

“Wise move, my dictator,” Flacco replied ironically. “I can write up a proclamation for you to sign.”

“That would do it, but we’ll want to restrict the practice of magic to acts that are not malevolent.”

“Sounds reasonable. Of course the act of harming another person, regardless of means is already illegal, but this will help allay fears of legalized witchcraft. Let me see to waking our Wanlarian adept and I’ll start drafting that decree.”

Half an hour later the adepts had joined the firefighters of Cilbe and started fireproofing buildings as near to the fires as they could get. It was a tiring process because the part of the spell that lent a degree of permanence involved a long incantation.

“It won’t last forever,” Gaenor told the leader of the firefighters, “just a few days, but hopefully that’s all we’ll need.”

“It will be if you can isolate the burning buildings quickly enough to keep ahead of the fire,” the man told her. “It’s a shame you cannot spray water on the fires with magic as well.”

“We’re a long way from the river and the harbor,” Gaenor pointed out.

“Lady, there is running water from the aqueducts available all over the city,” the fire chief pointed out.

Gaenor turned to look at how the firemen were battling the flames. In Narmouth she would have expected to see everyone in town forming a bucket brigade, passing water from nearby wells or from the harbor or river until the fire had been extinguished. In Cilbe, however, fire was fought with manual pumps that used the public water supply and sprayed it directly on the burning buildings. The pumps were fairly large horse-drawn affairs that required more than a dozen men each to pump with only one or two to direct the hoses. It gave her an inspiration.

“I can do that,” she told him. “Hold on a minute or two.” She made a few notes and then asked, “Do you have any additional hoses?”

“Just a few,” he told her. “Sometimes hoses are damaged in use, so we try to carry spares.”

“Let’s have one run directly into the water supply,” Gaenor directed. Two men were spared from pumping duties to do as she had asked. When one end of the hose was in the water, she looked through her spell tools and pulled out a number of items, including a hollow straw and a small empty bottle which she had filled with water. The incantation she chanted was not particularly long, but as she finished it, she and the hose were both glowing bright blue. Then she took the straw and poked it into the bottle and drew water up into it and finally put her finger over the end. She reversed the straw, putting the other end into her mouth, and blew it out with as much force as she could muster. The glowing light faded immediately and water started gushing out of the hose with far more force than the pump-driven ones.

“Amazing!” the chief of the firemen exclaimed.

“Actually that spell was far simpler than the other one,” Gaenor remarked. She repeated the process on the other spare hoses.

“How long will that last?” the fire chief asked.

“The spell will be broken when you pull the hose out of the water. Sorry, but I couldn’t think of a way to give you a set of magic hoses that always pumped water.”

“I’ll settle for these for now,” he replied.

That was just the beginning of a very long morning, but by noon she and the other adepts had been to all the fire sites and the fires were considered to be under control.

“We found the arsonists, Senator,” General Tarsus reported later that day while Artur and Clortius were relaxing in the palace bath, “or rather we found what was left of them. It appears that the citizens of Cilbe are more civic-minded than I might have given them credit for. A group of citizens caught a small group of former Imperial Guards attempting to set the offices of the Inland Revenue Department on fire. What they did to those men wasn’t pretty, but it was permanent.”

“Well, I can’t say I can blame anyone who wants to burn down the tax department,” Clortius chuckled.

“I’ve wanted to do that a few times myself,” Artur agreed, “but I certainly hope that’s the last we hear of that sort of thing. It’s a good thing we were able to put out the blazes. This city has burned before and it was never for the best. How goes the pacification of the city?”

“We have managed to keep looting down to a bare minimum,” Tarsus replied. “There was a little at first, but it stopped as soon as the Twelfth was seen patrolling the streets. I won’t say there won’t be any further attacks by the former Imperial Guard, or arson attempts for that matter, but I think most of the survivors, and I doubt there are more than a couple hundred of them, have either left the city or are desperately trying to blend in with the normal citizenry.”

“Well, let’s keep an eye out for them. I’d like to bring any survivors we find to stand before the tribunes. Maybe they’ll be found not guilty of any crimes, maybe not, but any Cilben deserves a fair trial when accused.”

“What are they accused of, sir?” Tarsus asked.

“Hmm, good question. So far nothing, but we should look into possible abuses. Who is in charge of the civil police force? Now that things have settled down, we should see about a smooth transition back to normal operations and I’d personally feel better if the police are maintaining peace in the streets rather than your legion.”

“Yes, sir. The problem is Lusius disbanded the civil police in favor of the Imperial Guard.”

“Terrific. A cost-cutting measure, no doubt, and one he must have justified from ancient history. Well, let’s look into what happened to the men who used to be on the police force; see if we can recruit them back. In the meantime continue working with Leracus.”

“Yes, sir. By the way, I’d like to put in a good word for the Temi.”

“Why is that?”

“Well, this is probably going to sound condescending, but they’ve been behaving themselves very well since entering the city. Their reputation is that they are lawless thugs, as I guess you know, but they have taken the idea of civil defense very seriously and I haven’t heard of a single case of pilfering, racketeering or any other crime for that matter among them since we arrived in Cilbe. I wish I could say the same for the men of the Twelfth. I’ve had to discipline several decurions already.”

“The Temi are a very honorable people. Their reputation as thugs is undeserved and they only work as assassins and at other disreputable activities, because until now that was the only way they could make a living within the Empire. I intend to change that.”

“Another proclamation, sir?” Tarsus asked.

“Yes, another proclamation. I’ve only issued one other so far. It’s not like I’m making a habit of it.”

“It’s just that you keep saying you don’t plan to stay in the empire when you’re done here and yet this will make the second big change in our laws you’ll have enacted,” Tarsus pointed out.

“You are right, of course,” Artur admitted, “and after this I’ll be very careful about such proclamations, but I’d be an ungrateful bastard if I didn’t at least give them legal status in the empire.”

“There is that too, Senator,” Tarsus allowed. “Perhaps I was worried about nothing.”

“That’s quite okay, General. You keep questioning my motives and actions and in the long run we’ll probably be fast friends.”

“Excuse me, my chief,” a Tem interrupted them from the doorway, “but there are two women here who claim to be your daughters.”

“Well, are they?” Artur asked.

“My chief,” the Tem protested. “How could I know?”

“Of course,” Artur sighed. “Please have them wait in the small sitting room in my suite. I’ll be up in a minute.”

“Before you visit the caldarium and frigidarium?” Clortius asked.

“I’ll have to forego the pleasure, old friend, or else come back a bit later.”

A few minutes later Artur entered his sitting room. “Father?” a tall slender woman with light brown hair asked. “Is it truly you?”

“It is, Canna,” Artur replied.

“You look so young, Daddy,” the younger woman observed. She was shorter than her sister with a round face and darker hair. “Younger than when you had to leave, I think.”

“It’s a very long story, Jullia,” Artur told her softly.

“Oh, Daddy!” Jullia lost all reserve and rushed into Artur’s embrace. “We thought we’d never see you again!”

“It’s been horrible, Father,” Calla added.

“Horrible?” Artur asked, “I thought you were happy with Pahlius and Tallian.”

“Oh they’re wonderful, Daddy,” Jullia told him, “But Emperor Lusius never stopped trying to ruin their families because we had married into them.”

“And poor Colchicus hasn’t dared return to the city in years,” Calla added, “but I guess it was all worth it. Are you really emperor now?”

“No, I’m not,” he replied for what seemed like the thousandth time in the last few days, “but I am dictator. In many ways that’s even more powerful than being emperor, but it means I can only keep the power for a short time. After that, well, life should be better for you in any case.”

“Artur?” Gaenor called from the doorway, “the cook wants to know... Oh, excuse me. I didn’t realize you had company.”

“Gaenor, my love,” Artur began an introduction, “I present my daughters Calla and Jullia. Girls, this is my partner and my intended, Gaenor of Narmouth.”

“Narmouth?” Jullia asked after they all had exchanged greetings.

“In Mishanda,” Gaenor told her.

“Mishanda? Daddy, is that where you have been all this time?”

“For the last decade and then some,” Artur told her. “Before that I wandered about for a while.” Just then Cornellya came in. “And this is Cornellya Vasylya, my godchild and so is kin to you as well.”

“So pleased to meet you, Cornellya,” Calla told her. “Our family isn’t very large so there’s always room for more, but,” she paused, noticing Cornellya’s ears, “are you a Parchite?”

“Daddy?” Jullia asked, her eyes moving back and forth between Artur and Cornellya. “Just what have you been doing all these years?”

“If you don’t mind,” Cornellya replied softly, “I prefer to be called a Vari. Although I really hope you’ll just call me Cornellya.”

“I’ve just had a wonderful idea,” Artur announced. “Why don’t we all have dinner together tonight? I can send invitations to Pahlius and Tallian and you ladies can get to know each other. And if the night gets too long, well, there is plenty of room in the palace.”

“Wonderful!” Jullia said, clapping her hands together.

“Cornellya, Tallicia and I were just about to go down to the palace baths,” Gaenor told Artur’s daughters. “Would you like to join us?”

“Go ahead,” Artur urged them. “I was still in the tepidarium when you arrived.”

“So, Gaenora” Calla asked, when they were all soaking in the tepidarium pool, “Where did you meet Father?”

“It’s Gaenor, Calla,” Gaenor corrected her, “or Gae for short. I met Artur in Narmouth.” She proceeded to tell them about how as a teenager she had answered his advertisement for an assistant.

“Daddy was working as a sorcerer?” Jullia asked, astonished.

“And a very good one, I think” Gaenor assured her. “He taught me everything he could about magic.”

“Yes,” Cornellya agreed, “but by the time he was done teaching you, you were already taking his lessons so much farther.”

“I’m thinking of hiring Cornellya as a publicist,” Gaenor told the others with a chuckle.

“You always make so little of your accomplishment, Gaenor,” Cornellya told her. “Ladies, I’ll have you know my good friend here has set the entire study of magic on its head. The elders of my people sat at her feet to learn from her, and my people live a very, very long time and I have heard her lecture at the college in Mita. She was ennobled because of her magical accomplishments and...”

“Cornellya,” Gaenor stopped her, “enough, please. You’re making me blush!”

“I’m sure that’s just the warm water doing that, Gae,” Tallicia laughed. “But that reminds me, I’ve been wanting to get a closer look at your signet ring. Is that really a ruby?”

“It is,” Gaenor admitted, “but you can see it’s flawed.”

“It is? I don’t see it.”

“Well, the master jeweler did cut it so that the flaw looks like part of my arms, but here, see that dark line? And this one here?”

“Those? I thought they had been added to accentuate the tree’s trunk,” Tallicia told her.

“I said he made it look like part of the arms,” Gaenor repeated with a shrug.

Over the next hour with prompts from the others and some help from Cornellya, Gaenor told them about her travels with Artur, of the adventures along the way, and of the people she had met. Artur’s daughters kept interrupting with questions, for which Gaenor really couldn’t blame them, since they were having trouble believing their father had ever practiced magic, an act that, until he had proclaimed it legal, had carried a death penalty in the Cilben Empire.

Finally, it was Tallicia who suggested they move on to the caldarium and its hot water. “If we stay in here much longer we’ll all be prunes, ladies,” she told them.

Gaenor didn’t quite scream this time when she took the obligatory dip in the cold water of the frigidarium, but it was a near thing. “I can’t believe you all enjoy this,” she told them.

“I like it,” Cornellya told her. “It’s invigorating.”

Gaenor just shook her head in disbelief as they returned to the apodyterium to get dressed again.

Four

The next three weeks were almost idyllic aside from the fact that Artur, Gaenor and Cornellya were

anxious to find a way to finish up their business in Cilbe and get back to their search for adepts to help them in their mission to the island of Ichtar. Vitautis, on the other hand, was in no hurry to leave Cilbe. He was living in luxury for the first time in his life and getting far too comfortable with servants to wait on him. "Besides," as he reminded Cornellya one afternoon when she criticized him for his indolence, "I never promised to go all the way to Ichtar with you."

"You will," she told him calmly. "It has been decided."

Gaenor overheard that encounter and asked her in the bath that afternoon, "You've foreseen that he will join us?"

"No one can see the future, Gaenor," Cornellya replied. "You should know that, not with any certainty anyway."

"But you told him..."

"I said it had been decided," Cornellya smirked. "I just didn't mention that I was the one who decided it."

Artur chose to visit the Jube Cathedral after the first week had passed. Gaenor had never noticed any particular reverence for the gods from Artur, although he was never really irreverent either, and while he often swore by Jube, she had never actually seen him pray or perform any other religious act.

The Cathedral stood atop the tallest hill in Cilbe and was faced with pure white marble. "At one time it was popular to face all the buildings of the city in marble," Artur remarked to Gaenor as they approached the temple. "I imagine it didn't look entirely unlike Sendmoot, although without the soaring spires. Cilben architecture is more open as you have seen. In most cities it doesn't run as tall, either, but in Cilbe five or six stories in high population areas is the norm."

"When did Cilbens stop covering everything with white marble?" Gaenor asked.

"About six or seven centuries ago," Artur replied. "Yellow brick became fashionable for a while after that, then red brick. After that we returned to marble, but instead of white, our builders used just about every other color. You can tell the age of a building in this city by the color of the facing material, but beneath it all, everything is concrete. We invented it, you know."

"Yes, I learned that back in Master Prendur's school," Gaenor remarked. "I notice that there are quite a few buildings faced in concrete though."

"The newest fashion," Artur told her. "Those buildings were erected since I was last here. I see they've been experimenting with dyes, paints and textures. Interesting. Although all this diversity makes the city a bit of a hodgepodge, stylistically."

"It's a very exciting city," Gaenor corrected him. "So much color and so much going on. I thought Misha was a busy city, but it feels like a Narmouth compared to this."

Oh, yes," Artur agreed. "Never a dull moment in Cilbe. You saw how the populace reacted to our invasion. Just another day in the life of the average citizen."

"Well, they did stay off the streets during the fighting," Gaenor pointed out.

“And the markets were open again the next day. Of course, that’s a good thing. It means the economy will stay healthy.”

“Who approaches the home of Jube?” a deep voice asked formally from the shadows of the cathedral doorway.

“Arturus Cornellian Marno,” Artur replied just as formally, “and Lady Gaenor of Narmouth.”

“Welcome, Senator,” the voice replied. “Welcome, Lady. It has been some years since an outlander chose to honor Jube in His home. We are all honored by your visit.”

“What do I say?” Gaenor whispered to Artur.

The priest/doorkeeper heard and answered instead. “No need,” he told her, dropping the formal tones he had been using. “Senator Arturus said all that was necessary. Peace and prosperity to you both.”

They continued on a few more steps and entered the grand sanctuary of the cathedral where Gaenor stopped abruptly and stared at the statue of Jube at the far end of the room. There she saw an incredibly tall figure seated on an equally large throne. The statue was over thirty yards tall and appeared to be made of gold and a medium brown material that Gaenor was unable to identify at first but soon realized was very old ivory. She started to bow before the divine statue but Artur stopped her.

“We do not bow before our gods in Cilbe,” he told her softly, “but stand proud and look them straight in the eyes.”

Gaenor nodded and let her eyes drift upward to the statue’s face. The face of Jube had been crafted in sheets of ivory, but the beard and hair had been made of thousands of golden wires. The God was looking down with a stormy expression and was holding a golden oak tree as though it was a scepter. As her eyes lifted upward she caught a view of the vaulted ceiling. She learned later that it was one of the oldest concrete constructions, but while in the cathedral all she saw was the magnificent mosaic work. Within a border of intricate knotwork was a pictorial account of the creation of the world according to Cilben mythology.

“Magnificent!” she breathed.

Artur guided her forward and they stood before the statue of the god for a minute or so. Then without having spoken any prayer or done any form of religious observance she could detect, he turned and after she had turned as well, they left the sanctuary together.

“That’s it?” she asked.

“We presented ourselves to Jube,” Artur replied. “Isn’t that enough?”

“Not in Mishanda,” Gaenor commented, “but if that’s the way it is in Cilbe...”

“In Jube’s temple anyway. There are different observances in the temples of Sellae, Roton and the rest. Jube merely asks us to stop by and visit as time permits. Taking time out from our day is what shows him honor.”

Artur’s daughters visited the palace daily with their husbands and often stayed for dinner. Calla had never had children, but Jullia’s two sons and two daughters more than made up for that and Artur was

able to enjoy playing grandfather for the first time in his life.

After the first day a noticeable coolness developed between Jullia and Gaenor and, to some extent, Cornellya. Gaenor shrugged it off, knowing she couldn't get along with everybody, but Cornellya was bothered.

"Don't worry about it," Calla advised her. "I think Jullia's just jealous. She always was the baby of the family and now here you and Gaenor come along. Father treats you like a daughter and since you're younger than she, that sets her off a bit. I don't think her jealousy of you is very serious; she hardly mentions it. It's Gaenor who really bothers her."

"Gaenor? Why?" Cornellya asked, astonished. To date, she hadn't seen Gaenor fail to befriend anyone.

"Because Father wants to marry her, of course. Don't worry, she'll get over it, although it's probably just as well you'll be leaving Cilbe. She may eventually warm up to you, but she and Gaenor will never really be friends."

The city itself had calmed down rapidly after the fires had been extinguished and there had been no further problems from the Imperial Guard. Artur assigned Tarsus to start rebuilding the Guard so that the Twelfth Legion could eventually withdraw from the city. The Temi continued to make the civilian Cilbens nervous until Artur suggested to Leracus that perhaps the entire clan didn't need to be on duty all the time. Leracus agreed and after that only those Temi acting as bodyguards wore the traditional red costumes while out in the city. To Artur's amazement, however, Leracus turned down his offer of citizenship for the Temi people.

"I am grateful for your official recognition, my chief," he told Artur formally. "It is good to be able to walk the streets of Cilbe without fear of arrest, but we have always been a people apart – a nation within your nation. We are used to that. It is part of who we are. So long as our one village is protected, we will be content."

"You do realize that this recognition doesn't give you immunity from prosecution concerning the various crimes you undertake by contract?" Artur asked.

Leracus laughed, "We've never had that. Any Tem clumsy enough to get caught deserves whatever he gets. Besides, assassinations and theft are a very small part of what we do for a living. If we have to give them up, it will be no hardship."

Artur also managed to conclude a treaty of Peace with the Barbarian legates he had escorted into Cilbe. "You realize, of course," he told them, "that this treaty is technically only effective so long as I am dictator. The new emperor may not choose to honor it, although I will recommend most strongly that he does so."

Gaenor was never quite sure why the Academy of Cilbe had invited her to speak in the Grove of Enlightenment considering the reception she received from some of the faculty. Still, Talicia and Jullia both insisted it was an honor she couldn't refuse.

"It's the first time in history that a woman has been invited to speak there," Jullia informed her.

“I suppose it is possible they don’t know I’m a woman,” Gaenor observed. “My name sounds like some masculine Cilben names.”

“The envelope was addressed to Lady Gaenor,” Cornellya pointed out.

“So it was,” Gaenor admitted. “Will you all be there at least?”

“Women aren’t permitted in the Academy,” Jullia replied.

“And yet here I am, invited to speak there,” Gaenor observed.

“I’ll be there,” Cornellya assured her, “whether they know it or not.”

“I really think we should all at least try to attend,” Calla told them. “If they have invited Gaenor to speak, it just goes to show that they are at least willing to consider the possibility.”

In the end they all went together.

The Academy was situated on the southern edge of the city. Gaenor had expected a campus similar to the ones in Es and Misha, but where those two universities were made up of large multi-floored buildings, the Academy was made up of large and low, single-storied buildings that enclosed a large park-like area with trees and gardens that was referred to as the Grove of Enlightenment. It was in this grove that all large seminars and guest lectures were given, weather permitting.

The door keeper, an old man who had served the Academy all his adult life, was hesitant to let Gaenor and her friends in, but as they were trying to explain that Gaenor had been invited to lecture, a somewhat younger man, Professor Antonus Linnian Haemior, approached and explained to the door keeper, “This is a rare and unusual afternoon, Namian. Lady Gaenor here comes highly recommended by our colleagues at the University at Misha and she will be lecturing on a subject long ignored at the Academy.”

“Hmmp!” grunted Namian. “Magic, you mean. Nonsensical superstition, if you ask me.”

“Then we shall all enjoy an afternoon of nonsense,” Antonus told him tolerantly, “and if we are allowing a woman to lecture, it only seems fitting and proper that there be at least some women in the audience.”

“Just don’t take them by way of Gannian’s Arch,” Namian told Professor Antonus sternly.

“This way, ladies,” Antonus urged them, ignoring Namian’s outburst.

“What’s wrong with Gannian’s Arch?” Cornellya asked curiously.

“It’s an old Academy superstition,” Antonus laughed nervously. “First year students are told that the Cilben Empire will fall should a woman ever pass beneath it.”

“Really?” Cornellya giggled. “That doesn’t seem likely.”

“Uh, perhaps I would be grateful if you didn’t test it today,” Antonus requested.

“Oh, if you insist,” Cornellya replied playfully.

“Cornellya, behave,” Calla instructed her.

“Yes, sister,” Cornellya replied facetiously.

“You’ve been spending too much time with Father, you know,” Calla told her seriously.

“Not really,” Cornellya laughed. “I’ve always been like this.”

Professor Antonus took a second look at Cornellya. “Dear lady,” he asked with a touch of hesitation, “your ears; are you a Parchite?”

“Uh,” Cornellya began, about to launch into her usual correction and then she just shrugged and told him, “Yes, that’s right. I am also Arturus’ godchild.”

“And thereby a member of the Cornellian family,” Antonus concluded. “Yes. It is good the Senate voted to restore the Cornellian estates. Cilbe has been a less happy place since Senator Arturus was forced into exile.”

“Not all of us were in exile,” Calla pointed out.

“True,” Antonus allowed, “but you were unable to be a Cornellians openly. You had to claim only your husband’s affiliations. The Cornellian family’s endowment was always one of the mainstays of the Academy and in fact it still is. The endowment was so large it would take another century to use it up, but while Arturus was still in the empire he always made a point of increasing the endowment each Yearend.”

“Is that why you invited me to lecture?” Gaenor asked. “Because Artur and I are affianced?”

“No, not at all,” Antonus assured her. “I wasn’t aware of that, although I knew you had arrived in Cilbe with Senator Arturus. It’s just that I received a letter from a friend in Misha advising me that I should invite you should you happen to turn up here.”

“Who was that?” Gaenor asked.

“Master Tellynar of Afton.”

“Really? I thought he didn’t like me,” Gaenor replied, amazed.

“I don’t think that’s the case. He admits that he has certain differences of opinion with some of the assertions of your work, but this is a scholastic difference. It has nothing to do with how he sees you personally.”

“Even so,” Gaenor replied, “he disagreed with almost everything but the spelling of my name.”

“In the Academy it is often one’s closest friend who is your harshest critic,” Antonus informed her.

“If that’s the case, I hope you don’t have too many friends here, Gae,” Tallicia laughed.

Gaenor chuckled politely, but privately she remembered telling the scholars in Misha that she valued constructive criticism all the more if only because so many of her ideas were being accepted with little or not question.

Antonius led them into the Grove and past several open spaces of various sizes. “When the weather permits we hold many of our classes out here as well,” he explained when Jullia asked about them, “so naturally we need areas of varying sizes depending on the class. Some of these areas are gardens, as you can see, but many are open spaces between clumps of trees. The Grove serves as more than just an open-air classroom. It is also the largest arboretum in the world and we have every known species of tree that can survive in this climate and a few that can only with our help.”

Finally they entered the largest lecture area of the Grove. It was an amphitheater large enough to hold over four thousand people in the audience. Gaenor knew there were larger such stadia in Cilbe, but since the Academy had less than two thousand students and faculty this was more than large enough. The amphitheater, however was already mostly filled and Antonius assured her that they expected more attendees than they had seating available for. By the time Gaenor was introduced to the audience, his prediction had come true and there were men standing beyond that last rank of seats and deep into the surrounding trees.

Lecturing in Mita and Misha had not prepared Gaenor for her experience in the Academy. The students and teachers in Mita and Misha were quietly attentive when she spoke and while one or two in Misha, Master Tellyndar especially, asked probing questions that were obviously trying to catch her in error, no one spoke while she lectured. Academics, on the other hand, were quite vocal. Most of them were discussing between themselves what she may have just said, but a few kept shouting questions at her, interrupting the flow of her speech, and one rather obnoxious professor started heckling her; shouting insults and calling her a liar. However, when he started denying the existence of magic altogether, Gaenor cast a levitation spell that left him about fifty feet off the ground in the branches of an ancient elm.

“Now, is there anyone else out there who doubts the existence of magic?” she asked sweetly. The audience went silent for the first time since Gaenor had arrived. “Good, so now that we have established the basic existence of the subject of my lecture, let’s delve into the theory, shall we?”

After that, they still continued to talk amongst themselves, but no one else dared to mock her. Realizing that aside from Cornellya and Artur and Vito - both men arrived just before she began – there were no other adepts in the audience, she tailored her talk to center on the magic of primitive peoples and how it compared to what was practiced in the eastern kingdoms. As she had in Mita and Misha, she also discussed the possible sources of magical power and how it may relate to Doctor Nyima’s latest theories. This last struck a favorable chord among the Academics, although they had trouble accepting the concept of time dilation and Gaenor found herself apologizing for not being able to show them Nyima’s mathematical proofs.

Once she got used to what she saw as amazing rudeness on the part of the audience, she decided the lecture had gone well and even consented to gently lower the formerly mocking professor back to the ground before the sun had set, bringing the lecture to a close.

By the time they had been in Cilbe for nearly a month, their problems started coming from reports of activities outside the city. Two generals along the Maxforn and Barian borders each thought they ought to be the next emperor and began a march on the city. They had met on the far side of the Mallactine Mountains and started fighting between themselves. The resulting battle left one of the generals dead and the survivor amalgamated the two legions and continued his march. Artur had sent orders to pull the four legions back from the Barbarian border, but they had not yet arrived in their newly

assigned positions before a legion was spotted moving down from the north.

This legion from the north had taken everyone by surprise because unlike the others no one had reported that it had been moving until it was only a day's march from the city. Artur quickly mustered the Twelfth legion and the Ridec Clan and marched out of the city to meet this new threat. The scene was almost a reenactment of the opening moves of the Battle of Cilbe a month earlier, except that this time Artur's forces were defending the city.

"It is the Seventh Legion, my chief," Leracus reported as the two forces formed ranks.

"Any idea of who's in command?" Artur asked.

"No, my chief. I am sure Tarsus knows, but he is on the far left flank giving his centurions their orders."

"Well, it probably doesn't matter," Artur sighed. "I'm not likely to know him even if I've heard of his family."

"Whoever he is," Leracus observed, "he is no coward. He is riding out alone to parlay."

"So he is," Artur agreed. "Maybe we won't have to fight today after all."

"That would be a pleasant change," Leracus remarked.

Artur looked at Leracus' impassive expression and shrugged. "And there I thought I was the only one here who felt that way." Then he turned and rode out to meet the general commanding the Seventh Legion.

The other general was wearing a helmet that hid most of his facial features, but several days growth of beard told Artur the man had force marched his army south without taking out unnecessary time. The general stopped precisely midway between the two armies and waited for Artur to approach. Artur squinted even though he knew it would do nothing to help him make out the opposing general's features. The other man, however, cocked his head to his right as though trying to examine Artur in the same manner. Finally Artur stopped just under ten feet away from him.

"Father?" the general asked in a wondering tone. "It can't be." He removed his helmet and revealed a full head of light brown curly hair that made him look like Artur's brother, even though Artur's hair was blond. Even sitting in saddles, both men were tall and muscular, although Colchicus' face was rounder than Artur's.

Artur chuckled, "Only if your name is Colchicus. I hadn't heard you had manage to command your own legion, but I suppose I should have known. Your strategic and tactical reasoning was always better than mine, even when you were a lad."

"How can you look so young?" Colchicus asked suspiciously. "You're in your sixties, or you are if you're supposed to be my father."

"It's a long story," Artur replied.

"I have time."

"All right, it all has to do with the practice of magic."

“That’s illegal,” Colchicus pointed out.

“Not anymore,” Artur replied. “I legalized it shortly after Lusius’ death.”

“Did you really kill him, Father?”

“No. Is that the story you heard?”

“We heard a rogue general had attacked the city with two armies and deposed Lusius. I brought the Seventh south to restore order and keep the empire safe from usurpers. Little did I realize my own father had returned to take the imperial throne for himself.”

Artur sighed. “It wasn’t quite that simple, son. However, I didn’t kill him, he killed himself. Girdecus died of a heart attack too.”

“Too bad,” Colchicus commented acidly. “I had a lot of childhood fantasies about what I would do to him someday.”

“You can have his son if you want,” Artur offered. “I’ve had more important matters on my mind, but I’ve been meaning to look him up and ask him about a contract he made with the Temi to assassinate me in Firdan.”

“If you’re still alive, you really must have used magic. I notice the Temi are still following you, or did you dress part of your army up in red to intimidate me?”

“No, they’re real. That is most of the Ridec clan, the rest of the clan is keeping peace in the city. I suppose I should mention I’ve been accepted as a sort of honorary Temi chief.”

“I would say that’s illegal too,” Colchicus remarked dryly, “but no doubt you changed that as well. You almost have me convinced that you’re my father.”

“Almost?” Artur asked. “Calla – I mean Cornellia, she change her name back just last week - and Jullia weren’t this skeptical.”

“My sisters are delightfully trusting people,” Colchicus noted, “but do you really expect me to believe in magic?”

“Better not say that in front of your future stepmother,” Artur advised. “She might take it in her head to attach you to the ceiling.”

Colchicus looked up at the sky and asked, “What ceiling?”

“Good point. In any case I managed to convince her to stay in the city today, although don’t be surprised if she’s lurking about around here. She was a little too easy to convince this morning. Well, if it’s proof you want, I suppose I could do a trick or two. Got a deck of cards?”

“Cards?”

“The people of Mishanda play various games with them. Never mind that wouldn’t have been magic, just sleight of hand. I’ll just have to do one of Gae’s light shows since I didn’t come prepared to do much

else.” He pulled out his flint and steel and quickly caused a bright flash of light to burst high over head.

“Lightning?” Cochicus suggested.

“On cue?” Artur countered. “You remind me too much of me when I was your age.”

“When you were my age, you’d been gone from the Empire for two years,” Colchicus pointed out.

“So I had. All right that bush over there.” Artur cast another spell. It used the same tools, but instead of light he created a small ball of fire which rushed toward the indicated bush. In a moment the bush was ablaze.

“I could do the same thing,” Colchicus said stubbornly, “with lot of advanced preparation. Okay, I’ll admit that there’s no way in which you could have known we would meet on this very spot so that you could immolate a shrub for me. So where do we go from here?”

“Back to Cilbe, I imagine,” Artur told him. “You may have come to defend the city, but unless we install a well known and respected person as the new emperor in a hurry and with sufficient force to back him up, the next legion to approach may not be quite as benevolent as you were.”

“Wait a minute. I thought you were the new emperor.”

“No, I’m not going to be able to stick around, I have other pressing commitments. In fact I’ve already been here far too long. I told the Senate I would accept the title of Dictator, but would step down as soon as the current crisis has passed.”

“And they believed you?” Colchicus laughed. “I mean I believe that, but I’m surprised they did, especially since naming you Dictator meant they had at least temporarily put themselves out of work.”

“I didn’t really give them a lot of choice,” Artur admitted. “However, now that you have arrived, perhaps I can get back to what I was doing before I stumbled into my present predicament.”

“What do you mean” Colchicus asked warily.

“I mean I intend to commend you to the Senate as my heir and as their new emperor.”

“Now hold on there, Father,” Colchicus protested. “What makes you think I want to be emperor any more than you do?”

“Hey,” Artur chuckled again. “You were the one who marched south in defense of the city and empire of Cilbe. What did you expect after the conquest of a usurper?”

“Why do I get the feeling that in a few months I’m going to wish I had just attacked instead of trying to parlay?” Colchicus muttered sourly.

“Of course you won’t,” Artur told his son, riding forward to clasp his hand. “You always were a smart boy. It won’t take you anywhere near that long.”

Olaka

One

The investiture of Emperor Colchicus was a modest affair when compared to that of his predecessors. Artur had expected the Senate to fight him all the way when he proposed his own son for the throne of Cilbe. Instead, the trouble turned out to be that they were all too enthusiastic.

It was traditional for a three day holiday to be declared when a new emperor ascended to the throne. On top of that they wanted to grant Colchicus a full Triumph to stretch the occasion an additional three days. Colchicus declined on the basis that he had not concluded any great military victories similar to those of his father and that he felt it would do the empire no good to grant Triumphs to generals merely because they were competent. He also decided that the economy of the city could not afford a three day holiday with games at the Circus, parades, military exhibitions and the lot, especially since that would mean that, by law, all business in the city must halt until the holiday was over.

Instead, he specified that his investiture festivities would only run for a single day with the actual ceremony in the Great Forum at mid-day followed by an afternoon of modest games in the Circus and a formal reception at the palace in the evening. He allowed the Senate to allocate funds for several public celebrations to be held during the reception.

Once that was over, Cornellya started pushing Artur and Gaenor to return to their quest. “We don’t have forever before the rains begin in the Parch,” she reminded them, “and we still have a long way to go.”

“You’re right, of course,” Gaenor told Cornellya at breakfast. “So where to next?”

“We have three possible adepts to find and try to convince to join us,” Artur replied. “There’s Sarmuel the Sorcerer in Maxform, Jimeleo who is supposed to be working in Tandro in Nimbria and...” he paused to try to remember who the third was.

Gaenor pulled out one of her ubiquitous notebooks and looked it up. “Faber Gerhardsson in Vohn. I still think it’s strange that one of the Southlands would have granted a license to practice to an adept. It’s usually illegal there.”

“Maybe their current king is unusually liberal,” Artur shrugged.

“Is Sorvohn a kingdom?” Gaenor asked curiously. “I thought it was some sort of theocracy.”

“I’m not sure, but I suppose we’ll find out when we get there,” Artur told her. “Now, believe it or not, I’ve actually been thinking about this. We could go overland to Maxform and then head south to Tandra and then head for Vohn, but it seems to me that an overland journey will take a lot longer than traveling by ship, even though a ship will have to go the long way. So I think our best plan would be to sail around the Nimbrian peninsula to Tandra and find this Jimeleo first.”

“A good plan,” they heard from the doorway. “As it happens, I know of a ship that is headed to Tandra in a few days.”

Artur, Gaenor and Cornellya looked up and saw a large, rotund gentleman wearing a tabard that bore the arms of Mishanda, "Sir Winniam!" Gaenor got up to greet the Lymphad Herald. "I was hoping we would see you, while we were still in Cilbe."

"Sounds, like we almost missed each other. I arrived late last night to find the entire city caught up in a massive party. Everyone was so drunk it took two hours to find out there was a new emperor, but that was just the first and least of my surprises. Artur, were you really the Dictator here for the last month? You don't know how sorry I was to have missed that!"

"Win, what are you doing in Cilbe?" Artur asked.

"Official business for my liege, His Royal Majesty, Pawlen III, King of Fair Mishanda, of course," Win replied with a wink. "Among other business, I am empowered to sue the Empire for damages incurred by her ambassador to Firdan during the Firdani coronation. I was really looking forward to dickering with you on that, especially considering that you and Miss Gaenor are the injured parties."

"Lady Gaenor," Cornellya corrected him.

"Excuse me?" Win asked.

"She is Lady Gaenor now," Cornellya amplified, "First Companion of the Distaff."

"Really now? Heartiest congratulations, my lady," Win bowed and kissed Gaenor's hand. "And this lovely Vari is?"

"Cornellya Vasylya," Gaenor performed the introduction.

"An honor to meet you Cornellya Vasylya," Win told her in the Old Tongue, surprising all three adepts.

"Win, it's good to see you," Artur told him, "but if you are going to negotiate damages for what happened in Dana it will have to be with my son, and just as well since I wouldn't have known whether I should grant you everything you asked for because I, too, am a loyal subject of Mishanda, or deny you everything because after Lusius' disastrous reign, I'm not sure the Empire can afford to pay what is truly owed."

"Fortunately you won't have to decide," Win replied. Then a flash of gold and red caught his eye. "Gae? Is that a new ring?"

"Her signet ring, of course," Cornellya replied.

"Of course. May I see it?" Gaenor handed him the ring. "Oh my! An oak tree engorged by a crown and if I'm not mistaken that's the Firdani crown at that and the stone is Firdani red too. A ruby, I'd wager. Very appropriate and unique. Wear it in good health, Gae," he added as he handed it back to her.

"Thank you, Win. It's a shame you missed the reception last night."

"Yes, but by the time I knew it was happening it was over. I found the Mishandan embassy practically empty. Well, no surprise there, since Pawlen recalled Lord Mikkell on His Majesty's return from Dana. So, since I understand Emperor Colchicus will be a bit late this morning how about you telling me what's new in Mishanda, assuming you're more up-to-date than I am?"

“You’ve heard about Pawlen’s engagement?” Gaenor asked.

“No! Tell me! Who managed to snag him after all. I do hope it wasn’t Earl Nerron’s daughter.”

“No, it was Ibbet of Ander,” Gaenor told him.

“Rolder’s daughter?” Win asked. “I wasn’t aware she was spending any time in Misha.”

“She wasn’t,” Gaenor replied. “From what I’ve seen, that may have been her best recommendation, with the exception of Relle, of course, and she’s already taken.”

“Very much so. So you’ve made friends with Relle have you?” Win asked. “An amazing lady. I think she’s the main reason Pawlen didn’t marry one of those useless types that hang around Misha; they all knew they would have to go through her to get to him. So when did it happen?”

“Well, if it went off on schedule they officially announced it at the harvest festival in Ander. We left before that, but he did ask and she accepted when we were last in Ander,” Gaenor told him. “Other than that, there’s not much I’m aware of.”

“That storm we got caught in caused some pretty bad damage along the lower Finder valley,” Artur added, “but most of the kingdom seems to have prospered this year.”

“Good news! Well, I managed to make friends with the Tinds again. Then I was bouncing around the Southlands until Pawlen’s instructions to come to Cilbe caught up with me, so here I am.”

Just then the door to the dining room opened and Colchicus entered. He took a look at Win’s tabbard and said, “Is it customary in the East to conduct business over breakfast and other normally social occasions?”

“Not at all, Your Serenity,” Win replied smoothly. “When I arrived at the gate, I was informed that you had not yet risen, and when I asked about your illustrious father, I was directed here. He and I are old friends, you know.”

“Are you?” Colchicus asked.

“Well, perhaps not. We spent a few days together last spring taking refuge from a storm in the same inn, and I’ve come to think of him as an old friend, Your Serenity.”

“Emperor Colchicus,” Gaenor handled the introduction, “may I present my fellow Mishandan, Sir Winniam Mates, Lymphad Herald.”

“Pleased to meet you, Sir Winniam, but I haven’t had breakfast yet,” Colchicus complained. “Let’s drop the ‘Serenities’ and ‘Illustriouses’ and other court talk until after I’ve had my morning kahwah. I see you don’t have a plate or a cup yet, will you have something as well?”

“Thank you, Your...”

“Colchicus,” the new emperor insisted, “at breakfast at least.”

“Colchicus, then. Thank you, and I hope you’ll see fit to call me Win,”

Colchicus nodded, "Now while we eat, perhaps you will see fit to explain to me why your colleagues from the other Eastern realms felt the investiture reception was the best time and place to start haranguing me about reparations for what that moron tried to do in Firdan? To tell you the truth, the first I had even heard about it had been the day before while catching up on the last quarter century or so with my father."

"Ah, I see," Win replied, stalling while he tried to think up a good answer. "Well, of course there is never a good excuse for rudeness, but you need to understand that Easterners are a bit more direct than Cilbens. Still, any ambassador or the member of one's staff ought to understand Cilben sensibilities better. I suspect they were overcome by worry that you might just disavow any actions taken by the ambassador of your predecessor and ignore their suits."

"It's a temptation, I'll admit," Colchicus told him, "but while the Empire may not quite open her coffers to meet all demands, I guarantee that Martius will pay enough to pauper him and his descendants. Now how about we put that aside for a bit and you can, if you would be so kind, let me know what's going on in the world. I've been a bit isolated until a few days ago."

"There's trouble brewing between Baria and Drombra," Win told him. "I doubt it will come to much, but last year some prospectors found some particularly high quality sapphires and rubies in a disputed territory along their mutual border. Up until now both kingdoms have claimed the province, but also until now the area didn't have much either side wanted."

"The Southlands are fairly quiet at the moment," Win continued, "and the Tinds are too caught up in their own religious hysteria to cause anyone else much trouble, but that's nothing new. You may want to send a little note to your ambassador in Maxform. I understand he's been getting a little full of himself lately and it's starting to grate on the king's nerves."

"What has he been doing?" Colchicus asked.

"Don't take offense, but in the east we would say he's just being a Cilben. Like I said he's full of himself. If you haven't visited another realm you may not have noticed, but a lot of your countrymen seem to leave their politeness at home when they leave Cilbe. It's one thing for a Cilben to lord it up in the Thimdra States, but it's another thing entirely when they try the same stunt in Gostrina or Mishanda."

"You're right I've never seen it, but I have heard about that sort of behavior. I'll send the man a note suggesting that the proper behavior for a diplomat is to be diplomatic."

"Then that's probably the best anyone can hope for. I'd give you the news from Mishanda, but Artur and Gaenor here have been back more recently than I have," Win concluded.

They chatted on for a while longer before Colchicus invited Win to a conference room where they could discuss Mishanda's suit in earnest.

Booking cabins on a ship bound for Nimbria was accomplished easily enough; As Win had implied the one he had sailed in on was loading up for a voyage south. However, leaving Cilbe quietly proved problematic.

The citizens of Cilbe had accepted Artur's decision to call himself "Dictator" rather than "Emperor," as a ploy to gradually acclimate the empire to his rule. By actually being the first ruler relinquishing such power in thousands of years, he had become the beloved of all and it became impossible for him to walk through the city without being mobbed by well-wishers and admirers.

His daughters begged him to stay. They had never truly believed that he, Gaenor and the others had a mission of greater importance. Like the rest of Cilbe, they thought that their father had merely been easing himself in to power and even when he turned the reigns of government over to Colchicus they were of the opinion it was only because he preferred to be the power behind the throne.

The Barbarian legates asked Artur to accept an ambassadorial post in the Barbarian Kingdoms and even General Tarsus advised him to remain. "Sir, you're a genuine hero of the Empire. We need heroes among us," he told Artur.

Of all the non-adept people Artur had recently interacted with, only Leracus understood. "May the gods be with you, my chief," the Temi leader told Artur as the party of adepts boarded the ship that would take them to Nimbria.

"Thank you, Leracus," Artur replied. "You seem to be the only one who understands."

"There are far more important matters in the world than ruling an empire," Leracus replied "and it has been my honor to assist you as you undertake one of them. Be well and never forget you are Temi now. If you ever need us again you need only ask." Leracus gave Artur and Gaenor the cross-chest Cilben salute and then left the dock area with the party of red-clad bodyguards who had assured safe passage to the harbor for Artur, Gaenor and their party.

"Alone at last," Artur chuckled to Gaenor.

"It was an interesting place to visit," Gaenor told him, leaving the other half of the old cliché unspoken.

"I don't think I'll truly be able to relax until the city is out of sight," Artur confided.

Cilben ships were not as large as their counterparts in Mishanda and Firdan. To Gaenor's eye the ship appeared to be too wide in the beam for her length, but Artur assured her the *Iris* was a typical merchantman. Technically a bark, the *Iris* boasted three masts but the fore and main masts only held three courses of sail and the much shorter mizzen mast was rigged with a large fore-and-aft sail on its lower course with a small square topsail above. She had been painted entirely black except for her holystoned decks which gleamed almost white in comparison to the black paint. The brasswork, Gaenor was pleased to see, had been kept bright and tarnish free. On a man-of-war she would expect that, but on a merchant ship she knew that such details were sometimes overlooked.

The crew of the *Iris* had slipped her hawsers from the wharf's cleets an hour after sunrise that morning, but it wasn't until noon that the outgoing tide had allowed her to reach the main channel of Cilbeport. Once clear of other ships, her crew was able to unfurl the sails and truly begin their voyage south.

They were still in the Bay of Cilbe when Gaenor found Artur leaning on the gunwales and staring at a large peninsula off the port beam. "Something wrong?" she asked.

"No, not really. I'm just sorry I was never able to show you my country home. That's it over there. See the low white villa overlooking the bay?"

“It’s beautiful,” Gaenor told him.

“Also very peaceful. Actually, it isn’t mine anymore. After my exile, the Farbian family bought it. I had the option of taking it back when the Senate voted to restore the Cornellian family, but it seemed a particularly petty thing to do. Besides, the Farbians were always good people, I had several friends among them, so it seemed best to allow them to keep it. Instead I accepted the value of the estate and left it to my children. Didn’t think you and I would have much use for it in any case, especially from what Win and King Pawlen have been telling me about the damages we’ll be receiving when the suit is settled.”

“We do all right even without that,” Gaenor told him calmly. “Still that villa looks like a nice place to get away from everything for a while. I’ll bet Relle would love it.”

Artur chuckled, “I’m sure she would. It’s close enough to the big city and she would probably enjoy the social life in Cilbe as much as she does in Misha and the climate is more moderate here.”

“I’ve noticed. It seems odd to enjoy such warm weather in the middle of the winter,” Gaenor noted.

“We’re lucky. It’s summer in the southern hemisphere right now and if we’re lucky we’ll be headed north again before the first snows down there. Just think of this as the year without a winter.”

“I can live with that,” Gaenor smiled.

Two

“What’s wrong, Cornellya?” Gaenor asked the next day. “You look positively green.”

“Green?” Cornellya asked, weakly, looking at her hand. “Looks brown to me.”

“Just an expression,” Gaenor explained. “It means you look ill. What’s the matter? Seasickness?”

“The world won’t stop moving,” Cornellya complained. “I think I’m going to die.”

“I doubt it,” Gaenor told her, “it just feels that way. Funny, you didn’t have this problem on theThindraSea ”

“I did,” Cornellya told her, “but it wasn’t this bad. I don’t think the boat we were on rocked about as much.”

“The water wasn’t as rough,” Gaenor recalled. “Still, I don’t think anyone has ever died of it.”

“Are you certain?” Cornellya asked miserably. “I can’t seem to keep food down, and even if humans can’t die of this, maybe Vieri can.”

“It’s possible, I suppose,” Gaenor considered, “but it usually passes after a day or two.”

“Can’t you cure it with magic?” Cornellya pleaded.

“I’ll try to think of something,” Gaenor told her, “but in order to cure it, I have to know what causes it.”

“The motion of the ship causes it,” Cornellya told her hopelessly.

“Well, yes, but I can’t stop the ship from moving and even if I could it wouldn’t help us get to Nimbria. What’s happening is the motion is making you dizzy, but I don’t know why you’re dizzy. Closing your eyes should help a bit and if you can get up on deck I’m told that watching the horizon helps too.”

“Are you sure there isn’t something I can take, maybe?”

“I’ll ask around. If there’s something, I’m sure the captain or crew ought to know.”

“Ginger, Lady Gaenor,” the captain told her when she asked. “Ask the cook. He usually keeps some ginger cookies and candies available for just this sort of thing.

The cook, however, had another suggestion, “Ginger helps some folks, but it does nothing for me. I like to use lime juice. Tell you what, help yourself to the ginger wafers there, but let me make a drink for Miss Cornellya.”

“What sort of drink?” Gaenor asked.

“A bit of lime, water and sugar, nothing more. Well, some of the men like to mix it with their daily rum ration, but I’ve never found that rum is a good seasickness cure.”

“I imagine it is just the opposite,” Gaenor opined, “unless it replaces seasickness with a hangover.”

“Could be,” the cook replied with a grin. “This limeade, however, always helps me on the first day or two at sea and it’s a good way to stave off scurvy on a long trip too.”

Gaenor thanked him and brought both the ginger wafers and the limeade to Cornellya who was sitting up on the *Iris*’ poop deck, trying miserably to keep her eyes on the horizon. “Not doing too well, are you?” Gaenor asked. Cornellya shook her head. “Well, try some of these cookies.”

Cornellya reached out for a wafer and put it in her mouth. Her eyes widened as the spicy heat of the ginger hit her tongue. “Wow!” she said. “Very spicy, aren’t they?”

“Are they?” Gaenor asked. She tried one. “Nice,” she said at last.

“Nice? Well, maybe when I get used to it. What’s this flavor?”

“Ginger,” Gaenor told her. “It seems to have at least taken your mind off being sick. Try this drink.”

“More ginger?” Cornellya asked suspiciously, but took a sip anyway. “Oh, this is nice and sweet.” It took another hour before she felt well enough to do anything more than sip the limeade and chew an occasional ginger wafer, but another hour after that she reported that she felt fine once again, although for the rest of the voyage she could often be found in the galley looking for the wafers or more limeade.

There were a few ships that sailed the Ocean Sea ; it was the fastest way from various ports in Cilbe to the coast of the eastern realms. However, there was not very much direct trade between Cilbe and the east and even less since the incident in Firdan, so more often ships tended to hug the coast unless crossing the Gulf of Nimbria on the way toward the Great Southern Passage of the Ocean of Sorrows .

The next two weeks passed quickly as they watched the Cilben coast slip by. The Cilben Empire, Gaenor learned, was not a homogenous culture by any means. Instead it was made up of many cultures all of whom had once been autonomous states. Each city they passed seemed just a bit different from the

last until they landed in Heunotlan, the capital of the Nachli district, Huenotlan reminded Gaenor a little of Es in Gostrina, but only because of the large pyramid in the center of the city. The pyramid, however, was built in six steps and made primarily of dark brown stone, although there was a long, wide staircase of white marble that ascended to a small temple perched on top. The walls were also adorned with several large and brightly painted human-looking figures in an artistic style Gaenor found entirely alien. The rest of the city's buildings were one or two story affairs faced in the same dark brown stone and trimmed in marble and painted geometric designs.

They only stayed in Huenotlan two days while the ship unloaded a shipment of wheat from Barbaria and picked up an equal volume of dried hot peppers. They used the excuse to do a bit of shopping; Gaenor picked out a number of small, but interesting trinkets for various friends. She also found interesting collections of stone samples and wood chips that were intended as an educational tool for children, but which she thought would make good spell tools and ingredients. Another purchase was a textbook on medicine and healing. After Cornellya's bout with seasickness, Gaenor felt she ought to learn more about common ailments. Cornellya also bought the stone and wood collection, although she was as interested in studying their aesthetic properties as she was in what they might do magically and both women bought new clothes, even though they were both more interested in the men's fashions, which were mostly loose-fitting tunics printed in various bold colors. Women's clothing in Nachli tended toward drab browns and grays that appealed to neither Gaenor nor Cornellya. Artur and Vito also bought new tunics, but otherwise only waited for Gaenor and Cornellya to complete their purchases.

Only having one night in Huenotlan, they ate in a restaurant recommended by the *Iris*' captain. Artur had privately worried it might turn out to be a dockside tavern filled with fishermen and merchant sailors, but it turned out to be almost a mile away from the harbor in a quiet neighborhood not too far from the large central pyramid.

The meal was a cacophony of flavors as far as Gaenor was concerned. There was a dish made from the flesh of a large game bird with a sauce made from hot peppers, tomatoes and other unfamiliar ingredients that was so unlike anything she had ever tried that she couldn't quite make up her mind about it, although had it been a little less spicy, she felt she might have enjoyed it. It was served on a bed of lettuce and with a bowl of melon balls in lemon juice on the side. Artur and Cornellya enjoyed it well enough, however, and Vito told them he thought it could have used more peppers.

Cornellya, however was not comfortable in Nachli with everyone staring at her and she tended to use her invisibility spell whenever she felt she was attracting too much attention. Vito tried to convince her there was nothing to be afraid of and that the locals were staring at all the adepts because they were foreigners and that the local folk had probably barely even noticed her pointed ears. "Besides, if it really bothers you, try wearing a hat that covers your ears. With your ears out of sight you'll just look like another woman; a bit short and delicately featured, perhaps and certainly pretty, but not unusually so."

"I don't want to cover my ears," she replied stubbornly. "I didn't attract this much attention in Cilbe."

"In Cilbe you were part of the Dictator's household. Nobody would have dared to give offense. People looked at you fairly intensely in Aston, Kimn and the Barbarian Kingdoms."

"That bothered me a little too, but even they were too polite to stare at me for long."

"The people of Nachli are more direct about their curiosity then," Vito countered. "You have to realize most people think the Vieri are just a myth. Seeing one of you in life is, well, unique to say the least."

"I'll just stay out of sight then," Cornellya decided and promptly suited her action to her words.

“How do you do that?” Vito asked, which led to a long and detailed conversation on magic theory that he had trouble following.

Cornellya decided that Vito probably wasn't as intelligent as Artur or Gaenor. *Well*, she thought to herself, *Gaenor's a genius by any measure!* However, Artur obviously understood Gaenor's theories better than Vito did. Vito was capable of learning how to cast a spell, but he would probably always have difficulty creating spells of his own.

They left Huenotlan as the tide receded late on the second afternoon. Since Huenotlan's harbor was smaller than that of Cilbe they only had to drift seaward with the tide for an hour before setting sail once more.

Up until then, the fair weather had been broken by only a few tropical rain showers in the afternoons, but otherwise the seas had not been too rough after that first day that had made Cornellya so sick. They woke the next morning after leaving Huenotlan to find the sky covered with slate gray clouds and with a brisk wind propelling them along.

“We're riding ahead of a big storm,” the captain told Artur. “I'm going to try to stay ahead of the weather, but it's more likely we'll have to take refuge in the nearest harbor we can find after it hits.”

The storm itself did not break until the next day just after noon. The swells on the sea were nearly up to the *Iris*' gunwales and the heavy wind kept sending blasts of warm seawater across the deck, forcing the passengers to stay below.

Cornellya was sick again and the ginger wafers only helped a little. Finally, Gaenor had to cast a tranquilizing spell on her to help her sleep through the storm. Late that afternoon, they noticed that the ship wasn't being tossed about as much as it had been and when Artur poked his head up on deck he saw that while the storm continued, they were now in the lee of a fair-sized island. It was nearly dark by the time they were able to lash the ship to a dock but at least they had managed to find a sheltered port in which to wait out the weather.

Three

On Artur's suggestion, the adepts got rooms ashore that evening. Cornellya was still feeling shaky, but forced herself to keep going until she could lie down on a bed that did not move. She fell asleep almost instantly.

It had been Artur's intention not to advertise his identity or presence in the town, which turned out to be Olaka, but when the landlord of the inn asked his name for the register, Artur answered with the Cilben form of his name without thinking. Even in this obscure corner of the Empire his was a household name and the word quickly went out that the famous Senator Arturus Cornellian Marno was in town.

Olaka was a small community, very much isolated from the mainstream of imperial life. Although technically a part of the empire, the local economy was based on its fishing industry and the community was mostly self-sufficient. They produced enough dried and salted fish to be able to afford the few luxuries the people desired. The local food, not surprisingly, used mostly fish and locally grown vegetables. There was precious little beef available, but many locals kept chickens for their own consumption.

Artur, Gaenor and Vito ate in the inn that first evening. The inn was intended more as a local gathering spot than a hostel for travelers, so they found themselves answering polite questions about what was going on in the world. The locals were surprised to hear there was a new emperor, but since the goings on at the capital rarely affected their lives, their interest was of mild curiosity. Gaenor and Vito followed Artur's lead on keeping their own parts in the recent events unspoken, but the next day it turned out that they may well have been bragging as Artur's notoriety could hardly have been less.

"Excuse me," a middle-aged, rotund gentleman began the next morning as Artur and Gaenor were eating breakfast, "but are you really Senator Arturus Cornellian?" The man was dressed in well made robes in a style that had gone out of fashion in Cilbe City decades earlier. He also wore a modest golden chain around his neck, which Artur recognized as a symbol of the man's rank as mayor.

"I am," Artur nodded politely. "May I help you?"

"Just the opposite, Senator," the mayor replied, "My name is Wahnus Hallian and I was hoping I could be of assistance to you. How long do you expect to stay here?"

"Only until the *Iris* is ready to sail again. A few days, probably. I understand some of the stays were damaged in the storm and it looks to me like it's still too stormy to expect the rigging to be repaired."

"Excellent," Mayor Wahnus replied. "I hope you will allow us to honor you as a man of your rank deserves."

"That's very kind of you, sir," Artur replied, "but hardly necessary. I wouldn't want to put you and your people to such a bother."

"It's no bother at all, Senator," Wahnus insisted. "We only have a few regular holidays here and the chance to celebrate such a hero of the Empire would both honor and delight us. At the very least you must let us have a feast day in your honor."

Artur glanced briefly at Gaenor, who merely shrugged. Then he turned back to the mayor. "Very well, it would be my pleasure to enjoy your hospitality."

"Thank you, Senator!" Wahnus replied with a bow. "I'll set the festivity arrangements in motion immediately." With that he bowed again and then rushed out of the inn.

"That doesn't bode well," Artur muttered sourly.

"We'll only be here a few days," Gaenor consoled him. "How bad can it be?"

"Good morning. How bad can what be?" Vitautis asked as he joined them at the table.

"It appears that I'm a celebrity," Artur replied dryly, "and the locals want to celebrate."

"Of course you're a celebrity," Vito confirmed. "You were the Dictator."

"Shh! Not so loud," Artur snapped. "I don't think they know about that. They're just pleased to be able to say a senator visited them. They'll go absolutely crazy if they knew I was in charge of the whole empire."

“Well, really,” Vito shrugged. “How many occasions have they had a chance to play host even to a mere senator? You know they’ll find out about your recent adventures eventually.”

“They will,” Artur agreed, “but I’d prefer they didn’t know about that until after we leave.”

“You’re just being unduly modest, Artur,” Vito assured him.

“No, he isn’t,” Gaenor disagreed. “Modest, yes. Artur has been a modest man as long as I’ve known him, but this has nothing to do with modesty, it has to do with personal courtesy and civic pride.”

“I’m sorry, but I don’t understand,” Vito admitted.

“You come from a large city, so I’m not surprised,” Gaenor replied without trying to sound condescending. “This is very close to a conversation I had with Relle once. I come from a fairly small city. Narmouth is larger than Olaka, but like Olaka we’re somewhat isolated from the mainstream of life in our country. Seeing a king or queen in Narmouth is the sort of thing you might do once in a lifetime and for most people it would mean seeing them at a distance. A year ago it would have been unthinkable for me to be on a first name basis with the king and future queen of Mishanda, and it would have been equally unthinkable that I would have met all the kings and queens of the eastern realms and some of those from the Southlands as well.”

“Not to mention the leaders of Kimn and Barbaria,” Vito added, “and Cilbe as well. I can understand that. So?”

“So if King Pawlen were to visit Narmouth do you really think the people there would be satisfied by merely giving him a parade and a good dinner? Not on your life. We would pauper ourselves if necessary to make sure we had given our king all the honor he deserves. We would hold festivals and feasts everyday he was with us and give him as many gifts as we could. Of course he probably wouldn’t stay more than a day or two at the outside. For one thing the king has too many responsibilities to spend his time going from party to party, but he would only be harming his subjects if he were to remain in Narmouth so long to enjoy such excessive hospitality, so it is a mark of courtesy that he only visits rarely.

“This is almost the exact same situation here,” Gaenor continued. “Artur was a patrician and a war hero in Cilbe and then later served honorably in the Senate. That makes him very much a celebrity to the average Cilben, so the mayor wants to be able to honor his presence. The fact that it gives the locals a chance to enjoy an unexpected holiday, no doubt, will make the mayor more popular locally as well. However, if it were known that Artur,” she paused to make sure no one could overhear her and then dropped her voice to a whisper anyway, “was the first Dictator in thousands of years, they would insist on making every day we are here a holiday and that would hurt them very much.”

“If it hurts them, then why do it?” Vito asked.

“Because it would be a matter of honor and pride that they do so and their pride would be dashed to the ground if they were unable to. Better to destroy their local economy than to lose their pride,” Gaenor concluded.

“Excuse me,” a girl in her mid-teens interrupted them shyly. She bobbed a clumsy curtsy at Artur and continued with her head bowed, “Mayor Wahnus has assigned me to you, Senator.”

“Assigned, lass?” Artur asked. He looked at her carefully. She couldn’t possibly be a slave. Slavery this far from Cilbe City was almost unheard of. Even there only the richest patricians could afford them.

Besides, she wasn't dressed well enough. Artur had never approved of the institution of slavery and if he had any regrets about having not accepted the Imperial oak wreath it was that he had not abolished slavery altogether. However, the slave owners in Cilbe he knew were proud and they often dressed their slaves in clothes as fine as they themselves wore. It was a status symbol and the better their slaves were dressed, the more status they themselves had. Even those who did not participate in that particular contest, were still required by law to keep their slaves in well-made clothes that were in good shape. It was a law that had been passed over a century earlier. That did not mean that a servant could not wear worn-out clothing while weeding the garden or doing other heavy work, but any slave forced to go out in public in raggedy clothing could not only sue for his freedom, but win a healthy pension from his former owner as well. This girl's clothing was, indeed worn out. The hem of her skirt was in tatters as were parts of its neckline. The drab brown garment was clean, which showed she at least tried to take care of herself and possessions, but it was in such bad shape that it was likely the only dress she had. "You're not a slave," Artur added, half questioningly.

"No, Senator," she replied quietly, shaking her head a little, but still keeping her eyes averted. She had deep blue eyes and long straight black hair, which while clean had obviously not been trimmed properly in a long time.

"Look at me, child," Artur told her gently. "Never be afraid to stand proud and look someone in the eye." She looked up shyly, barely able to meet his stare. "I can't keep calling you 'child,'" he continued. "What is your name?"

"Elena, Senator. Elena Carolena." Having said that, she immediately averted her eyes again, as though she had gone too far.

"And did the mayor say what he expected you to do for me, Elena Carolena?"

"No, Senator, not in any detail. He just told me to report to you and do whatever you asked of me."

"I see," Artur replied blandly, although behind those words his thoughts were dark. Then he had an idea. "Would you be willing to help my lady?"

"Of course, Senator," Elena replied, looking relieved.

"Good. Elena Carolena, this is Gaenor of Narmouth. Also this gentleman here is Vitautis of Senne. We also have my godchild with us, but she isn't feeling well and is still in her room. Perhaps you can help Gaenor with her."

"Yes, Senator," Elena agreed readily, then turned toward Gaenor. "How may I serve, My Lady?"

Gaenor was torn. She wanted to tell her not to be so subservient, and yet she knew nothing of the girl nor how she lived here in Olaka. She decided to find out more about Elena before trying to advise her. "Why don't we both go see how Cornellya is, Elena?" she suggested.

Elena nodded and followed Gaenor to Cornellya's room in the small bungalow the party was sharing. The Vari was not sleeping, but she wasn't feeling up to getting out of the bed either.

"I ache all over, Gaenor," she croaked, "and it's so cold."

"Cold?" Gaenor wondered. "I thought it was pretty warm in here."

Elena put a hand to Cornellya's forehead and reported, "She has a fever. I'll get some cold water and cloth to apply it with if you like."

"Good thinking, Elena," Gaenor commended her. Elena bobbed another clumsy curtsy and ran out of the room.

"Who is that?" Cornellya asked hoarsely.

"The mayor of this town seems to think we need a servant," Gaenor explained. "At the moment I'm glad she's here. I'll introduce you when she gets back. I do wish I knew some of the Vieri healing spells."

"I'm not sure they would help in any case," Cornellya told her hopelessly. "From what I'm been taught, they are most effective against physical wounds. We don't usually have the sorts of diseases humans have."

"No? Then maybe you just have what we call a cold. I suppose it's so bad because you've never had one before."

"Is there a cure?" Cornellya asked.

"Drink plenty of liquids and get some rest. I'll see if I can find some soup too. You haven't been eating much the last couple of days. Are you still feeling nauseous?" Gaenor asked.

"A little, but not as much as on the ship."

"You must have been coming down with this even then. Oh, Elena, you're back." The village girl had returned with a bowl of water and several rags. "Is this the coldest water you could find?"

"Yes, My Lady. It is what the innkeeper's wife gave me."

"I'd like it a bit colder, but at this time of year I don't imagine you have a lot of ice available."

"Ice, My Lady?" Elena asked. "I've heard of it, but..."

"Never mind," Gaenor pushed the matter aside. "That, I can handle." She reached into her pouch and drew out a small note pad and a coin. There was already a candle burning in the darkened room, but she needed a spoon. Elena promised to be right back with one. While waiting, Gaenor made a few notes on the pad to make sure she had the exact spell she wanted. It wouldn't do to freeze the water into a solid mass of ice, but she did want a fair amount of ice chunks floating in the bowl. Elena returned with the spoon just as Gaenor was ready. "Thank you," she told Elena as she took the spoon. Then wasting no time she started the incantation. With all the intended modifications it was not a simple spell, but it was not a particularly hard spell to cast. As she continued the incantation she held a spoonful of water over the candle flame with her right hand and then flipped the coin over with her left. The water in the spoon instantly froze, and after a brief modifying incantation, she dropped the spoon into the bowl of water. Instantly half of the water froze into individual pieces of ice all exactly the same shape of the spoon's bowl.

Gaenor ignored Elena's gasp of surprise and dipped one of the cloths into the icy water and then applied it to Cornellya's forehead.

"How did you do that, My Lady?" Elena asked, mystified.

“Magic,” Gaenor replied simply.

“But...”

“It’s not illegal. Not anymore,” Gaenor told her.

“It used to be?” Elena asked.

“It still is, in some parts of the world, but not in Cilbe any more,” Gaenor told her. “Elena, do be a dear and keep applying cold cloths to Cornellya’s forehead, while I go to the kitchen.”

“Hello, Elena,” Cornellya rasped as Gaenor hurried from the room, “I’m Cornellya Vasylya.”

“Yes, My Lady,” Elena replied.

“No, I’m not a lady,” Cornellya corrected her.

“Oh, but you must be,” Elena assured her, “if the Senator is your godfather.”

“I suppose that might be,” Cornellya conceded tiredly, “but my people don’t use that title. I’d rather you just call me ‘Cornellya.’”

“Who are your people, My... uh... Cornellya?” Elena asked.

“We call ourselves Vieri,” Cornellya explained, “and we live in the Parch.”

“Where is that?”

“It’s a great desert pretty much in the center of the continent,” Cornellya told her.

Elena wasn’t sure what to say about that. Her education had been sadly ignored and she really knew very little about the world outside Olaka. Instead she changed the subject. “I like your ears,” she told Cornellya. “They’re very pretty. I wish mine looked like that.”

“My mother always said they were my best feature,” Cornellya smiled.

“They are nice,” Gaenor agreed as she returned with a large bowl of chowder. “I wanted to get some chicken soup for you, it’s what Mom always gave me when I was sick, but evidently fish soup is more common around here. The landlord’s wife also promised to send some fruit juice up here.”

Cornellya ate the soup before falling asleep again.

“She looks more comfortable now,” Elena noted.

“I think so too,” Gaenor agreed leading her out of the room. “Thank you for helping.”

Elena looked confused, as though Gaenor’s words were in a foreign language. Gaenor did speak with an accent Elena found odd, but that wasn’t the source of her confusion. Rather than confront it, she changed the subject, “Lady Gaenor, what is a Vieri?”

“Vari, Elena,” Gaenor corrected her gently. “Vieri is the plural; one Vari, but many Vieri. Understand? It’s not a Cilben noun so it declines differently.”

Elena was a bit confused by Gaenor’s words, but she more or less followed the explanation, so she nodded to show understanding. “How did you make the water cold?”

“You mean how did I cast the spell?” Gaenor asked. Elena nodded. “Okay, I’ll see if I can explain it. Let’s sit at the table.” Elena looked panicked at the suggestion. “Now what’s wrong?”

“You want me to sit? With you, Lady?” Elena asked.

“Time to nip this in the bud,” Gaenor decided out loud. “Look, you don’t have to call me ‘Lady.’ In fact, I think I’d feel more comfortable if you didn’t.”

“But you’re noble,” Elena protested. Who were these strange people? First the Senator told her not to avert her eyes and Cornellya asked her to call her by name and now Lady Gaenor... What sort of people would treat someone like Elena as an equal?

“Actually in Mishanda I’m technically gentle, not noble, but until a few months ago I was as much a commoner as you are.”

“You, My lady?” It didn’t seem possible. Rank and status were something you were born with. It didn’t change; not on Olaka.

“Yes, me. And call me Gaenor, please. Or Gae, my closest friends call me Gae, well, except for Cornellya, but that’s because in her native tongue every name has a meaning and to change the meaning of a name changes the person, or at least so they believe.”

“I don’t understand,” Elena admitted. Tears threatened to burst forth.

“Sit, Elena,” Gaenor repeated gently, taking her by the hand and guiding her to a chair. She was about to offer to get Elena a drink, but quickly decided that might really be too much for her. “Maybe before I try to explain how I cast a spell I should know a little more about you. Why don’t you tell me about yourself?”

“Me?” Elena asked. “There’s nothing special about me.”

“Oh, I doubt that,” Gaenor smiled, “although it is possible you may not know it yet. Tell me about your family.”

“Family?” Elena echoed.

“Sure. Your mother and father? Brothers? Sisters? Cousins?”

“I don’t have a family,” Elena replied after a long pause. “My father was a fisherman, I’m told, but he died at sea before I was born and my mother died when I was born.”

“How horrible,” Gaenor sympathized.

“It’s not so bad,” Elena replied, shaking her head. “You don’t miss what you never had.”

“Really? I find that hard to believe. I grew up in a large family. I have two sisters and a brother. I haven’t been home in a year, but last I saw, my parents were still well. I just can’t imagine what I’d do without them.”

“But they’re not here,” Elena pointed out.

“But they are always here,” Gaenor put her hand over her heart. “So do you live with an uncle or an aunt?”

“No, I have no relatives at all.”

“So where do you live?”

“Various places,” Elena shrugged. “The town takes care of me. I help people with their chores and they feed me or let me sleep in the lofts of their barns or carriage houses.”

“They don’t seem to clothe you very well, though,” Gaenor said without thinking. “Oops. I’m sorry I didn’t mean to say that.”

“They give me their old clothes when mine wear out,” Elena said defensively.

“I don’t mean to make you feel bad, but it looks like they’re a bit overdue. Come on,” Gaenor said, getting to her feet, “Let’s see what we can do about that. You’re a bit thinner than I am, but only an inch or two shorter and probably will grow a bit more before you’re through too. I’m sure I can find something to fit you.”

“But,” Elena started to protest.

“No buts, Elena,” Gaenor told her firmly, “The rags we mopped Cornellya’s forehead with were in better shape than that dress.” Gaenor took a good look at Elena and decided. “Yes, I have a blouse that will absolutely match your eyes and a really nice skirt I bought in Cilbe because it went with the blouse, but to tell the truth they really aren’t my colors. Here, try these on.”

“I couldn’t,” Elena protested.

“Of course you can, if I say so,” Gaenor told her.

“My Lady...”

“Gaenor,” Gaenor corrected her. “Now put these on and let’s see how you look.” Elena was confused, but the easiest course was to do as Gaenor told her. “Very nice,” Gaenor told her when she had changed. “Now let’s see what we can do about your hair.”

“My hair? What wrong with it?” Elena asked, raising her hands to her head.

“It’s beautiful,” Gaenor assured her, “but no one has ever shown you how to take care of it, have they?”

“I clean it.”

“Yes, you do, and that’s a sign that somewhere in that bundle of shyness you do have some pride in yourself. Good! However, the ends are all split. Elena, you need a trim. I have some shears in my pack.

Sit and I'll cut. Don't worry. You look too good with long hair for me to trim more than just the frizzy ends."

It took Gaenor longer than she expected because Elena kept fidgeting in the chair, but she calmed her down by talking throughout the process. In the back of her mind, Gaenor recalled that Ibbet of Ander had been doing this same service for her almost a year earlier. She tried to recall whether she had fidgeted as much as Elena was doing.

"How old are you, Elena?"

"Fifteen, Lady," Elena replied.

"Gaenor," Gaenor corrected her yet again.

"Gaenor," Elena repeated.

"Better. Fifteen, so you're almost an adult by Cilben law. What are you going to do two years from now when you're considered a woman, dear? Is there some nice young man you plan to marry? Or do you plan to learn a trade?"

"I don't know," Elena admitted. "I don't know how to do much besides run errands and clean houses and things like that. And none of the boys around here will look at me."

"Well, you should think about it. And watch out, because by the time I'm done, they're all going to be looking at you. Just don't fall for the first sweet talking liar, you encounter. Now there, that's much better. See in the mirror?"

"Oh!" Elena started at her reflection. Her long black hair still fell down past her shoulders, but without the split ends it seemed different, more refined, and she was dressed more like a prosperous woman than the errand girl she normally was.

"I'm not quite done yet, though," Gaenor warned her.

"Now what?" Elena asked worriedly.

Gaenor chuckled, "Nothing dire, just a ribbon for your hair and maybe we'll braid it. Relax! If my friend Relle were here, she'd be trying to cover you in jewelry, but I only have two pieces and it wouldn't be appropriate to give either of them away." She started plaiting Elena's hair into a single long braid, but part way through she changed her mind and instead left most of it straight with one narrow braid that contained the blue ribbon and wrapped around Elena's head like a coronet. "Perfect," Gaenor decided. "What do you think?"

"Oh! It's much too fine," Elena protested.

"Nonsense!" Gaenor scoffed.

"But the ladies of the town will think I'm trying to rise above my station."

"Your station, Elena, should be where you choose it to be, not where they want it."

“Thank you, Elena,” Artur told her as she brought him and Vito a pot of kahwah two mornings later.

“You’re welcome, Senator,” she replied with far more confidence than she had displayed on first acquaintance. “What will you two have for breakfast this morning?”

“Just some toast, I think, if you would be so kind.” Artur nodded to Vito who agreed.

“An honor, Senator,” she had learned to call Gaenor, Cornellya and Vito by name, but Artur was always “Senator,” and no amount of coaxing would get her to stop. She went into the kitchen to deliver Artur’s order and soon returned with a plate of toast and a jar of marmalade. “If that’s all for now, Senator, I promised to help Lady Gaenor this morning.”

“Of course,” Artur told her. “Have fun.” A strange expression passed over Elena’s face as he said that, but then she smiled and performed a quick curtsy, one far more graceful than her earlier attempts, before turning away. There was a bounce in her step that hadn’t existed before either.

“She’s come a long way in two days,” Vito observed, watching her disappear through the kitchen doors again.

“That she has, sirs,” the innkeeper agreed from the next table. “I’m thinking I should offer her a job here. My wife and I could use some help serving and she seems to have a nice personality. I never noticed it, or her really, before.”

“She’s a nice girl,” Artur told the man, “though she may still need some guidance. I get the feeling that while the town has taken care of her, they haven’t done so kindly.”

“You’re right, of course, Senator, though I can’t really explain why.”

Elena returned from the kitchen carrying a tray with a pot of tea on it and three cups, then disappeared out the back door.

“There are always reasons,” Artur commented. “They aren’t always good ones, though. If you do hire her, treat her well.”

“Yes, Senator.”

Gaenor had an extra cot installed in Cornellya’s room for Elena and she had been staying there ever since. At first it was so Cornellya would have someone to assist her should she wake up in the middle of the night needing something, but her fever broke that night and except for tiring easily, she felt fine the next day.

Gaenor and Cornellya were sitting at the table in the bungalow’s common room when Elena arrived. They were deep in conversation concerning something Gaenor had written in her notebook, but both looked up and greeted her with smiles and a “Good morning,” as she put the tray down.

“Good morning,” Elena replied cheerfully. Gaenor thought she detected an unspoken, “My Ladies,” in there, but could not very well correct the girl on that. Elena poured tea, first for Gaenor and Cornellya and then, almost as if it were an afterthought, for herself, before sitting at the table, although slightly apart

from the others. "La... Gaenor?" she asked. "Senator Arturus, is he the same man who was dictator before the emperor was crowned? And is his son really the new emperor?"

Gaenor looked at the girl. "Where did you hear about that? And when?"

"Last night," Elena replied nervously. She had been showing more self-confidence, but every so often if she thought she had gone too far she would slip back into her previously timid behavior. "Some of the men in the inn were talking about the news from the capital. I gathered they heard it from some of the sailors on that ship you arrived on."

"It was inevitable, I suppose," Gaenor sighed, taking a sip of her tea. "I know Artur was hoping we could move on before anyone here found out."

"Why?" Elena asked.

Gaenor paused to collect her thoughts, but in the interval Cornellya charged ahead, "My godfather did not really want to be dictator, or emperor for that matter. We all sort of stumbled into the situation that made it necessary. You see, we're in the middle of something far more important and all that was just a distraction that kept us from doing what we had to do."

"It embarrasses him as well," Gaenor added. "He would much rather live among equals and the way he does that is by treating everyone he meets as an equal."

"You all do," Elena replied a little shyly.

"It's the sort of thing that's contagious," Gaenor laughed. "Besides none of us are any better than anyone else. Sure we can do some things others cannot, but then others can do things we can't so it's even."

"It's a good thing we'll be leaving tomorrow evening," Cornellya observed, "but it's too bad we couldn't leave before word of Arturus' full status came out. I do hope nobody makes too much of it."

"I'll talk to the mayor," Elena volunteered eagerly before realizing what she was proposing. Her eyes widened at her own audacity.

Gaenor caught that and added, "Maybe we all should." Elena put her cup down and started to rise until Gaenor added, "After our tea, however."

The mayor had heard the rumor as well, but understood, or at least pretended to when Gaenor explained that Artur would rather not have it spread about that his son was emperor or that he, himself, had until recently wielded absolute power in the Empire. "You don't have to lie about it," Gaenor added. "Just make sure nobody goes on about it in front of Artur."

"It will disappoint the whole town, you know," the mayor complained. "Everyone is looking forward to having this feast in honor of Emperor Arturus."

"Nonsense," Gaenor told him, laughing. "First of all he wasn't emperor, he was dictator, and they'll still be holding a feast in his honor, just make sure that in his honor they also respect his wish to continue to be called Senator."

"Do you really think that will work?" Cornellya asked her after they returned to the bungalow. "I mean asking the mayor to pass the word around like that?"

“It was worth a shot,” Gaenor shrugged. “It was a nice day for a walk though. I’m glad the storm is finally over. I know the wind died down yesterday, but it was still gloomy. Too bad there aren’t any interesting shops in town.”

“You’re sounding like Relle,” Cornellya pointed out.

“The one thing I’ve always loved about traveling was window shopping,” Gaenor admitted. “I like to look at what’s for sale. Relle likes to buy. Still had there been anything really unusual it might have been interesting to buy it for study.”

“You still have dozens of items in your pack that you haven’t got the foggiest notion of what they do,” Cornellya pointed out.

“True, and we have some time this afternoon. Want to look at a few of them?” Gaenor asked.

“Okay,” Cornellya shrugged.

“I’ll get your pack,” Elena offered. “The smaller one, right?”

“That’s not necessary, Elena,” Gaenor assured her.

“I want to,” Elena insisted, getting up and cutting off Gaenor’s progress to her room. “Be right back.”

“Okay,” Gaenor said, mostly to herself as she sat back down. She saw Cornellya grinning broadly. “What?” she asked.

“Nothing,” Cornellya replied.

“Here you are,” Elena announced as she deposited Gaenor’s pack on the table.

“Thank you,” Gaenor told her.

“My pleasure,” Elena replied as she sat back down.

“Okay, let’s take a look at some of the things I bought in Fasri,” Gaenor suggested. “I think they’re down near the bottom, by now.”

“Then why not examine some of the pieces we got in Nachli?” Cornellya asked.

“I left them on the *Iris*, along with the rest of my stuff” Gaenor replied. “We can look at yours if you want.”

“No, I left them on board too.”

“Okay, so let’s see what’s left that we haven’t managed to discern the properties of,” Gaenor continued and she dug through the pack. As she did so, she removed the bright red Temi garb Leracus had given her.

Elena gasped. “Bright red! No one dares to wear that color in Cilbe.”

“I’ve seen clothing this color or close to it in CilbeCity,” Gaenor replied, “but you are right about this garment.” She shook it out and laid it down on the table. “It’s a Temi warrior’s outfit. Chief Leracus gave it to me.”

“You are Temi?” Elena asked, thoroughly awed and a bit frightened.

“She’s a chief of the Ridec Clan,” Cornellya put in.

Elena’s jaw dropped open. “I didn’t know.”

“Why should you?” Gaenor countered. “Look it wasn’t that big a deal.”

“Hah!” Cornellya laughed.

“Okay, so it was a big deal, but... Okay, it all started in Firdan. Artur and I had traveled there with King Pawlen of Mishanda. We were his gift to the new king and queen of Firdan, the magical portion of the coronation ceremony by law cannot be performed by a Firdani adept, so it’s traditional for the Mishandan monarch to provide an adept. Anyway, while we were there an old enemy of Artur’s hired the Ridec Clan to assassinate Artur. Artur managed to kill the first few Temi to attempt it, but one managed to hit him with a poison that removed his ability to cast magic spells. Realizing he was only endangering everyone around, he decided to leave Dana and return to Cornellya’s people, who, he knew could cure him. I didn’t have to go along, but I did.

“It was a rather harrowing trip across Firdan and Gostrina,” Gaenor continued. “At one point Artur tried to sneak away when I was arrested in Es and I was forced to catch up when I was finally released. I found him in a small village in Western Gostrina, but had to intercept three Temi from finding him first. I killed two outright by magic, but had to use a sword against the third. I wasn’t very good with a sword at the time. Actually, I’m only a little better now, although Artur says at least now he doesn’t worry about me stabbing myself in the foot. At the time I was too angry at the Temi to care, so I just kept swinging the sword until I tripped on a log or something. Fortunately Artur was nearby and he saved me.”

“You killed two Temi?” Elena asked.

“Together with Artur I lost track of how many we killed, Elena. Somehow we managed to make it to the edge of the Parch. Do you know what the Parch is? It’s the largest, most absolute desert in the world. The only ways to survive a Temi contract are to either kill the person who hired them or challenge the clan chief for his position. If you survive enough attempts, the chief will come after you himself. Leracus, the clan chief of the Ridecs met us at the edge of the Parch. He told us that no one had ever survived in the Parch for more than four days but if we were to do so we would have met his challenge and be welcomed into his clan.

“We had a slight advantage in being able to cast water spells in the Parch, but even so we would have died if Cornellya’s people had not found us. I never expected to run into the Ridec Clan again, but they found us when we were on the way to CilbeCity. That was when Artur and I were formally welcomed into the Ridec Clan. It was an exciting evening. We told stories and they told stories and sang songs about us. There was a lot of music and dancing and Cornellya here nearly got herself killed,” Gaenor told her with a glance at the Vari.

“Killed?” Elena asked.

“Never try to spy on a Temi encampment,” Gaenor told her seriously.

The festival Olaka held in Artur's honor started an hour before sunset but lasted until well after dawn. From the reception after Colchicus' investiture, Gaenor had expected a series of speeches and toasts with some of the slow and measured dances that had been fashionable in the capital. But the Cilben Empire was actually a collection of nationalities and while Olakan culture was more closely related to that of the capital than the nearby provinces of Nachli, Kolme and Archatu, it was still quite different.

Olaka had, early in her history, been a military base. The Legion that had been stationed there had left long since, but the Cilben colonists had stayed. Isolated from the rest of the Empire, they had retained certain customs, but developed others that were unique to them.

The festival did at least start out with a speech by the mayor, but he kept it short and to the point. He welcomed Artur and his company to Olaka and then declared the festival open. This was followed by a concert by the town band and alternated between classic Cilben music, a few pieces from other parts of the world and even some locally written compositions. After the concert, the band took a break while the feast began, but were soon back on duty, playing a wide variety of dance tunes. Gaenor had thought to be able to relax and just watch the festivities, but Elena would have none of that and after the mayor's wife managed to lure Artur to dance with her, Elena dragged Gaenor into the middle of the dancing frenzy as well. Dance on Olaka was unlike anything Gaenor had experienced elsewhere and she found herself rotating from partner to partner, both male and female, until at the end of that particular set, she was once more coupled with Elena.

More food was brought out then. Dishes that were so unlike those they had enjoyed at the inn, Gaenor might have thought they were foreign to Olaka, but Elena explained that these were special foods that were only made when they were celebrating holidays. The spices used were expensive and usually imported and in an isolated port like Olaka there was not as much trade as elsewhere in the Empire. There were even two sides of beef being barbecued on twin spits. "I didn't know you had any beef on this island," Gaenor commented to Elena.

"There's a farmer with a small herd on the far side of the island," Elena explained. "They're mostly dairy cows, but you can't have calves without getting some males. This may be the only time we'll eat beef until the New Year celebration, though."

"I should have realized," Gaenor laughed at herself. "Milk doesn't make itself, does it?"

"I'll bet you could make it with magic," Elena told her.

"Hmm," Gaenor considered. "If Doctor Nyima's theories are correct, I suppose it is theoretically possible, but I've never heard of anyone doing that. Magic, as we practice it, is manipulative not creative." Seeing the look of confusion on Elena's face she tried to explain. "I mean that we use magic to work with materials and forces that are already present, we don't actually create something from nothing."

"But I saw you make ice," Elena argued.

"No, I just chilled the water until it froze" Gaenor explained. "The water was already there, all I did was to remove enough heat energy to freeze it."

“But the shapes of the pieces?”

“A side effect of the spell. I might even have caused water to form like dew by condensing moisture in the air, but I still wouldn’t be creating water.”

“But you say it is possible?”

“Theoretically,” Gaenor repeated. “However, why would you need to create water? It’s everywhere, even in the Parch. Admittedly in the Parch it’s very deep in the ground, but it is there nonetheless.”

“But how would you do it?” Elena pressed.

Gaenor considered it. Both Elena and Cornellya were watching her closely. She understood why Cornellya was interested, but in what way could such information ever be useful to Elena? Very early on, she had explained how an adept had to be initiated before he or she could start casting spells. “I suppose the easiest way would be to just extract it from the air, but as I mentioned that would actually just involve cooling it until it condensed. Water is also a common product of combustion. By that I mean that it forms when you burn something, especially organic matter like wood. Two atoms of hydrogen bond to one of oxygen, the same component of the air that we need to breathe, I should add. However, all that would be necessary is to start a fire. You could modify the spell at that point to extract the water from the smoke and then condense it into a liquid. Of course all that would be is a modified ignition spell, a bit complex and exotic, perhaps, but just an ignition spell.

“What is hydrogen?” Elena asked.

“The smallest and lightest of elements,” Gaenor replied. “That probably doesn’t answer your question, does it? I’m sorry, Elena, it would take a bit of time to teach you enough to actually understand it. As simply as I can put it, all things are made of matter. There are many types of matter, but most are combinations of smaller types of matter. The smallest possible particle is the atom, although I’ve read some speculation that still smaller particles form atoms, but it’s a controversial hypothesis, that is, not everyone agrees. Anyway, there are only a finite number of different types of atoms. The last time I heard, there were only forty-nine confirmed elements. Well I say only, although some of the ancients thought there were only four – fire, water, earth and air – we now know none of those are actually elements. Fire isn’t even a form of matter.

“Someone put together an organized table of the elements that I saw in a book at Mita College,” Gaenor continued. “It was fascinating, I never thought of such a thing and yet it seemed like such an obvious way to organize them. Anyway, if it was accurate there are quite a few holes in it that we may discover. Some elements you may have actually seen. Gold is an element. So is silver and copper. And carbon too, like in lampblack, the soot you get inside a lamp globe especially if the wick isn’t trimmed properly. But there are a lot of elements you almost never see in their pure forms like... Elena, your eyes are glazing over.”

“I’m sorry,” Elena was halfway to tears. “I understood part of what you said, but as you went on I just couldn’t keep up.”

“No need to apologize, Elena,” Gaenor assured her. “It’s my fault. I had a pretty good education. I had to work to pay for much of it, but it was an opportunity you haven’t had. The problem is, I keep forgetting you haven’t and in doing so I talk over your head. It’s my failing, not yours.”

Elena shook her head and a few tears glistened on her cheeks. “I’m so stupid,” she cried softly.

“No,” Gaenor disagree, “I don’t think you’re stupid. Not knowing things does not make you stupid. You’re very clever with what you do know and you seem to learn quickly. That’s a sign of intelligence.”

Elena just shook her head and refused to let Gaenor apologize any further. Instead she dried her tears and told Gaenor and Cornellya, “Wait here and I’ll get some sweets for you.” Then she quickly ran off before either woman could stop her.

“I wish I could do something about her self-esteem,” Gaenor sighed.

“Gaenor,” Cornellya told her, “you’ve only known her a few days, but it seems to me you’ve already improved her self-esteem a lot. But you can’t change her overnight and I don’t think you should try to change her. She’ll grow and develop as she sees fit. Trying to force her into a mold is exactly what the people of Olaka have been doing. Okay, you want to do it to help and they were just uncaring, but it’s still the same act.”

“That’s more of the Way, isn’t it?” Gaenor asked. The “Way” or “Way of Life” was a philosophy culturally shared by all Vieri.

“The Way is of life and life is of the Way,” Cornellya replied. It was obviously a quote. “But how would you create water from nothing?”

“It can’t be done,” Gaenor replied. “Not literally from nothing. Doctor Nyima’s theory says it is possible to change matter to energy and vice versa but I think one would have to have a firmer grasp of the nature of matter to accomplish such a thing. If I had such a grasp, that is if I understood what an atom looked like and if I could harness enough energy, assuming it was safe to do so, I suppose I could cast a spell that would create water molecules of two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen. Frankly, condensing it or drawing it up from the water tables is a heck of a lot easier. Let’s drop the subject for a bit, though, I see Elena coming back.”

“And the band is starting up again,” Cornellya pointed out. “I’d like to dance some more.”

“Why don’t you ask Vito?” Gaenor suggested. “I doubt he’ll start asking questions about Vieri while dancing.”

“I have been avoiding him,” Cornellya admitted. “Okay, but let’s try some of these sweets. Is this chocolate, Elena?”

“From Archatu, yes,” Elena confirmed.

“I heard the Innkeeper’s wife talking about this. You’d think it was the treasure of the ages.”

“You’ve never had chocolate?” Elena asked.

“It doesn’t seem to have made it to our parts of the world yet,” Gaenor replied, taking a bite. “Very nice.”

“Oh my!” Cornellya gasped as she tasted the chocolate. “Oh my!”

“Cornellya?” Gaenor asked. “Are you all right?”

“Maybe I’d better not finish this,” Cornellya replied, a blush spreading over her dark face. She put the uneaten chocolate aside. “You don’t feel it, do you?”

“Feel what?” Gaenor asked.

“Uh, I’d rather not say, it’s very personal.”

“Oh. I think I understand,” Gaenor said a moment later, a blush was spreading over her face as well. “No it doesn’t do that to me. Well, maybe very mildly, but obviously not like it’s affecting you.”

“Too much of that would be addictive,” Cornellya told them. “It’s very nice though. But I’d better not dance with Vito, I’m not sure I could control myself and as you might say in Mishanda I don’t really approve of dating outside my species.”

“Too bad it only affects Vieri that way,” Gaenor replied, casting a glance over at Artur.

“Remind me to describe what I’m feeling after this wears off,” Cornellya requested.

“Why not do so now?” Gaenor asked.

“Thinking about it only makes it much worse,” Cornellya replied, blushing furiously. “But I think Kseniya will be interested. She’ll probably want a sample to analyze, but I’m not sure it would be wise to bring any of this back to the Village.”

“I think it would melt on the way,” Gaenor replied. “This is rather soft already. We should contact Kseniya soon, though.”

“Not tonight,” Cornellya replied instantly. “I don’t think I could maintain the spell in this condition.”

“I could try it,” Gaenor offered. “I’d like to anyway, but it can wait until we reach Nimbria, I suppose. You want us to help you get back to your room?”

“If you don’t mind,” Cornellya responded.

Together Gaenor and Elena helped Cornellya get back to her room and waited until she shoed them back out the door again before returning to the party.

Colch

One

None of the adepts were entirely recovered from the festivities of the night before by the time the *Iris* cast off from the dock late that afternoon. However, nearly the entire town came out to see them off although there was one person notably missing.

“I wish Elena had come to see us off,” Gaenor commented as the harbor began to slip out of sight.

"I'm not surprised she didn't," Artur replied. "Think about it. You probably gave her some of the happiest days of her life this week. Now she'll have to go back to living hand to mouth the way she did before we arrived. No wonder she didn't care to be around to see it all come to an end."

"I suppose," Gaenor agreed sadly. "Could I have done more for her?"

"In a few days? I don't see how. You showed her kindness and what it is like to be treated as an equal. I noticed some of the townsfolk there looking at her differently as well, so maybe it won't be as bad for her as it has been."

"I hope so. I like her and she deserves better."

"Everyone deserves better than what she was getting," Artur told her, "but we usually have to assert ourselves a bit to get it. Maybe now she will as well. She was getting bullied around by some of the people in that town, but I don't think she's likely to take it as meekly as she once did. If nothing else, she'll come to realize that she doesn't have to work for the people who don't treat her well. Also the innkeeper was planning to offer her more regular employment, so that will help too."

"If he goes ahead with it," Gaenor replied darkly. Artur merely nodded. "Well, I'm going to unpack a few things and maybe take a nap. I think Cornellya went back to sleep before we ever left the dock. I hope she's all right."

"She probably is," Artur commented. "She told me she didn't get very much sleep last night. I thought that odd since she went to bed relatively early."

"Nervous energy, perhaps," Gaenor replied. "Or maybe an allergic reaction to the chocolate."

"That could be it," Artur agreed, shrugging the matter off. "Where's Vito?"

"I saw him on his way toward the bow. He seems to like facing in the same direction we're going."

"It keeps the wind in your face," Artur noted. "That helps some people. Or maybe he just likes the view."

"It can get rather wet at that end," Gaenor remarked.

"Speaking of that, it looks like we have some more rain moving in," Artur noted, catching a view of the horizon.

"Not another storm, I hope," Gaenor replied.

"Probably just a cold front moving up from the south," Artur replied.

"The south?" Gaenor asked. "Oh, that's right, we're on the other side of the equator now, aren't we. Is it true water swirls in the opposite direction when it drains out of a sink?"

"Not really. It's an interesting bit of folk legendry, but it's not true. Water can swirl to the left or the right anywhere in the world."

"Pity," Gaenor replied.

"I encountered a man at one of the beach towns near the equator who ran a minor scam on the local tourists. He claimed his property was situated exactly on the equator and had even drawn a line on the ground in chalk to mark where the equator was. He had this cone-shaped tub that he would fill with water and then remove a cork from a hole in the bottom. North of the equator it would swirl to the left as it ran out the hole. Then he would move the tub to the other side of the line and do it again and the water would swirl out the other way."

"But you just said it didn't make a difference," Gaenor accused.

"I did, but with practice, he found a way to start the water turning one way or the other and did it without anyone noticing. It doesn't take a lot and once the water is in motion it will keep going the same way."

"Oh," Gaenor said, disappointed.

"The real capper, though, is that his property wasn't on the equator. It was about ten miles north of it in fact. Strangely only the locals ever thought to question it and since it did them no harm, none of them tipped the tourists off."

"Well, of course the tourists never questioned it. Everyone knows the equator is a line and there it was, right in plain sight," Gaenor laughed. "I wonder if it was pointed perfectly east and west."

"Probably not," Artur chuckled. "He likely used a magnetic compass to set the direction and in that area, magnetic north is several degrees east of true north."

The clouds moved in from the southern horizon fairly quickly and soon darkened the sky. A few minutes later the sky appeared to get slightly brighter and Artur suggested, "We'd better get below decks or we'll get soaked."

Sure enough, as soon as they got to a sheltered area the rain started pounding the deck behind them. They continued on to their cabin and were joined a minute later by a very wet Vitautis. "I wish I had your weather sense," he told Artur, seeing both he and Gaenor were dry. Artur had amazed Vito several times on their journey so far by predicting the weather.

"It's been a hobby for about forty years," Artur shrugged. "If you watched the weather avidly for that long, you could do it too."

"I'm going to check on Cornellya," Gaenor told them. The ship was rolling slightly as she left the cabin, but no more so than she had done while docked in Olaka. She was about to knock on the door to Cornellya's cabin, but rather than risking waking her friend up, she just quietly poked her head in the door. She was a little surprised to see the vari sitting up on the bed, writing in a notebook.

"What are you working on?" Gaenor asked.

"Oh, hi. Come in," Cornellya replied. "Just looking for a way to disguise myself while among humans."

"Why?"

"I'm a little tired of all the staring, actually," Cornellya replied. "It just seemed to me that if we can create lights and be almost invisible, then with a bit of work, perhaps I could make a spell that will hide my ears for a while."

“Even with your ears hidden,” Gaenor replied, “you’ll look unusual. The shape of your face, while quite becoming, will be exotic anywhere humans live.”

“Maybe, but exotic and freakish are two different things.”

“You don’t look freakish,” Gaenor insisted. “Besides, even with those ears of yours, which barely show through your hair I should mention, I’ll stand out more for the color of my skin once we reach the Southlands and the other realms that surround the Gulf of Nimbres. I was a bit light-skinned compared to the Cilbens, for that matter, but they’re used to seeing people from other kingdoms so it wasn’t a big deal.”

“But they all stared at me and I really didn’t like the way the people in Huenotlan looked at me.”

“You didn’t want to cover your ears then,” Gaenor pointed out. “What changed your mind?”

“I didn’t want to cover them, because it isn’t comfortable to do so,” Cornellya replied. “Disguising them through magic wouldn’t hurt, at least, but I can’t find a way to get the fine detail I need to make it look natural.”

“Here,” Gaenor offered, “let me see what you’ve done so far.” Cornellya handed her the notebook. She looked at it for a few minutes as the ship rolled back and forth gently. “Oh, that’s the problem. You’re trying to do too many different things at once. You’re making the ears invisible, but then also trying to fill in the holes in your hair with illusory hair. When you do that you have to account for every hair and the way you’ve done this, you’ll just get a patch of color where your ears had been.”

“How would you do it then?” Cornellya asked.

“I’d try to change your appearance as a whole, rather than trying to do it in pieces this way. Let me see,” she paused and pulled out a notebook and started scribbling furiously. She frowned at her first attempt and flipped the page. “Can’t use that, it would have changed your appearance permanently. I assume you don’t actually want round ears.”

“Not really, no,” Cornellya replied. There was no mistaking the sense of revulsion in her tone.

Gaenor chuckled and went back to work. She went through several more pages before she had something she liked. Finally she looked around the room. “Do you have a slate and some chalk?”

“Should I?” Cornellya asked.

“It would have made this easier. I don’t know where mine is. Artur insisted on buying new packs in Cilbe because the old ones were all worn out. They’re nice enough, but we had to pack them in a hurry and I’m still looking for some of my less frequently used tools. Let me use your looking glass and some rouge.”

“Rouge? Gaenor, Vieri don’t wear make up. Didn’t you notice?”

“No,” Gaenor replied, “I hadn’t.” She looked at Cornellya closely. “My Gods! You really look like that naturally? Do you know how many women would kill to look like you? Very well, hold on, I’ll be right back.” She rushed back to the cabin she shared with Artur. He and Vito were playing the Cilben board game, “Maelstrom.”

“How’s Cornellya?” Artur asked.

“Concerned about her appearance,” Gaenor replied.

“Still?” Vito asked. “I thought she had grown used to people staring at her.”

“Apparently not,” Gaenor replied. “Artur do you know where the slate is?”

“In one of my packs,” he replied. “Check the larger one.”

Gaenor routed about in Artur’s pack and found what she needed. “Thanks,” she told him and rushed back to Cornellya’s cabin. She found the vari examining her notes.

“What is this?” Cornellya asked her. “I can’t make any sense of this spell.”

“I wrote it in shorthand,” Gaenor admitted.

“You’ve always warned everyone not to do that,” Cornellya accused her.

“True and I intend to write it out with the full subtextual realization of the spell, but I wanted to make sure I had the tools I needed. Now, just give me a few more minutes and I’ll bob your ears.” She reworked her scribbled into neatly arranged and notated symbols. When she was finished she double-checked her work and then for good measure ran through it yet another time. When she was ready she laid out her tools, the slate and a piece of chalk, a piece of perfectly clear quartz crystal, and a small gold coin called an aureus from Cilbe.

She started with the quartz crystal in her left hand and the gold coin in her right. The first part of the spell was an invocation and prayer to the Mishandan goddesses Hannor the Mother and Meara, goddess of the deep ocean. This first part wasn’t strictly necessary, but she felt more comfortable asking Hannor for guidance and Meara for a calm sea while she cast this spell for the first time. From there she started the detailed descriptive part of the incantation. In her hands she felt the crystal and coin growing warm. As she continued the incantation she opened her hands, palms upward, and observed an arc of lightning spark between them. She smiled and placed the two items on the upper corners of the slate.

Gaenor then picked up the slate and the crystal and coin stayed in place as though glued there. Seeing that part had worked, she started into the next incantation as she drew a simple sketch of Cornellya. Actually, her artistic abilities were limited and it looked more like a mango with pointed ears, but for the purposes of the spell it was sufficient. It didn’t particularly please Cornellya, who managed to peak at what Gaenor was doing. She raised her eyebrows a bit disdainfully, but otherwise allowed Gaenor to continue. The spell continued for several more minutes before Gaenor paused. Then she wiped off the ears and redrew them to look more human. Another long incantation followed and when she finally concluded the coin and crystal fell off the slate.

She caught them easily and then approached Cornellya and touched the crystal to the middle of her forehead. Cornellya’s ears instantly disappeared under her long hair. Gaenor showed the results in the looking glass.

“Wow!” Cornellya marveled. “It’s perfect.” She reached up to feel her ears. “But they’re still pointed, I can feel them. How do you undo the spell?”

“With the coin,” Gaenor replied. She touched the coin to Cornellya’s forehead and her normal appearance was restored. “I don’t know how many uses you’ll get out of that and frankly I don’t think you ought to use it at all. Your mother is right, they are your best feature.”

“Thank you,” Cornellya told her anyway.

Two

They made a brief stop-over in ColchCity a few days later. Like the stop in Huenotlan, the crew would be off loading some cargo and picking up more and so expected to be there for at least three or four days. “Longer, perhaps,” the captain confided to Artur. “The dockworkers in Colch are never in much of a hurry.”

“It’s been a while since I was here last,” Artur noted, “and at the time I didn’t have the opportunity to look around. The city seems unusually quiet, though. Is that normal?”

“No, it isn’t, Senator. I wonder what’s happened.”

Artur found out a few minutes later when the deputy harbormaster boarded the *Iris*. “It’s the old king, sirs,” the man told them. “He’s dying.”

“King Werlta?” Artur asked. “Is he still alive?”

“Oh, aye, yes, he is, but not for much longer, I fear. The entire city is just waiting for the sad news.”

“We noticed the quiet,” Artur replied, “as though everyone were holding their breath.”

“Aye, yes,” the deputy harbormaster agreed. “Well, I’ll see about getting some men here to unload your cargo, Captain, but if old Werlta dies, there will be a three-day mourning period, no work done.”

“Then I wish the man a long and healthy life,” the captain replied.

“Aye, yes, but he’s already had that,” the deputy harbormaster replied.

“I should go pay my respects,” Artur told Gaenor not long after. “He was an enemy once, but an honorable one and he stayed with me when he had to visit Cilbe to formally surrender to Emperor Balto. We did not quite become friends, but I’m sure we would have had we spent more time together.”

“May I come with you?” Gaenor asked. “And Cornellya too, if she wants?”

“Of course,” Artur replied without hesitation. “It isn’t going to be a happy visit, you understand.”

“Of course not,” Gaenor agreed, “but it seems more appropriate than if we go out shopping while the city is in such a state.”

Vito chose to stay on board the *Iris*. He had tried reading his copy of Gaenor’s thesis again while they were on Olaka and was trying to teach himself her notational system. He had found the work fascinating, but much of the theoretical aspects were beyond his comprehension. From his questions, Gaenor was afraid he wasn’t making very fast progress, but he was improving and she did her best to encourage him.

At least he had stopped questioning the need for the subtextual notation.

Colch had been a walled city when Artur's legion had conquered her many years earlier and most of those walls still stood, but only because there were many buildings integrated with them. The city had doubled in size since its inclusion in the Cilben Empire because it was ideally suited as a port of entry from the Gulf of Nimbres states and the Southlands of the subcontinent beyond.

"I hardly recognize the place," Artur told Gaenor and Cornellya as they walked away from the harbor. "Most of these buildings are new, or at least they weren't here on my last visit. I guess that shouldn't surprise me. It's been, what? Thirty-five years? Maybe a bit longer. There are whole cities that aren't that old."

"Where?" Gaenor asked.

"Laria in Wanlaria for one," Artur replied. "The old capital city, Tralonni, was destroyed in an earthquake thirty-one years ago. Instead of rebuilding, they chose to build an entirely new city. It's supposed to be a marvel in its own right. Perhaps we'll get a chance to see it, but maybe not. The palace ahead looks pretty much the same, however. I was always glad we weren't obliged to do much damage to it before Werlta surrendered. Actually we weren't trying to damage it at all, but some of the catapult shots bounced into the city and beyond. Trust me; it takes a lot longer to build a house than it does to take it down."

"Do you know the way up the hill?" Cornellya asked, seeing the palace as it overlooked the rest of the city.

"Just keep heading up-slope," Artur replied nonchalantly.

"But if the city has been rebuilt since you were here..."

"The streets will still be in the same places for the most part. There may be parks and buildings where some of those streets were, but the basic geography of the city is still the same and I doubt anyone would have ripped up one of the main streets."

They were halfway up the hill when they came to a broad stretch of greenery that the street they were on continued through. Most of the trees were obviously thirty years old or less and the grass was kept amazingly short, almost like a living rug. There was a rotary area in the middle of the park that the road split and went around. In the middle of the rotary was a tall statue of a man in Cilben senatorial robes.

"Is that you?" Gaenor asked Artur.

"It is according to the plaque," Cornellya observed. "Do you think you can see your house from up there?"

Artur looked at his godchild. "Where did you ever hear that expression?" he asked her.

"Several places. It seems to be universal among you humans, at least anywhere you can get up high enough to have a panoramic view. You won't hear a vari saying something like that."

"I just did," Gaenor observed.

"Normally," Cornellya amplified.

“That’s because in the Parch all your houses are subterranean,” Artur pointed out. “if you get to the top of the nearest dune all you’re going to see are still more dunes.”

“Did you know this was here?” Gaenor asked looking at the tall standing figure.

“Can’t say I did. It isn’t totally unheard of. In fact it’s fairly common for a conqueror’s statue to be erected on the site of his victory, but technically it was Balto who conquered Colch, I was just the general commanding his army.”

“Balto was sitting on a throne in Cilbe at the time,” Gaenor retorted.

“He was an old man,” Artur explained. “He had that prerogative. In his younger days he would have led the legion against anyone who declared war on him directly just as Werlta did. He wasn’t like Lusius. He wasn’t prone to sending good men to their deaths without being willing to face the same risk.”

“According to the inscription,” Cornellya reported, having walked closer to read it, “you are being honored as the savior of Colch. Just what did you do here, Godfather?”

“I accepted the king’s surrender,” Artur shrugged. “Then I assigned units of the Twelfth Legion to suppress looting and keep the peace. Standard procedure, nothing more.”

“Evidently it was seen as something more by the Colchians,” Gaenor suggested.

“It’s flattering, I suppose,” Artur admitted, “but it appears the local pigeons enjoy my presence a little too much.”

They continued on uphill and were soon at the gatehouse of the royal palace complex. Two pairs of guards in ornate and bright purple uniforms and tall gray furry helmets stood statue-like on either side of the main gate. To Gaenor’s surprise, however, Artur did not attempt to talk to either of them. Instead, he walked past them to the gate itself where he found a discretely placed bell-pull. He gave it a yank and a tinkling bell could be heard from deep inside the gatehouse.

“Why aren’t you talking to the guards?” Gaenor asked.

“They aren’t allowed to talk, dear,” he replied. “They aren’t allowed to react in anyway at all. If you need to enter the palace, you have to talk to someone inside the gatehouse, unless you have a prior appointment.”

“Not react at all?” Cornellya asked mischievously.

“Behave,” Artur told her firmly. “It may be a local hobby to tease them, but this is neither the time nor the place.”

“You’re no fun,” Cornellya grumped, but she couldn’t hold the frown on her face and she giggled a bit. They didn’t have too long to wait before another guard bearing the insignia of a centurion came out of the gatehouse to ask their business. His uniform wasn’t as florid as those of the men outside the gate. Instead it was a normal military uniform a soldier might wear while in camp.

“Arturus Cornellian Marno,” Artur replied, “with Lady Gaenor of Narmouth and Cornellya Vasylya. We would like to pay our respects to His Highness if possible.”

The centurion's eyes grew wide. "General Arturus Cornellian?" he asked nervously.

"The same," Artur replied calmly. "Is there a problem?"

"His Highness is not well, you realize?" the centurion asked.

"So I have been led to understand, Centurion. As it happens, we just landed at the port this morning and on hearing, we rushed up the hill in the hope that we would not be too late."

The centurion nodded his head. "General, if there is any man in the world who is welcome within these walls, it is you. Open the gate!" he commanded. The four ceremonial guards turned as one and in what could have been mistaken as a well-choreographed dance, they performed a series of maneuvers that resulted in the opening of the huge wrought iron gate. "Welcome back to Colch, General," the centurion told him as Artur and the women walked through the gate.

"Thank you, Centurion," Artur replied. "Should we just walk up to the keep?"

"You mean Sabutla Hall, sir. Yes, straight ahead through the courtyard. There will be someone to conduct you to His Highness when you get there."

Artur thanked the man again and they continued onward as the guards performed their choreography in reverse to close the gate behind them. Sabutla Hall was a tall and wide building that reminded Gaenor strongly of the Ander baronial manor except that it had been built of granite blocks rather than wood and fieldstone and overlooked a major city rather than a pastoral collection of farms and forests.

"The king is called 'His Highness' here?" Gaenor asked.

"Yes," Artur confirmed. "When this was an autonomous realm he was 'His Majesty,' but after Colch was annexed by the Empire, the title was demoted to 'Highness.' I must admit that I was worried that King Werlta would not make a good vassal king to the emperor after the aggressiveness he displayed that necessitated our conquest of this district, but after he got over his pride he became as loyal a citizen as any in the Empire."

They entered through one of a wide pair of mullioned wooden doors and found themselves in a large gathering hall at the base of a broad stairway that led to the upper floors. A woman in a uniform-like outfit that consisted of a dark violet skirt and silver-grey blouse and a smartly tailored violet jacket came forward to greet them.

"Good morning, sir and ladies," she began, "I am Cloudilla, how may I assist you?" Artur repeated what he had told the centurion outside. "Of course, Senator, or is that Dictator now? Follow me, please." She led the way up the stairs.

"The word is out," Gaenor whispered to Cornellya. Cornellya nodded.

"Senator will do, Lady Cloudilla," Artur replied. "I am no longer the dictator now that there is a new emperor on the throne."

"Is there?" Cloudilla asked politely. "May I ask who?"

"My son, Colchicus," Artur replied.

“Congratulations, Senator,” Cloudilla told him. “May this be the beginning of a thousand years of good fortune for the House of Cornelius.” It was a traditional blessing.

“And for the Kingdom District of Colch as well,” Artur replied.

“Thank you, Senator,” Cloudilla replied wistfully, “but I fear there are sad days ahead.”

“In the short term, perhaps, Lady Cloudilla, but without sad times, could we properly appreciate the happy ones?”

“I don’t know, Senator, but it might be nice to try, at least once.” She continued to lead them upward to the fourth floor and soon brought them to the door of the royal suite. Opening the door to the suite’s antechamber, she ushered them in. Within, were several worried-looking people. “Your Highness,” Cloudilla announced with a curtsy to an elderly woman, “Senator Arturus Cornelian is here.”

“Arturus?” the queen asked, “Is that truly you? The gods have been kind. We heard you had returned as young as the day you left the Empire, but until this moment I would scarcely have credited it.”

“I’ll admit it has its compensations, but the price is commensurate with the value, I assure you, Benice,” Artur told her. “May I present my intended, Lady Gaenor of Narmouth from Mishanda and my godchild, Cornellya Vasylya.”

“Welcome, Lady Gaenor, you are far from home,” the queen observed. “Mishanda is on the other side of the world.”

“Very true, Highness,” Gaenor replied. “I am about as far from home as I can be unless I should decide to visit the South Pole.”

“It’s beyond me why you would want to,” Queen Benice chuckled. “And you, Lady Cornellya, are welcome as well. Any member of the Cornelian house is welcome here.”

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Cornellya replied.

“How is Werlta, Benice?” Artur asked.

“Not well, Arturus,” she replied, “Not well at all. The healers have all but given up on him and are only trying to keep him comfortable now. He won’t last much longer – a few days at the most, I fear. Our son, Kennus Arturus is in with him now, but you may go in, if you like.”

“Thank you, Benice.” He turned to Gaenor and Cornellya, “I probably won’t be too long.” Then he turned back and entered King Werlta’s bed chamber.

“Lady Gaenor, Lady Cornellya,” Queen Benice said turning to them, “I’m sorry this couldn’t have been under happier circumstances, but may I present my daughters, Ronna and Loura.” Both women had light brown hair and fair skin, although their facial features were more similar to the Maxformian trader, Tomasi Kaguru, than anyone else Gaenor had met in the north. They had wide noses and high cheekbones that, while not in keeping with Mishandan standards of beauty, were still quite comely. Both princesses nodded their heads in turn to Gaenor and Cornellya.

“I’ve only ever met one other person from Mishanda,” Princess Ronna remarked, “and he was here just

a few weeks ago.”

“Would that have been Sir Winniam Mates?” Gaenor asked.

“Why yes,” Ronna replied. “You know him? Oh, of course you would.”

“Mishanda is a big kingdom,” Gaenor remarked, “so it doesn’t necessarily follow, even if Win is one of the higher ranking heralds. I don’t live in the capital. In fact when I first met him last spring, I wasn’t even a lady yet. We crossed paths by coincidence when Artur and I took shelter from a storm in the same inn Win was staying at. Had the weather been better, he probably would have just been a traveler on the road who was heading the other way, although we were traveling with his nephew, another herald, so perhaps I might have remembered him.”

“You aren’t noble by birth?” Loura asked, interestedly.

“Hardly,” Gaenor laughed. “I’m as common as dirt, or I was. Technically I am now gentry twice over. First because I am adept and all adepts in Mishanda are gentry, at the least, by courtesy and then by royal grant.”

“Gaenor was the first lady ever granted knighthood status in any of the eastern realms,” Cornellya informed them proudly.

“For inventing a hangover cure for the king,” Gaenor added. The queen and her daughters laughed at that.

“For conducting the binding ceremony on the Queen of Firdan,” Cornellya corrected her. “Your Highnesses, if you inspect Gaenor’s signet ring you will note that not only is the stone the color of Royal Firdan, but there is a Firdani crown engraved on it as well.”

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t recognize the crown,” Benice replied. “We don’t have any direct contact with Firdan, but I do agree that Lady Gaenor must be a remarkable woman to have been knighted for whatever the reason. And you, Lady Cornellya? Are you noble by birth or grant?”

“Neither, I think,” Cornellya replied. “There is no inherited rank among my people. Our status is according to our accomplishments and I’m young yet so I don’t have a lot to my credit. The only reason I’m called a lady is because Arturus is my godfather.”

“Senator Arturus is noble,” Benice explained, “so, by extension, is any member of his immediate family and that includes any godchild.”

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

“How could you not?”

“I did not grow up in Cilbe. My people live in the Parch,” Cornellya replied.

“I didn’t know anyone could live in the Parch,” Loura replied.

“Yes,” Ronna agreed. Only the mythical Parchites are supposed to... Oh, I see.”

“Put away the disguise,” Gaenor advised the vari.

“Must I?” Cornellya asked.

“My friend here is not human,” Gaenor explained, “but she is understandably sensitive about being stared at.”

“I know exactly how you feel, dear,” Benice told Cornellya gently. “when I first married Werlta, I couldn’t do anything, whether here in the palace or out in the city, without having everyone in sight stare at me and watch waiting for me to slip up. Terrible, isn’t it? Still that’s no reason to try to be something you are not.”

“Besides,” Gaenor added. “I told you I don’t know how long the spell will last or whether it will wear off after a certain number of applications or after a certain amount of time that it is in use.”

“Oh very well,” Cornellya sighed and took the enchanted aureus out of her purse and placed it on her forehead. The change was immediate but subtle.

“Is there a difference?” Princess Ronna asked.

“Her ears,” Loura explained.

“Oh, I see. Actually I think you look better this way, Lady Cornellya. Honestly if anyone is staring at you, it has to be men and they’d stare at you with or without the ears.”

“Do you really think so?” Cornellya asked.

“Men will stare at any pretty girl,” Ronna told her. “So what brings both of you to the far side of the world?”

The air in King Werlta’s bed chamber was stale as Artur entered the room. “It’s a nice warm day outside,” he observed. “Perhaps we should open a window for a bit.” There were two men in the room. The elderly king was sitting up in bed. When Artur had last seen him, he was a robust man in his prime, but now he had lost a lot of weight and looked tired although still alert and aware of his surroundings. Sitting on a bedside chair was a younger man with medium brown hair and the same chin as the king.

“Who the hell are you?” Prince Kennus Arturus demanded.

“Arturus!” King Werlta exclaimed hoarsely. “Thank you for coming. Son, this is the man you were named after. I hear the Senate was trying to make you emperor, old friend. I don’t see your head all weighted down with oak branches so I imagine you managed to avoid that fate.”

“Yes, but not as honorably as I might have. I had to stick my son with the job,” Artur chuckled.

“Colchicus is a good man,” Werlta replied. “I’ve met him a few times on visits to the capital. You left the Empire in good hands. So what brings you to Colch? I’m not going to pretend you came all this way just to see me.”

“I would have, if I’d known,” Artur replied, “but it happens we’re just passing through.” At the old king’s urging, Artur told him about everything he had been up to over the last thirty years or more.

“So now you’re Sir Artur the Southlander, hey?” Werlta laughed weakly when Artur had finished. “Well, Sir Artur, you had better watch out or you’ll end up ruling the whole world if you’re not careful.”

“I truly hope not,” Artur replied seriously, which made Werlta laugh all the more.

“Arturus, old friend, I know you are not aware of it, but you have always walked through this world like a giant.”

“Nonsense,” Artur scoffed.

“Not at all, Senator,” Kennus told him. “First of all, think of your record as a military leader. Your victories made you a hero among the natives of the places you conquered. Conquests do not generally endear one to the conquered, you know, but here your name is revered and even as a child my playmates envied me because I bore your name. And even the children of the Transminue rebels are taught to see you as a hero. It’s not because you won battles, but because you were generous and merciful in victory. So many other generals have been known to punish the people they fought, but you only did your job and then treated everyone with respect. I hear there are statues of you in Arberoa as well, and the Arberoans never entered the Empire.

“And it is not just as a general that you made history,” Kennus continued. “As a senator you always advocated the path of peace.”

“My record in the Senate was not as illustrious as it was in the Army,” Artur replied.

“Depends on how you see it,” Kennus replied evenly. “You were pivotal to the welfare of the Empire. Do you have any idea what happened here after you were banished? Half the provinces nearly went up in flames. Emperor Lusius was never a popular man and it was everything Father could do to keep the people of Colch from rebelling against the Empire. They were willing to be Cilben because of you, but when you were banished, none of them had any desire to remain Cilben. There were seven assassination attempts on Lusius during the next five years. One attempt was right here in ColchCity, but fortunately we were able to stop the assassin before Lusius even knew he existed.”

“Interesting times,” Artur murmured.

“I’ve heard the saying,” Kennus replied, “and you’re right; they were. Did you know there were celebrations all over the southern districts when the word came of Lusius’ death at your hands?”

“I didn’t kill him. He took his own life.”

“Really? Well that fits too, although I think most folks prefer it the other way,” Kennus replied.

“Perhaps,” Artur shrugged, “but if you want to continue this conversation, perhaps we should do it in another room and let your father sleep.”

Kennus look and saw that the king was, indeed, sleeping.

Three

The sun had just started to lighten the eastern sky. In that moment when the world takes a deep breath before getting on with whatever needs to be done, the air was suddenly split with an odd cacophony. Every bell in ColchCity was ringing, but instead of the normal clear, sharp notes, they sounded muffled and flat. "What's going on?" Gaenor asked, sitting suddenly up in bed.

"Oh," Artur groaned. "Well, we knew it was coming."

"King Werlta is dead," Gaenor concluded, "isn't he?"

"I'm afraid so. The clappers of the temple bells have been covered in soft leather. That's why it sounds so odd. It's a Cilben thing," Artur explained. "You should normally have heard it announcing Lusius' death as well, but none of us thought to give him the usual honors. I suppose I should have, of course, but we all had other things on our minds and he had no family left to mourn him."

"We should get dressed," Gaenor told Artur. "Queen Benice and the others will need our help now."

"Queen mother," Artur corrected her absently as he looked around for his clothing.

"Excuse me?" Gaenor asked.

"Queen Mother Benice. Kennus Arturus is king now and his wife is queen."

"The reality may not yet have occurred to them, you realize. Not deep in their hearts at least." Artur nodded agreement.

They had been invited to stay in the palace for as long as they were in Colch and Artur, Gaenor and Cornellya accepted graciously. They had invited Vito, in turn to join them, but to Cornellya's surprise he had chosen to remain on the *Iris* instead. Now, two days later, the ship had only a few hours worth of loading left and Artur had hoped that King Werlta might hang on longer than expected. He had even seemed a bit more animated the previous day and his color had improved as well, but evidently it was just one last flicker of life before his flame was extinguished.

They found Werlta's family in the palace chapel and joined them in prayer for the final fate of Werlta's soul. A King's funeral is a long series of rituals which lasted three days in Colch although in some other kingdoms a royal funeral could last up to six months. As it was, the actual coronation of Kennus Arturus would not take place until the official mourning period was over eleven months later, but until that time he would rule over Colch in the name of the emperor.

The first day after Werlta's death was spent with the family technically in quiet seclusion although in practice close friends were welcome to visit in the private wing of the palace. While they were in seclusion there were a lot of preparations going on both within the palace and in ColchCity. The priests of both the Cilben and the local Colchian gods were performing a long series of blessings. Palace servants were preparing the palace by covering all mirrors, painting the brass-work black, and hanging black bunting. The normally bright green and white flag over the palace was replaced with a special mourning version in dark green and gray.

In the city, similar preparations were being made. Black bunting and banners were being hung from houses and businesses and along the planned funeral route, Colchian flags in the mourning colors were being distributed. With so much to be done Artur and Gaenor stepped in to help organize while

Cornellya mostly stayed with the family at their request. She found herself describing Vieri funereal customs, although she explained that each funeral in the Village was a unique occasion and that they were not very frequent occasions at that.

On the second day, Werlta's body lay in state inside a large pavilion that was erected in the palace courtyard where the people of Colch were allowed to pay their respects. The Colchians were lined up for over a mile even before the gates were opened at dawn and they were still passing by to pay their respects at dawn the next morning. Most left flowers by the king's casket and when, an hour after dawn on the third day, the palace servants came to prepare the king's casket for the funeral procession, they had to move hundreds of thousands of flowers out of their way before they could reach the casket.

The funeral procession itself began an hour before noon and lasted two and a half hours. The first carriage was the hearse that carried Werlta, and was followed by another all black carriage in which the women of the Royal Family rode. Behind that were several other carriages to carry the ladies-in-waiting. Gaenor and Cornellya rode in the third such carriage with Princess Loura's ladies. Gaenor looked out of the carriage window and watched the silent weeping faces pass by. It was the silence that most struck her. There was no talking and no audible crying; just the sound of the horses' shoes on the cobbles and the rolling of the carriage wheels. What little talking inside the carriage took place in almost silent whispers. Here and there as they passed the people in the streets, Gaenor would hear the crying of a baby, but such sounds were quickly quieted. It was a far cry from any Mishandan funeral she had ever attended where people always talked and cried out loud if they felt the need. She would have been equally amazed by Southlander funerals where the customary and formal lamentations were performed by professional mourners.

Behind those carriages rode the men of the court led by Kennus Arturus and Artur. Between them walked a riderless horse, draped with the funeral flag of Colch and behind them rode and marched thousands of the best soldiers and sailors of the Empire who were stationed in Colch. Finally, behind them came many common citizens of Colch who, while not officially part of the procession, chose to follow all the way to the royal cemetery, where an ornate mausoleum waited. Outside the tomb was a blacksmith and a portable forge. The coal smoke from the forge assaulted Gaenor's nose whenever the wind blew in her direction.

At the behest of the queen mother, they waited until the entire procession, including those citizens who so chose to honor King Werlta, to arrive. Then, with a final series of prayers, the casket was brought into the mausoleum, placed behind one of two iron doors and then the blacksmith pulled a long, red hot rivet from the forge and used it to seal the door permanently. That done, there was one final short prayer before the mourners returned to their homes.

"Kseniya?" Cornellya called. She and Gaenor had decided to use the Vieri communications spell to contact the elder Vieri who had hosted Gaenor while she visited the Village. It had been several weeks since they had last spoken. They had found their way to the top of the tallest palace tower.

"Cornellya? I hear you," Kseniya's distant voice could be heard softly. "Where are you?"

"We left Cilbe three weeks ago, and are now in a land called Colch. Gaenor is with me again."

"Of course," Kseniya remarked warmly. "How are you, Gaenor? Is Arturus well?"

"We both are, Kseniya," Gaenor replied. "I think we were lucky to contact you so quickly this evening,

we are nearly twice as far away as we were when we were in Cilbe.”

“Distance does make a difference,” Kseniya agreed, “but so long as you have enough power integrated in the spell, you should be able to contact me anywhere in the World. You have called to inquire on our progress?”

“Yes, we have,” Gaenor replied.

“I thought as much. You were so anxious when we last spoke. We are still uncertain whether the Ichtar spell is only using the weather to deplete the magical resources of the world rather than the other way around.”

“You mean the Wise do not agree?” Gaenor asked.

“Yes, that is what I mean. It is a shame you cannot be among us at this time, Gaenor. You deserve a seat among the Wise,” Kseniya told her.

“Hardly!” Gaenor scoffed. “Perhaps when I have lived one thousand years.”

“Age is not always an indicator of wisdom, dear,” Kseniya told her. “I hear the strain in both of you so I will not keep you much longer. Gaenor, I personally believe your theory is correct. The Ichtar spell is undeniably using vast amounts of magic and it will have the effect of depleting the world of magic if left unchecked regardless of its intent. Call back when you can, but remember the Council of the Wise does not deliberate hastily. It could be still more weeks before we come to a consensus.”

“Do we have that sort of time to be so careful?” Gaenor asked.

“The debate is only over the intent of the spell, not its effect, dear. We are acting even as we talk.”

“Goodnight, Kseniya,” Cornellya said suddenly. Gaenor noticed beads of sweat on the vari’s forehead and added her farewells quickly before the connection ended.

King Kennus Arturus and his sisters accompanied the adepts back to their ship the next evening. “Thank you for being with us,” the new king told them all. “There is nothing we can do that will ever repay your kindness, but I do hope you will be able to return to us in a happier time so that we might make a start.”

“I hope so as well, Your Highness,” Artur replied.

“Call me Kennus, please. If you called Father by his name you should certainly be able to do the same for me.”

“Very well, Kennus,” Artur told him. “As it happens we do have a gift for you.” Artur reached into a pocket in his pack and pulled out a small glass doorknob, Gaenor had found in a shop earlier that day, and handed it to Kennus.

“It’s charming,” the king said uncertainly, obviously confused and not wanting to turn down any gift, no matter how inconsequential, from Artur.

“Exactly,” Artur told him. “It’s been enchanted; turned into an amulet. We won’t be able to attend your formal coronation, but we did want to leave you a gift for the occasion. Invoke the amulet when you leave the temple to receive the acclamation of the public.”

“How do I invoke it and what will it do?”

“Just say the words of the kingdom’s motto and drop it to the ground,” Artur told him. “It’s a blessing spell intended for all Colch. It ought to be fairly spectacular given all the power we put into it, but then we needed that much power in order to cover the whole district.”

“Thank you, Senator,” Kennus replied. “It is a gift truly beyond all value.”

“It was Gaenor’s idea,” Artur admitted, “and her invention. It’s similar to the very first spell she ever cast over the Vieri’s Village in the Parch, although all three of us worked together on this one.”

“Then thank you too, Lady Gaenor and Lady Cornellya,” Kennus told them, with a deep and respectful bow. “Colch is eternally in your debt.”

“Use it well and rule Colch wisely, Your Highness,” Gaenor told him. Then they all hugged and the adepts reboarded the *Iris*. An hour later, under the light of a full moon the ship was once more under sail.

Nimbria

One

Shipboard routine was quickly reestablished. This time Cornellya showed no signs of seasickness and spent as much time up on deck as she could. Vito, who had been acting reclusively ever since they had left Cilbe, became more gregarious and spent an hour or two each day talking to Cornellya about the Vieri. He spent more time with Gaenor asking about her system of notation with examples of spells he already knew. Gaenor found she had to make constant corrections in his use of the subtext even though his basic notation was spot-on. After discussing it with him, she discovered that he had misinterpreted a key passage near the beginning of the text. On rereading it, she decided it could stand clarification, which prompted her to write letters to Doctors Haxmire and Lastor at Mita and Misha respectively, with a more clearly written version of that section.

Gaenor spent most of her spare time, however, at her usual preoccupation - writing. She had sent several letters from Colch City to friends and family. Colch really was at the far end of the world and it was possible that she might see those friends and family before the letters actually arrived, but she wrote them anyway. It was just part of who she was. However, while on board the *Iris*, she quickly caught up on her correspondence, so most of her time was spent working on her latest magical theories, which she discussed with the other adepts as often as she could. “I so wish I could discuss some of this with Doctor Nyima,” she told Artur. “So much of what I’m coming up with is based on my own conjecture and a pair of articles by Doctor Nyima and I don’t have the mathematical knowledge to verify his work. I feel like I have a house built on quicksand, or maybe it’s built out of quicksand. I’m not sure how much farther I can take it without experimental proof.”

“So what’s stopping you, Gae?” Artur asked.

“Ships are made of wood,” Gaenor pointed out. “Wood burns. If what Doctor Nyima says is true, matter will convert into amazingly large amounts of energy, and it seems to me that could be dangerous, and heat energy is just the least of it.”

“I wasn’t suggesting that you try annihilating a block of stone or something like that,” Artur replied. “But as I recall, your hypothesis was concerned with the origin of energy used in magic. What you need to do is come up with a way to measure such energy and then conduct a series of spells. After that, you can check your results and do the same measurements when others cast the same spells. In this way you won’t be releasing any energy that is unusual.”

Gaenor found herself working diligently to come up with spells that could be used to measure the energy used in other spells. Unable to devise such a spell that she was certain did not affect the spell it was monitoring, she started writing more letters to Doctor Nyima as well as Haxmire and Lastor to see if they had any suggestions as to how she might measure the energy from conventional spells. The problem consumed her attention so completely that she didn’t realize the weather was turning again until she was suddenly soaked with wind-driven, cold rainwater.

One of the crewmen helped her back to her cabin and offered to fetch her a pot of tea from the galley. “Thank you, Fanchian,” she replied. “That was a nasty shock. Is the rain always so cold this far south? I could have sworn it was half frozen.”

“Aye, Lady. It’s normal weather here in the Ocean of Sorrows. Fortunately we’ll not be sailing the Sorrows for long. Once we round Cape Nimbre the weather will improve soon enough. I’ll be right back with that tea.” He rushed out and Gaenor chose a dry woolen dress to slip into partially for its warmth and partially because it would get her decently covered before he could get back. The wool felt warm but it scratched her annoyingly. She decided to change out of it as soon as the tea had been delivered. There was a knock on the door before Gaenor could decide what she would wear next.

“Gaenor?” Cornellya asked from the doorway. “I was just checking to make sure you knew enough to get in out of the rain. And I see you didn’t. Predictable, I fear.”

“I think I liked you better when you were shy and retiring,” Gaenor told her sourly.

“Oh, I’m adorable and you know it,” Cornellya laughed. “Actually, I’m only shy among strangers.”

“You’ve been getting over that too lately,” Gaenor pointed out.

“Only because you’ve been around,” she replied frankly. “Having you nearby is almost as good as being back home.”

“You miss the Village,” Gaenor told her.

“I do. It’s not just home, it’s the most beautiful place in the world to me. It’s the place I belong.”

“Cornellya, I’m not telling you to go home, but you can, you know.”

“Not until we’re done on Ichtar,” Cornellya told her. “Even if you have enough adepts, I still need to be there.”

“Why?” Gaenor asked. “What don’t I know about this spell we have to cast?”

“It has nothing to do with the spell,” Cornellya replied, “at least I don’t think it does. It’s just that when I learned you and Arturus were going to Ichtar I suddenly knew that I had to as well.”

Another knock announced that Fanchian had returned with the tea. He also had included some of the cook’s ginger cookies. He put the tray down on a small table and nodded at Gaenor and Cornellya.

“Thank you again, Fanchian,” Gaenor told him.

“My pleasure, Lady,” he replied, smiling. “Now unless you need anything else, I’ll need to get back to my duties.” He nodded once more before leaving the cabin.

“How do you remember everyone’s names?” Cornellya asked as Gaenor turned to consider what to wear.

Gaenor shrugged. “I just do. Until Artur started pointing it out I didn’t even know it was unusual.” She looked at her closet and decided that the woolen dress was the right thing to wear, but chose a light cotton chemise to wear under it.

“You remember everything you’ve ever read too, don’t you?” Gaenor started changing.

“Of course. Don’t you?” Gaenor asked, but with a smile that showed she knew better.

“Not word for word, I don’t,” Cornellya replied, missing Gaenor’s signal because she had started pouring the tea. “Nor does anyone else I know, human and Vieri alike.”

“Actually you’re wrong there. Relle can do it too. I discovered that in Firdan when we were shopping. I started quoting a favorite bit of poetry and she joined in. We started taking turns reciting line after line. It was a particularly long poem.”

“Anyone could memorize a poem, Gaenor.”

“True, but when we were finished, we compared notes. You know, Relle comes off as flighty to people who don’t really know her, but she’s one of the deepest thinkers I know. It’s a shame she was never allowed to train as an adept, but in Mishanda nobles aren’t allowed to become adept.” Gaenor put the woolen dress back on and belted it.

“I never understood that,” Cornellya admitted.

“I know,” Gaenor nodded. “You think Mishandans are crazy, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Cornellya laughed, handing Gaenor a cup of tea, “especially when you put milk in your tea.”

They both laughed and then sat back to enjoy the hot beverage. A few minutes later Cornellya asked, “What’s all this wet paper?”

“More notes,” Gaenor admitted. “I guess I’ll have to rewrite them.”

“More on that monitoring spell?”

“Yes, but I’m not any closer to a solution, so these aren’t much of a loss,” Gaenor shrugged.

“You never know,” Cornellya told her. She put the sodden notebook on the table and opened it. “Well at least the ink wasn’t water soluble.” She pulled out the flint and steel Gaenor and Artur had insisted she carry with her while in human lands and cast a spell. It wasn’t Gaenor’s fire spell, although that was a component of the incantation. Instead she moderated the heat effect so that it was spread evenly over all the pages of the small book. Sparse tendrils of steam rose from the pages. Suddenly Cornellya reached out and held the book closed with all her weight. A cloud of steam was pushed out and when it cleared, she picked up the book and handed it to Gaenor. “Here. I doubt you’ll want to write in it anymore - the pages will be like blotters – but at least it’s dry and flat.”

“Very nice,” Gaenor commended her. “I should have thought of that. Thanks.”

“It’s something I saw Kseniya do once after I dropped a book in the reservoir at the Village.”

“I’m surprised she didn’t make you do it yourself,” Gaenor remarked.

“I had to learn the spell and practice it for a month until she forgave me, but I got pretty good at it.”

“I think I’d like to add it to my collection,” Gaenor told her. She pulled out another notebook from her pack and started writing the spell down. “Where are Artur and Vito?”

“In Vito’s cabin. They’re playing Maelstrom again. I honestly don’t know why. It isn’t that interesting a game.”

“Are they playing for money?” Gaenor asked.

“Pennies,” Cornellya shrugged. “Does that make a difference?”

“Some people seem to think so. Actually I don’t mind the game. It’s not entirely unlike the backgammon we play in Mishanda. The board is a different shape, but the basic idea is to get your game pieces to the end of the board first.”

They helped themselves to more tea and spent the next two hours working on the energy monitoring spell that eluded Gaenor. They still had not made any discernable progress when the bell announcing the changing of the watch rang.

“Maybe we’re going at this the wrong way,” Gaenor said at last.

“What did you have in mind?” Cornellya asked.

“I’m not really sure,” Gaenor admitted, “but we’re trying to create a single spell to do what we want. Maybe we need to construct it in pieces. Maybe we need a piece to do the actual monitoring of energy and another to record what the first part finds; possibly another to hold the first two together. It would help if I had an idea of how much energy we’re actually dealing with so we would know if we were making accurate measurements. You would have thought someone would have tried to do this before. As it is, I’m so over my head it’s not funny. I wonder if there is a way to predict what results we should be getting mathematically?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Cornellya replied mystified. “I doubt anyone on the Council of the Wise do either.

This isn't the sort of thing we worry about. Maybe we should, I suppose, but our entire philosophy concerns why we use magic and how we construct our spells. That's part of why you impressed Kseniya with your first spell. Our earliest training teaches us to use no magic for ourselves that is not strictly necessary, but that to help others is a blessing. When you blessed the entire Village, you demonstrated that without having to be taught. She was also impressed by the way you naturally equated the gateway carving with the Village."

"That was just luck," Gaenor replied. "I needed an object through which to disseminate the blessing and it was the only thing ready at hand save the opening itself."

"No, Gaenor, that's not what impressed Kseniya. That fact that you chose the carving as an appropriate object to equate with the Village showed her that your thoughts are not as alien to us as we might have feared."

"Ah, so I think like a vari?" Gaenor asked.

"Mmm, more like you do not think unlike a vari, if you can follow the distinction. Your thoughts may not be like ours but they complement our thoughts. As we got to know you better we would have discovered that anyway, but that our similarities were so obvious from the start was a good sign."

Gaenor nodded, unsure of what else she could say to that. "I wish I could ask Kseniya about this. Not just the monitor spell, but the entire issue of what magical energy is and where it comes from."

"I really don't think she knows as much about it as you do," Cornellya assured her.

"Maybe, maybe not," Gaenor shook her head, "but I would certainly welcome her perspective on the subject."

"We can always call her when we reach Tandra," Cornellya suggested.

"No, she and the Council of the Wise have too much else to think about just now. After this is over, if I haven't solved the problem yet, will be soon enough. Then, perhaps I can visit for a few months and see what the Wise come up with. That reminds me, however, I haven't written to Queen Khodania on Kimm since that note I sent from Exlona. I ought to send her a letter letting her know how things are."

"It might be nice to let her know how we found the cause of the imbalance and how it was corrected," Cornellya suggested. "You know I've tried that heeding the balance spell a few times since we left Cilbe."

"Have you?" Gaenor asked. "What have you learned?"

"Not a lot," Cornellya replied. "I can sense an imbalance a long way away. It's probably on Ichtar, at least that seems to be the right direction when I compare my results to a map."

"That's hardly a surprise," Gaenor commented. "We already knew there was one of the Kimmite's imbalances there. Khodania admitted it herself."

"True enough," Cornellya agreed, "but I can also sense dozens of smaller imbalances all over the world. I'm beginning to think that Arturus is correct in believing these things correct themselves if left alone."

"I won't argue," Gaenor told her. "We were able to follow the specific imbalance we did because we

were looking for it in particular, but all these others? As you say, Artur may be right and Khodania may be wrong.”

Another bell rang and they recognized it as the galley bell. Dinner was available and while Gaenor had learned she could often coax the cook into supplying something no matter what time she asked as long as he was awake, she always felt guilty for imposing on him, and unless there were leftovers from the previous meal, the most she could hope for was a light snack. Consequently, she rarely took advantage of the man’s kindness.

“Why don’t we break for dinner?” she suggested. Cornellya nodded and they headed off for the galley.

They arrived on deck to discover the rain had just been a passing squall and on the western horizon they could see a patch of sky under the heavy clouds. Suddenly the blood red sun appeared in that low break in the clouds and flooded the world in its brilliant red glow.

“Oh!” Cornellya gasped. Gaenor turned and followed her gaze. Off to the east was a large, bright rainbow. “What’s that?”

“It’s called a rainbow,” Gaenor explained, “although I’ve never seen one like that.” The rainbow was nearly all red. Within the glowing red arc, she could see bands of orange, green, blue and violet, but it was like seeing them through a pane of red glass. “I’ve never even heard of one looking like this. Normally the colors of the rainbow are bright and pure, but these are all tinged with red. It must be because the sunlight is so red.”

“What causes it?” Cornellya asked.

“Well, white light as we see it is actually a combination of all the visible colors. However, under certain conditions, that light can be split up into these bands of color you see. One of those conditions can occur when the air is filled with water droplets, like it is to our east. With the sun low in the west and it still raining to our east we get a rainbow. We can get similar effects in the sky called sundogs, but those are caused by ice crystals floating very high in the sky and they are just patches of color. In fact, sometimes they’re just patches of bright white light. Sometimes ice crystals can cause a rainbow-like halo around the sun.”

“Then why have I never seen one?” Cornellya asked.

“You live in the Parch,” Gaenor reminded her. “The air is so dry there you don’t even have enough moisture for clouds, at least you didn’t until recently. When it’s that dry you aren’t likely to have any of the conditions for such effects. I’m surprised that you don’t know what a prism is, however.”

“A prism?” Cornellya asked.

“It’s a piece of glass or crystal with a triangular cross-section. When set at the right angle it can diffract a beam of light into a small patch of rainbow colors. I’ve seen that sort of thing when light hits certain kinds of rock, and Artur first demonstrated it to me with a glass prism he had made. However, we left it in Narmouth.”

“Does it have a magical use?” Cornellya asked.

“Everything is potentially a spell tool or ingredient,” Gaenor replied. “I’ve never actually cast a spell with it, nor has Artur as far as I know, but I suppose you could use it as a piece of glass. Its ability to diffract

light could be used to diffract it on a larger scale, I suppose, but I'm not sure what practical use that might be. For that matter it could probably be used in a large number of light spells. They would probably be of more use in setting up the study of light than anything else, although I suppose I could use its ability to sort light into different colors as sympathetic magic to sort other things. To tell the truth, I never really thought about it."

"Could it be used to help with your monitoring spell?" Cornellya asked.

"I could use it to sort out different types of energy, I guess," Gaenor noted, "but the problem at the moment is being able to measure it reliably in the first place. Well, let's get something to eat and maybe it will come to us another time."

Two

They rounded Cape Nimbria the next day and after several days of heading south-southeast, they were now sailing due northeast. The nature of the sea in the Gulf of Nimbria seemed different to Gaenor and she remarked on it to the captain.

"Yes, m'Lady," he agreed. "it is different, but in many ways it is even worse. More unpredictable than the Ocean Sea. The waves can stand on each other's heads in here, and they bounce all around, especially as we get closer to the Minue."

"Is that a canoe way over there in that inlet?" Gaenor asked suddenly. In the distance there was a small boat apparently being paddled across a bay.

"Aye," the captain replied. "It is. They're the Teliaboc, the only people who live in this part of the world. They spend as much time in those outrigger canoes of theirs as they do on land. They fish mostly and hunt seals. When we aren't running behind schedule we'll occasionally stop and trade with them. They have some interesting ivory carvings that they like to trade for steel tools."

"Ivory?" Gaenor asked. "Where ever do they get the ivory?"

"There's a sort of tusked seal that lives in and around the Ocean of Sorrows. They use those tusks. If you're interested, I'm sure you'll see examples of it for sale in Tandro."

"I'll look forward to it," Gaenor remarked. She stood by the gunwales until the canoe was out of sight, then, because it was a bit chilly, she went back to her cabin.

She reached the door, then changed her mind and went to see what Cornellya was doing. Gaenor knocked but there was no answer. She was about to try Vito's room when she thought she heard something from inside the room. Opening the door, she was met by a blast of hot, dry air. The inside of the room looked like one of the stone-cut rooms in the Village and the eerie whistling music of the Vieri filled her ears. It was dark in the room and it took a minute or so for her eyes to adjust, but when they had she spotted Cornellya sitting comfortably on the sandy floor. "Wow!" Gaenor breathed appreciatively.

"Huh!" Cornellya gasped. She jumped a bit in surprise, and then spotted Gaenor standing above her.

"When did you get here?" Cornellya asked.

“Just now,” Ganeor replied. “This is an amazing illusion, It actually feels dry in here.”

“I was feeling homesick,” Cornellya admitted. “It’s not entirely illusory, however. The air really is warm and dry. I just had to have some comfortable air for a little while. It’s been so long. The floor and walls are illusions, however. This may look like sand, but it feels like the wood it is and if I tried walking around the room, I would probably bump into things covered by illusion like the chair and desk.”

“At least you left the bed in place,” Gaenor observed.

“It seemed like a good idea unless I actually wanted to bark my shins whenever I tried to get some sleep,” Cornellya replied with a grin. “The illusion makes the cabin look a little bigger than it really is too.”

“I noticed that,” Gaenor told her. “Are you claustrophobic?”

“What’s that mean?”

“Afraid of small, closed-in spaces,” Gaenor explained.

“No, not at all, it’s just that the room I live in back home is this size.”

“You didn’t make it an exact copy,” Gaenor pointed out.

“I didn’t need that,” Cornellya replied, “just a taste of home. If I could find a way to keep the room from swaying on the waves it would be even better.”

“So how long have you had the room looking and feeling like this?” Gaenor asked.

“Just since yesterday. And before you ask, I set it up to dissipate in another three days.”

“We’ll be at sea another week at least,” Gaenor pointed out.

“This is long enough,” Cornellya told her. “It’s not like I’ll never go home again. Don’t you miss your home?”

“Of course,” Gaenor replied, “We’ve been gone a year now. I really miss my sister Marlie, that’s probably why most of the letters I write are to her. And there’s a certain comfort about knowing a place is home, but so much has happened in the past year and sleepy little Narmouth may not be big enough any more once this is over.”

There was a loud knock on the door and Artur stuck his head in. “Better get up on deck,” he told both women. “We have a problem.” He closed the door again before they could ask what had happened.

Gaenor helped Cornellya up from the floor and they quickly left the cabin area. On deck they saw Artur and Vito facing the captain and several sailors. The sailors were holding someone who was struggling against them. Gaenor stepped forward to see what was happening. “Elena? What are you doing here?” The Cilben teenager from Olaka looked up with hope and relief in her eyes.

“She says traveling with you,” the captain informed her.

“With me?” Gaenor asked.

“I told you we didn’t know she was on board,” Artur told him.

“Aye, yes, you did,” the captain agreed, “but I wanted to hear it from Lady Gaenor, before making my decision.”

“What decision?” both Gaenor and Elena asked.

The captain turned to Elena, “Girl, do you know what the penalty is for stowing away?” Elena shook her head fearfully. “It is allowable by maritime law to throw stowaways overboard.” Elena blanched, but did her best to face the man bravely. “I’ve never done that, but I can’t allow you to ride free either. You’ve been stealing food from the galley, I imagine and you’ve also attempted to steal passage to Tandra. There’s nothing free in this world, girl. I would have thought you knew that.”

“Captain,” Artur interrupted. “I’ll see to paying for her passage to Tandra and back again to Olaka.”

“No!” Elena cried. “Please, Senator, please! Don’t send me back there. I’ll do anything. I’ll be your slave, just don’t send me back to Olaka.”

“I don’t believe in slavery, Elena,” Artur told her sternly.

“Artur,” Gaenor interrupted, “we cannot send her back to Olaka. They treated her worse than a slave. A slave has value to his owner, but the people of Olaka never thought she had any value. They worked her hard and paid her off in food and ragged clothing only. You saw how she was dressed when we first met her. And you saw how the mayor just assigned her to us as though he owned her.”

“Some of the Olakans changed their minds about her, once you dressed her better,” Artur pointed out. “The innkeeper was planning to offer her a job.”

“So he told you, but he should have told that to Elena. In fact I wonder if he would have still been thinking of giving her a job after we left. I doubt it,” Gaenor concluded.

Artur knew Gaenor well enough to realize she wouldn’t let him just send Elena home. “Very well,” he sighed. “We won’t send her back. What do you propose to do then?”

“I don’t know,” Gaenor admitted. “But I’ll think of something.”

“All right, but she’s your responsibility,” Artur said at last. “Keep her out of trouble, at least, while you’re figuring out what she’s supposed to do for the rest of her life.”

Gaenor waited until she and Cornellya had Elena back in Cornellya’s cabin before rounding off on the girl. “Whatever were you thinking, Elena? You can’t just sneak on board a ship and hope to get taken to some wonderland where the people would take care of you?”

“Like they took care of me on Olaka?” Elena asked defiantly. “No, thank you! I want to be like you. I want to be a sorceress.”

“We call ourselves adept,” Gaenor corrected her. “And you can’t just start casting spells. It takes years of study.” Gaenor paused to try to think of a gentle way to say what she had to and came up blank. “And, you are so far behind. You never had a formal education. Can you even read?”

“Read? What do I need to read for?” Elena asked. “Just show me what I have to do. I’ll remember what to do. I’m very good at remembering,” she insisted.

“Maybe, but how would you ask a question of someone who’s been dead for a century?” Gaenor counted. “That’s why you need to be able to read.”

“Elena,” Cornellya interrupted, “reading is something you will find helpful no matter what you do for a living.”

“Why?” Elena asked. “How?”

The question was one Cornellya was unprepared for. Among the Vieri everyone was literate. “What if you need to talk to someone a thousand miles away?” she tried.

“Why would I want to do that?” Elena asked, mystified.

“I do it all the time,” Gaenor told her. “I write to my family. I write to other adepts and scholars. I have several letters I mean to post as soon as we get to Tandra because there are things I need to say to people on the other side of the world and I don’t have the time to go say them in person.”

“That might be useful,” Elena conceded, “but I don’t know anyone on the other side of the world and no matter how far I travel I don’t want to say anything to anyone on Olaka.”

“It is also necessary if you want to get a better paying job than you had in Olaka,” Gaenor told her.

“I’m not worried about that,” Elena told her stubbornly. “I’m going to be adept.”

“Then you’ll absolutely have to be able to read and write,” Gaenor told her.

“Why? It’s just a matter of memorizing. Look!” Elena stood up and performed a flawless rendition of the spell Gaenor had used to freeze water.

“I’m impressed,” Gaenor admitted. “You only saw me perform that spell once, but do you know what each of the gestures and the words means? Could you create a spell on your own?”

“Couldn’t you teach me that?” Elena asked.

“I could, but it all starts with learning how to read,” Gaenor told her firmly.

“Oh, all right,” Elena replied, sounding defeated. “Teach me to read.”

Gaenor thought about that for a moment. “Now when did I agree to do that?”

“She out-manuevered you, Gaenor,” Cornellya laughed.

“So she did. Elena, do you speak any language besides Cilben?”

“There’s more than one language?” Elena asked.

“We have so far to go,” Gaenor sighed.

Gaenor and Cornellya were amazed by the speed at which Elena learned how to read. Like Gaenor she had an eidetic memory, she could look at a page and remember it word for word. It only took an hour to teach her the Cilben alphabet and how each letter sounded before she was able to start puzzling out written words. Cilben was a mostly regular language, so there were not very many cases in which consonants and vowels had different sounds depending on their context. But they only had a pair of cookbooks written in Cilben with them. The cookbooks were of only limited use in teaching Elena to read so Gaenor started teaching her to speak Shandi and Cornellya started tutoring her in the Old Tongue.

Gaenor also gave Elena one of her notebooks. "I want you to keep a diary in this," she told Elena. "You can use this to practice printing letters and also to write about what we teach you."

"Why write about that?" Elena asked. "I know what a diary is. Why don't I just write about whatever happens of note each day?"

"Well, I suppose it's more of a journal than a diary," Gaenor explained, "and at first I'm probably going to be reading what you write in it, at least until I'm satisfied about your ability to write, so you may not want to make it too personal."

"I understand," Elena replied, "but I trust you. You can read my diary, if you want."

Gaenor looked at Elena and for the first time realized what the others had known for a while. Elena idolized Gaenor. To her, Gaenor was everything she longed to be and was willing to do anything to be able to be with Gaenor. Gaenor was suddenly very uncomfortable and to cover her discomfort, she pulled a second notebook out of her pack. "Better yet, keep a scholarly journal in the first notebook, but if you want to keep a diary, use this one. It will be your private one and none of us will read it. Okay?"

"Okay," Elena nodded. "But I don't want to keep any secrets from you."

"You say that now," Gaenor replied, "but later on you may feel differently. Elena, I don't imagine you had much privacy on Olaka."

"I had a lot of privacy, Gaenor," she told her. "Nobody cared enough about me to want to pry into my affairs or feelings. I doubt any of them have noticed I'm not there any more."

"You might be surprised," Gaenor responded, "but you're probably right about none of them caring."

"But you care," Elena continued. "You gave me nice new clothes and did things for me when you really didn't have to. You and Senator Arturus weren't the first people the mayor gave me to, you know. None of the others treated me as if I was even a person. They just ordered me about, the nice ones of them did anyway. Some of them hit me if I wasn't fast enough for them or if I did something wrong or maybe just because they wanted to, and a few... Well, I don't want to talk about them." Elena shivered in spite of the heat in Cornellya's cabin.

"Maybe you don't want to go back to Olaka," Gaenor said darkly, "but there are some things I'd like to say and do to that mayor of yours."

“Let it go, Gaenor,” Cornellya advised. “That sort of thought isn’t healthy.”

Gaenor took a deep breath and finally replied, “I suppose not. The thing is, Elena is right. I do care. Maybe too much?”

“I doubt that,” Cornellya told her firmly.

With the help of the same spell Gaenor had used to speed-learn languages, Elena was speaking fluent Shandi and Old Tongue within a few days and Gaenor was able to teach her to read and write in Shandi. This too caused confusion on Elena’s part however.

“Why do I need to write in more than one language?” she asked one afternoon on the *Iris*’s poopdeck.

“As your education advances,” Gaenor explained, “You’re going to need to read articles and books that aren’t written in Cilben. Sometimes you can find translations, but sometimes translations lose some of the finer distinctions. In Arberoa, for example, I’m told that the natives have fifteen different words for snow, so a translation of an Arberoan poem, for example, might not fully capture the full meaning of what the poet was trying to convey.”

“What sort of poetry do Arberoans write?” Cornellya asked interestedly.

“They have an interesting short form of poetry in which they describe a single image or feeling in a minimal number of words. They also have a long form used for telling epic stories,” Gaenor replied. “I’ve never actually heard any in Arberoan, however. Anyway, in the long run you probably won’t have to write in more than one language unless you want to, but you may want to get proficient in either Shandi or Gostri since most magical articles are in one language or the other and until a few weeks ago the practice of magic was illegal in Cilbe”

“Is Gostri easier to learn to write in than Shandi?” Elena asked.

“Both are irregular languages,” Gaenor replied, shaking her head. “Words don’t always spell the way they sound.”

“That’s silly,” Elena told her rebelliously.

“It certainly isn’t sensible,” Gaenor agreed, “but I didn’t have a lot of say in how the language developed. If it helps, Old Tongue is very regular.”

“I have to read and write in that language too?”

“That’s your choice, of course,” Gaenor told her. “Magic doesn’t care what language you use, so long as you understand what you’re saying. It’s a fashion, I suppose, to not use a common language to recite an incantation in. It’s mostly because so many of them sound silly and adepts are as sensitive about how others see them as anyone else. I use the Old Tongue, because Artur does and he’s the one I learned from. He uses it because he learned magic in the Village and the Vieri cast spells in their own language.”

“So when do I learn magic?” Elena asked.

“You’re already learning,” Gaenor assured her. “Magic is life. I mean everything you learn applies to magic, so the more you know, the more you can do. You should be very certain that this is something you want to do, Elena, because the more you learn the more you’ll realize you don’t know. In effect you are committing yourself to a lifetime of learning and eventually of teaching as well.”

“Teaching? Me?” Elena laughed nervously.

“I suppose you could try keeping everything you learn to yourself,” Gaenor told her, “but I think you’re better than that.”

“But when will you teach me how to cast a spell?”

“You already know how to cast one spell,” Gaenor replied patiently. “At least you know how to go through the motions, but there is so much more you need to learn before you can become adept. Reading and writing is just the start of it. I also need to teach you arithmetic and other forms of mathematics, basic chemistry and biology and physics too. I also want you to learn geography, although as we travel across the world, you’ll pick that up easily enough as we go and I’ll want you to read some of the great literature of the world. In time I think you’ll come to love reading, I know I have. I’ll pick up some story books in Tandra if we can find some in Cilben or some other language you know. That will help you to get more proficient in reading. If we’re lucky we’ll find a few textbooks for you as well. They can be in Nimbrian, I suppose, it will help me learn the language and knowledge is the same regardless of what language it is written in.”

“But...” Elena tried again.

“As we go along, I’ll teach you what I know about composing an incantation, constructing a ritual and the properties of various spell tools and ingredients, but right now that knowledge would be useless to you. For example I could start you off with the memorization of all the properties of quartz and its varieties, but what use would that be to you? All adepts have to start exactly where you are right now. The only difference is that you’re starting eight years later than most of us. Still you’re smart and you learn fast, so I imagine you’ll catch up soon enough, but even I had to study magic for several years before I became adept. Eventually, I’d like you to attend classes in one of the good magic schools, either in Mita or Misha, but there’s so much you need to know before you can go to either of them, that we’re going to have our work cut out for us.

“Still,” Gaenor continued, “I imagine you’re bored with reading those cookbooks over and over and the articles I’ve been writing must seem rather dusty and maybe even incomprehensible sometimes.”

“I don’t understand all the words you use,” Elena admitted.

“Make a note of those words,” Gaenor suggested, “and we’ll discuss them. Meanwhile why don’t I start teaching you arithmetic. We’ll start with addition and subtraction.” Elena nodded eagerly.

Gaenor found herself teaching with an entirely different slant than Master Prendur had used in teaching her. The major difference was that when Gaenor was in school in Narmouth, she had no way of knowing she would one day be adept. As an intelligent young girl, it was possible she might get a job as a secretary to a local businessman or might become a businesswoman herself, although that was very rare, nor was it her thought to ever be one. Such a career was not encouraged for the girls of Mishanda and in spite of how odd the people of Narmouth had thought she was, Gaenor was a good Mishandan girl. Even when she became Artur’s assistant it was not until somewhat later that she thought to become adept

herself.

So Gaenor's education was a very general one, but in teaching Elena, she found herself trying to show her student how everything applied to magic. Without either of them realizing it, Elena was being given a very specific education in magic theory even though Gaenor insisted that Elena was studying a more general curriculum for the time being.

By the time they landed in Tandra, Elena was reading Cilben and Shandi, albeit haltingly and Gaenor privately thought the girl's reading ability might have been better had she better books to learn from.

Three

Finally, Tandra, the Nimbrian capital came into sight. It was unlike any city Gaenor had seen so far and even Cilbe had not prepared her for the size of Tandra. Cilbe was a large, sprawling metropolis, but Tandra was built on the vertical. Buildings in the business district averaged twenty-five stories tall. They were large brick and glass structures that to Gaenor's eye appeared to stretch upward just short of the clouds. Away from the city's commercial center, the buildings were shorter, but at five to ten floors each, they were still taller than anything she was used to outside of Misha.

"However does anyone climb to the tops of those buildings?" Gaenor asked, unable to tear her eyes from the tall buildings.

"Lifts," Artur replied. "They have hydraulic or steam-powered machines that transport passengers up and down."

"Have you been here before?" Gaenor asked.

"Actually, no. I never had any reason to."

"It occurs to me that we're going to have a lot of trouble here," Gaenor remarked. "How are we ever going to find Jimeleo of Laria here?"

"Ask about, I suppose," Artur replied.

"Ask about? In a city this big? Where do we even start?"

"Actually I expect it to be easier because it is so large. No city can be held together without some sort of organization, and the larger the city, the more organization there is bound to be. If Jimeleo is doing business in Tandra, we should be able to find him. He's probably registered at City Hall."

"I certainly hope so," Gaenor replied uncertainly.

The *Iris* came into Tandraport at a respectable velocity, but to Gaenor's ease, the captain was not the same sort of show-off as the man who had captained the *HMS Dauntless* on her trip to Dana and he did not feel the need to enter the harbor at full speed and use the anchor to bring his ship to a halt with only feet or inches to spare. Instead the *Iris* made her way cautiously to the outer harbor and was soon met a by smaller boat carrying a pilot who guided her in the rest of the way. The pilot, a highly skilled man with

an intimate knowledge of the harbor's channel, brought the *Iris* into her slip slowly and safely. Finally, when the ship had been secured to the wharf's cleets, Artur, Gaenor, Vito, Cornellya and Elena bid farewell to the captain and disembarked from the ship.

They took the pilot's advice as to where to find a good hotel and they decided on a suite where they left their packs before going off to dinner. Dinner was in a nearby restaurant that offered a menu that claimed Gostrinan origins. The seasonings were familiar to Gaenor, but vegetables and meat combinations were not. She decided that recipe must have been devised by someone who had come from or traveled to Gostrina but had to adapt Gostrinan recipes to the foods available in Nimbria. The most notable difference was the use of buckwheat instead of rice. After the initial shock, Gaenor decided she liked it.

The streets of Tandra were paved with cobble stones orange-red in color. On closer inspection Cornellya reported that they were not actually made of quarried stone, but had been cast in concrete or something very similar. These cast cobbles had been laid out in the streets in a variety of decorative patterns with the names of the streets incorporated into the patterns and also glazed on to special cobbles at each corner. The biggest shock, however, involved what traveled on those streets. Along with the conventional horse-drawn carts and carriages, there were also contraptions unlike anything any of the adepts had ever seen or even heard about.

They looked like small open carriages with two seats. Behind the seats was a large brass tank with a hot but contained fire underneath it. Instead of reins they had a rudder that was used to steer them and they hissed loudly as they passed by.

"That's amazing!" Gaenor marveled as they were walking back to the hotel. "What's making them move?"

"Steam power, I think," Vitautis replied, "although I've never seen a practical use for one before. You see that tank on the back is filled with water and the fire heats it up to boiling. The steam thus produced is under a lot of pressure so it can be used to make the wheels move. I used to have a miniature steam engine when I was young, but it was just a toy. I was told they were highly impractical. Evidently I was misinformed."

"And I as well," Artur agreed. "Those toy steam engines have been around for centuries but I've never seen anyone use them practically until now. Looks like fun too. Maybe we should buy one."

"I don't see any models about that seat four," Gaenor pointed out, "nor any that could hold all our packs."

"Maybe they're not very common," Artur replied.

"Maybe they're also very expensive," Gaenor retorted, "And while we aren't exactly hurting, we didn't really bring so much money with us that we have any to burn."

"You're right, of course," Artur admitted, "although I think I'll look into the cost and order one when we get back to Narmouth. "It might be a better way to travel to jobs than renting a horse, and now that my Cilben estates are restored I'm sure these carriages are within our means."

"Especially when Colchicus settles Cilben damages with Mishanda. We're getting a high percentage of that you know."

"Are we?" Artur asked.

“Didn’t anyone tell you?” Gaenor responded. “Relle told me the main reason Pawlen is pressing for damages is for us. When he started the suit, I imagine it was for our heirs since we told him we weren’t likely to survive, but at least a quarter of the settlement will be ours.”

“A quarter of a settlement between nations?” Artur asked. “We couldn’t spend that much money if we tried.”

“Then we’ll have to do something worthwhile with it,” Gaenor shrugged. “Would it really be all that much?”

“I believe the term is ‘a king’s ransom,’” Artur replied dryly. “In our case it will be one quarter of a king’s ransom. It’s a princely gift from the king, no pun intended. He doesn’t actually have to give us any of it. So you’re right, we’ll have to do something worthwhile with it. What did you have in mind? Buying a small kingdom?”

“Hardly,” Gaenor laughed. “If we wanted that we could have stayed in Cilbe. I’ll have to think about it.”

Behind them Vito and Cornellya were talking about the Vieri again. Cornellya was explaining Vieri marriage practices. “We have a fairly small population so it’s difficult to marry very far outside our families since if you go back ten generations or so we’re all related. However, we never marry first cousins and usually try not to marry second cousins as well.”

“And siblings, of course,” Vito added.

“Well, yes, of course,” Cornellya agreed, “although you have to understand that children are so rare among us that the chance of having a brother or sister born within two or three centuries of you is pretty rare. Anyway, most adult Vieri form couples, but we don’t actually marry until the first child is born.”

“Why is that?” Vito asked.

“Our birthrate is low and we think that’s because not all Vieri are interfertile, so if a couple don’t produce a child after a century or two they’ll either split up or find an alternative that works for them.”

“Alternative?”

“Love is a strange thing, Vito,” Cornellya replied. “While the normal response to no children would be to try a different partner, some couples are so deeply in love with each other that they cannot bear to part. We respect the power of love, although we also see the need to have children as well. When a couple is unwilling to separate they will usually try partnering with other individuals and couples. These are usually temporary alliances for the purpose of producing children, but it is not unheard of for such bonds to become permanent as well.”

“But then how do you know who the father is in that case?” Vito asked.

“Does it matter? Your father is the man who brings you up. Some lucky Vieri just have more than one father or more than one mother.”

Behind them Elena Carolena shrieked and they turned to see a trio of large, poorly dressed men approaching them with clubs. Cornellya ducked out of the way, but slipped on the damp bricks of the walk and skidded into a nearby wall. She wasn’t unconscious, but neither was she entirely alert either.

The nearest thug clubbed Vito and he fell to the sidewalk unconscious. Gaenor and Artur drew their swords and attacked the men. Gaenor quickly scored a hit on one man's arm, but his club continued arcing toward her and smashed into her own lower arm, leaving Artur fighting the three men on his own.

Elena found a few rocks and started throwing them at their attackers. She hit one in the back for a painful, but otherwise ineffective hit and the man started in after her. She bravely held her ground and kept pelting him with the rocks until she ran out. By then she was too scared to run, just as he was about to swing his club, however, he suddenly erupted into a column of intense flame. He screamed and started running away, but only got a few yards into the street before colliding with a horse-drawn wagon. He slipped and fell under the wagon's wheels and was dead a moment later.

Looking back, Elena saw Gaenor had used her sword blade with a piece of flint to cast a fire spell. Meanwhile, Artur managed to skewer one of his opponents and he and the other ran off into the night.

Nearby, a whistle was blown and several constables quickly ran to the scene. Gaenor made her way over to Cornellya who was already recovered and worrying about Vito. Elena had curled up on the sidewalk nearby and was whimpering, so Gaenor changed her course and went to Elena instead. Artur was speaking to the constables.

"No, we were just on our way back to the hotel when they attacked us."

"Sir, it appeared you were trying to kill them," one constable replied, "and that one over there is dead."

"It seems only fair, since they were trying to kill us," Artur replied calmly.

"And you feel no remorse?"

"Not particularly, no," Artur retorted. "It was us versus them. What should we have done, then, stand there and let them kill us?"

"They were common muggers," the constable told him. "They just wanted to rob you. You used unnecessary force."

"Where I come from we kill thieves," Artur replied coldly. "To do otherwise just encourages them."

That was evidently the wrong response for the Nimbrian policemen. "We'll have to ask you all to come to our stationhouse, sir."

"After I've seen to my friends and family members," Artur replied. "By the way, what about the thieves? You don't seem overly concerned with catching them."

"To the station, sir. Now!" came the response.

"Godfather," Cornellya called, "Vito is badly hurt here. I think Gaenor's arm is broken and I'm not sure what happened to Elena."

"Elena?" Gaenor spoke to the girl gently. "Are you hurt? Where did they hit you?" She put the pain in her own arm out of her mind. Elena curled up a bit tighter and moaned incoherently. "Elena," Gaenor called more firmly. "Speak to me."

Elena uncurled enough to look at Gaenor. "I'm not hurt," she told Gaenor. Then suddenly threw her

arms around Gaenor and held on as though her life depended on it. Gaenor ignored the pain and tried to assure Elena that everything was all right now.

One of the constables looked at Vito and told the other to call an ambulance. "We'll take your injured to the hospital, but the rest of you will have to file a report at our station house," he told Artur.

After the constables relieved Artur and Gaenor of their swords, Gaenor and Vito were transported to the hospital while the others were forced to accompany the constables to their station a few blocks away. Artur appeared calm although Cornellya could tell he was actually seething, but Elena was beside herself with worry. She tried to stay with Gaenor but the policemen took hold of her and pulled the two apart. Cornellya stepped in and took Elena in hand, giving the girl someone to cling too. One of the constables tried to tell them to stand apart, but caught a look at Cornellya and suddenly jumped back, looking scared. She wasn't sure why that might be, but when she glared at him, he took another wary step away.

Artur remained fairly quiet until they were actually in the constabulary station, when he demanded to speak to the captain. When that officer was unavailable he rounded off on the sergeant in charge. "Is it policy in Nimbria to arrest the victims of robbers and let the robbers themselves go free?" he demanded.

The seargeant looked at the constables and the one who had been doing most of the speaking informed him, "We observed no robbery, sir, but we did see these people using magic to kill one Nimbrian and this man stabbed another with his sword." He placed Artur's and Gaenor's swords on the table.

"Is there a law against carrying a sword in Nimbria?" Artur asked coolly.

"No, sir," the sergeant replied, "so long as they are worn openly."

"It is difficult to hide a sword of this length, don't you think?" Artur asked.

"This is a strange blade," the sergeant commented seeing the long, slightly curved weapon that was Gaenor's sword.

"It's a Temi warrior's sword," Artur replied. The sergeant suddenly froze and put the weapon back gently on the table, so Artur added, "it belongs to my fiancée."

"Who are you?" the sergeant asked quietly.

"I was born Arturus Cornelllian Marno, sir," Artur replied evenly.

"A Cilben," the sergeant noted. "We'll have to contact your embassy to vouch for you, of course." He signaled to one of the constables, who nodded and quickly left the room. "I don't suppose they would know who you are?"

"She's not a Cilben," the constable said nervously, pointing at Cornellya. "She's not even human."

"Is that illegal here too?" Cornellya asked with an edge to her voice.

"No, miss, it is not, but you are a foreigner and we take a dim view of foreigners killing Nimbrian citizens."

"And evidently you encourage your citizens to attack such foreigners, do you?" Artur countered sarcastically. "No doubt it is classified as private enterprise."

“That’s enough of you,” the sergeant snarled. He turned to the remaining constables, “Lock them up until we hear from the Cilben Embassy.”

Artur was led off in one direction and Elena and Cornellya in another. They were placed in a small room with a table and a few uncomfortable wooden chairs and told to stay there. “What do we do now?” Elena asked Cornellya worriedly as they heard the door being locked behind them.

“We wait, of course,” Cornellya replied, sitting down. “Oh, these are terrible chairs.”

“But what if the Cilben Embassy doesn’t vouch for Senator Arturus?”

“Are you kidding?” Cornellya asked. “The emperor’s father? Besides, we’re only here as long as we care to be. Watch.” Cornellya opened her purse and drew out several items and performed a variant on Gaenor’s lock-opening spell. As she concluded the ritual they could hear the door unlock itself and see it swing inward a few inches. “See? No! Don’t go out.”

“I was just closing the door,” Elena told her.

“Oh, good idea.”

“So that’s how you unlock something by magic?” Elena asked after sitting back down at the table.

“That’s how I unlocked that particular door,” Cornellya replied. “Magic is flexible, Elena. There’s no single way to do something. There are probably a thousand different combinations of tools, ingredients, rituals and incantations that can accomplish the same thing. For example, I used a notebook to simulate the opening of the door. Gaenor told me about a similar spell she used in Mishanda in which she used a small candy box. She did use a notebook on that occasion, but only to scribble out a multiplication table. In this case I already had a multiplication table inside the cover of this notebook.” She showed it to Elena. “You probably didn’t notice that, did you?”

“No. What would have happened, assuming I had already been initiated if I had tried the spell without it?”

“Nothing,” Cornellya replied. “If you were able to understand the entire incantation you would have recognized the words that identified the table.” She repeated those words to Elena, knowing she would memorize them. “But keep in mind that the Old Tongue is a very exacting language. A minor mispronunciation might have made the spell useless or have opened every door in this building or even this town.”

“That might have been amusing,” Elena remarked.

“Not really,” Cornellya disagreed. “Aside from the invasion of privacy it would inflict on the people of Tandra, there’s the question of where the energy released by a magic spell comes from. That’s one of the questions Gaenor has been researching for months, but I can tell you that some of the energy comes from within you and if you cast a spell, like this one that mostly uses such internal energy, you could kill yourself, if the spell has a greater energy need than you planned on.”

Elena continued asking questions about magic and Cornellya answered them as freely as Gaenor had, but both were really only doing so to keep from having to face their fears. They both knew they would have to wait, but it turned out they didn’t have to wait too long. Half an hour later, a constable came to

the door.

“Wasn’t this locked?” he asked, confused.

“I thought it was,” Cornellya replied.

“Doesn’t matter, I suppose,” he shrugged. “Would your ladyships come with me, please?”

Elena and Cornellya exchanged a glance that spoke volumes, but they quietly stood up and followed the man back to the sergeant’s desk where a man in a considerably more ornate uniform was shouting at him. “What the hell were you thinking? The emperor’s father for the gods’ sake! Were you trying to create an international incident? Hoping to force us to go to war with Cilbe, perhaps? Well, if we do, I’ll make sure you’re on the front lines.” Then he turned to a party of well-dressed Cilbens behind him, “Your Excellency, I hope you’ll forgive this unfortunate incident. I assure you there was no intention...”

“Let it pass,” Artur interrupted the apology as he entered the room, “at least so long as the other members of our party are all right.”

“Senator Arturus,” one of the Cilbens greeted him, “I am Hertius Benallius Tannor, His Serenity’s ambassador to Nimbria. How may I be of service, sir?”

“Pleased to meet you, Your Excellency,” Artur replied, “I want to see my intended and the colleague who was traveling with us. Do you know where they are?”

“I understand they are at the hospital, just a few blocks away, Senator. I would be honored to escort you there and if I might be so bold, I could have your bags brought to the embassy, where you are certainly welcome as long as you continue to stay in Tandra.”

“I was hoping to pass through without incident,” Artur replied, “but perhaps, given the nature of what happened tonight, that might be best. Thank you, Ambassador Benallius, on both counts. I see Cornellya and Elena are ready, shall we be off?”

The police captain attempted to apologize again, but Artur cut him off, and simply left station. “Now where is this hospital?” Artur asked as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

“Turn left here,” Benallius told him. “Which hotel did you check into?” Artur told him. “I’ll see that your luggage and that of your party is waiting for you at the embassy.” A moment later two of the men that were with them split off and headed for the hotel.

They found Gaenor with her splinted arm in a sling, sitting outside the room Vito was in. “I think I shocked the doctors,” she admitted. “That Vieri health spell had already healed a lot of the damage, except for the broken bone. That had to be reset, and of course it had started healing wrong too. That was painful, but even that healed quickly. Cornellya, how long will I need to wear these splints?”

“A few days, maybe” Cornellya replied, “just to be on the safe side, although if you’re careful you could probably take them off right now, but I’m not sure of that. I never had a broken bone. We could ask Kseniya if you want?”

“No, I can live with the splints for a few days. Let’s not bother her for such a small matter. Artur, are we free to go? The constables who were guarding us left a few minutes ago, but nobody said anything to me.”

“Yes, whatever charges they were thinking of pressing have been dropped,” Artur replied, then introduced the ambassador. “We’ll be staying in the embassy as long as we’re in Tandra,” he added. “How is Vito?”

“I don’t know,” Gaenor replied worriedly. “The doctor has been in with him almost as long as we have been here, but so far all I’ve seen are nurses coming and going and none of them will talk to me.”

“I have some training as a healer,” Cornellya replied. “Not as much as Kseniya – she has a thousand years of experience over me - but I’m not entirely ignorant either.”

Without waiting for anyone else to agree or disagree, she walked straight into Vito’s room where she was confronted by the doctor. “Who are you and what are you doing here?” he demanded.

“You are taking too long, Doctor,” Cornellya replied, “so I came in to assist.” She opened her purse and started pulling out various spell tools and ingredients. The others filed into the room behind her to observe.

“Who are you, and what is all that?” the doctor asked.

In answer, Cornellya brushed her hair, almost absently, back from her left ear and replied, “You won’t have heard of me, I’m sure, but if you need a name, my friends called me Cornellya.”

The gesture had the effect Cornellya hoped it would have. The doctor looked stunned for a moment and then just stood aside as she worked. “Gaenor, may I borrow your ash wand? I think it will work better than my obsidian rod.” Gaenor nodded and found the short round piece of ash wood in her purse and handed it to Cornellya.

Cornellya picked up a round, polished piece of clear quartz with fine sprays of gold within it and held it in her hand against the ash wand. She closed her eyes for a moment, took a deep breath and began a long incantation and ritual in which she walked around Vito three times tracing a complex pattern in the air over him. When she was finished, Vito was encased in a box-like ward of rust-colored light. She touched the rod to the ward and two dark red splashes of color formed on the side of Vito’s head and on his shoulder.

“Concussion,” Cornellya noted, “and a cracked skull, I’m afraid. The shoulder is damaged too, obviously, collar bone I think. Does that concur with your diagnosis?” she asked the doctor. He nodded mutely. “Good. Magic is a fine tool, but it never hurts to confirm such things by as many different means as you have at your disposal. The skull fracture will heal itself assuming he doesn’t go bumping his head into something before that and the collar will need to be reset, but I really need to do something about that concussion. That could kill him.”

She handed the wand back to Gaenor and started picking through her own tools again. Finally she pulled out a vial of powdered amber, a piece of amethyst crystal and, after a thoughtful pause a smooth piece of bloodstone. “Is that water in the pitcher?” Cornellya asked. “Good, I’ll need a glassful.” A nurse poured and handed the glass to her. “Thank you.”

Cornellya arranged her chosen tools and ingredients before her and started putting the rest away, but at the last minute she kept the rutilated quartz in her hand and added a small piece of olive wood to the collection of intended tools. The spell she cast was a long and complex one, It started with a long invocation, calling on the gods of Wanlaria to help and protect Vito and then she began chanting her

intentional . As she chanted she sprinkled a little of the powdered amber on Vito. As she did so the rust-colored ward turned a clear, light green and the red splotches grew a little smaller and lighter as well, but they did not improve enough to satisfy Cornellya. Having stated her intentions, she then closed the vial of powdered amber, put it away and commenced the actual core of the spell. She used each of the spell tools repeatedly for the next half hour.

When she was done the box-like ward had disappeared and the red splotch of light on Vito's head had gone with it. The one around his shoulder had faded and shrunk, but was still visible. Finally, she released the diagnostic spell represented by the red light and sat tiredly on a nearby chair.

"That was amazing," the doctor told her.

"My teacher would have done it better," Cornellya disagreed. "He would have been conscious now. Still, I think he's just sleeping."

The doctor checked Vito's pulse and reported, "He's definitely improved. Pulse is stronger and at a healthier rate now."

"It's probably a good time to set his collar bone," Cornellya remarked tiredly. "If you don't mind, I'll stay here tonight. Is that other bed in use? No? Good, I'm afraid that spell took a lot out of me. I really do need to learn how to do that sort of thing without draining myself so, but I haven't learned that yet."

She made her way to the second hospital cot and was asleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow.

Four

Vito stayed in the hospital for another two days while Artur and Gaenor searched for word of Jimeleo of Laria. They were not entirely free to conduct that search, however, because word of Artur's presence had spread leading to a long string of invitations, including a carefully worded request from Nimbria's King. Artur was not inclined toward accepting any of them, but Benallius insisted one afternoon over kahwah, saying, "It would ease relations between Cilbe and Nimbria especially in this time of transition. Your son is an able man, no doubt, Senator, but the Nimbrians know nearly nothing about him. Meeting and getting to know you will help to assure them of the continuity of friendship of the Cilben Empire."

"I don't recall that Lusius had any such problem," Artur retorted.

"Lusius was the legal heir to Balto," Benallius replied patiently.

"And Colchicus is mine," Artur returned. "If anyone was a usurper it was me."

"In a way, that's why everyone wants to meet you, Senator. No one else in living memory has ever walked away from monarchic power. It makes you a celebrity of the first water."

"There have been other abdications," Artur insisted.

"Under duress, Senator. You came to power and claimed it would only be temporary. Others have made that promise, but only you kept the promise."

"I have more important things to do than rule an empire, Benallius," Artur replied flatly.

"You see? That's exactly why they want to meet you. No one else can imagine anything more important than being emperor."

"How about living a good and happy life?" Artur suggested. "No, never mind, hardly a consideration, is it?" Benallius chuckled politely. "Very well, I should at least pay my respects to the king, whoever he is."

"Mikklosi IV," Benallius supplied.

"Fine," Artur sighed, "but if I respond to all these invitations I'll be tied down here for weeks. I don't want to stay more than a few days and I'm going to need time to search for this Jimeleo character."

"I can have staffers here do that for you," Benallius replied "and perhaps we can host a reception of our own, invite all these people in and take care of all the obligations in a single evening."

"Better," Artur admitted, "but this is why we were trying to slip through the country unnoticed."

"Senator, far be it from me to correct you, but it seems to me that you may want to rethink your strategy. There's no place on this side of the world where you aren't known and likely to be recognized. You're more likely to be able to move quickly if you announce your presence wherever you go."

"No," Artur disagreed, "It might sound reasonable to you, but it will only slow me down having to do a grand tour of the continent. It's bad enough I'm going to have to pass through half the kingdoms in the world just to get home, I don't have the time to visit every king in the world."

"You may not be able to avoid it," the ambassador informed him.

"I'm going to do my best, though. So tell me, what sort of kingdom is Nimbria? When I was just passing through it didn't matter a lot, but now that I'm going to have to meet their king... He is a real king isn't he, not an elected official?"

"He's an hereditary king, yes," Banallius replied. "but Nimbria is a constitutional monarchy although it has only been so for the last twenty years or so. Nimbria has had a Parliament for generations, but until Mikklosi ascended to the throne, it was an advisory body only. He made a rather bold move by delegating much of his authority to the Parliament, but it afforded him more time to devote to statesmanship and foreign policy and it has worked out very well. Nimbria is a power to reckon with. She has treaties of mutual assistance with Baria and all the nations that border the Gulf of Nimbria and just recently proposed that all those countries agree to mutual aid with each other and I think they are going to agree. You can blame Lusius for that as well."

"How so?" Artur asked.

"You remember his attempt to get the Senate to declare war on Baria, of course."

"Hard to forget, considering the reason I had to run for my life was that I successfully blocked it," Artur remarked.

"Quite," Banallius replied, "Well, Mikklosi was a young prince at the time, but he took the threat very seriously. He's been working on this ever since his coronation. It's going to be a long time before Cilbe can muscle her way through this part of the world again."

“Just as well,” Artur told him. “This isn’t the world of a thousand years ago. There’s so much more to gain through negotiation than by force.”

“It’s a pity you didn’t accept the oak wreath when Balto died,” Banallius remarked seriously. “It would have saved us the folly of the last twenty-five years.

“You two are lucky to have missed the royal reception,” Gaenor told Cornellya and Vito at breakfast. Vito had only been out of the hospital for a day and didn’t feel up to being presented to the king with his arm bound up and the persistent headaches Cornellya was sure were in his own mind. “I found myself wishing I was back in Narmouth doing the morning chores. Correction: I was looking back fondly on what I put myself through to get Artur to hire me.”

“As I recall,” Artur put in, “you nearly killed yourself with exhaustion.”

“Don’t you think you’re just getting a bit jaded?” Vito asked, with a slight smile on his face.

“Could be,” Artur agreed teasingly. “It wasn’t all that long ago she was nervous to even be noticed by a king. Now she’s met a fair lot of them and is on a first name basis with her Caroms buddy, Pawlen.”

“I was bored too,” Elena admitted, “although not enough to want to be back on Olaka. Everyone just stood around in small groups talking among themselves and weren’t particularly interested in anyone but you, Senator. Well, there’s no reason I should have interested any of them. I’m just a plebian girl from a remote corner of the Empire, but I didn’t like the way they snubbed Lady Gaenor.”

“That didn’t bother me all that much,” Gaenor replied. “I didn’t find most of them any more interesting than they found me.”

“But you’re a great lady,” Elena protested.

“A year ago I was just a small town girl and common as dirt,” Gaenor reminded her. “Even so, I’m not a noble so not of any interest to those whose only social scale is based on that sort of rank.”

“Well, tonight’s reception ought to be a bit more interesting,” Artur informed them all. “Cilben affairs, at the least, involve wine and other alcoholic beverages and the food won’t be scraps and scrapings that fit on a cracker.”

“I don’t recall that Cilben party foods were all that exciting,” Gaenor commented.

“You’re right,” Artur agreed, “but His Excellency isn’t planning to serve Cilben food. It seems there has been a fashion lately for foods from Pongaria and Ux. The core of such fare is whole slow-roast oxen, sheep and pigs basted with a variety of spicy sauces. I’ve never had Ponga-Uxerian food before, but it certainly sounds substantial.”

“I guess we should look forward to it then,” Vito replied. “Is there any word about my countryman, Jimeleo?”

“Not yet,” Artur told him, “but I have both the ambassador’s staff and the Royal Bureau of Revenue looking for him. If we haven’t heard as to his whereabouts within a week, however, I think we’ll have to cut our losses and move on to Teliodena. Jimeleo is only one adept and while we need every one we can get, I’d rather go to Ichtar short-handed than get there too late. For all we know Jimeleo may have packed his bags and headed back to Laria two months ago.”

“Why two months?” Gaenor asked.

“Why not?” Artur returned. “It was just the number that came to mind, is all.”

The reception began late that afternoon and ran late into the night. Vito retired early, but came back a few hours later to find the party still in full swing. Ambassador Banallius had hired several bands and an orchestra to insure music all night long. Each group of musicians played an entirely different sort of music. There was stately Cilben urban music, Nimbrian dance music, a set of Tindi concertos and the very latest in fashionable chamber music from Corinia.

Elena did her best to be a part of the festivities and not quietly hang back in a corner, but in spite of Gaenor’s and Cornellya’s urgings, she found herself shying away from the high-born notables in attendance until a new band struck up a familiar dance tune she knew on Olaka. It was new to most of the attendees and they were uncertain of just how to approach it, but Elena grabbed Gaenor, Artur and Cornellya and led them through the steps of the country dance she knew that went with the tune. It was a spirited dance and Elena soon lost her fears in the dance and even let loose a wild ululation as any Olakan might have in those circumstances. Watching her lead the group in the dance as a set of four, some of the others followed suit and tried with some success to follow their steps. As the band started into the next dance piece, everyone looked toward Elena to see what she would do next. Elena started guiding her set through the steps and when she noticed the others straining to hear her, she raised her voice to call out the steps for everyone present and proceeded to do so as long as that band continued to play.

After the set ended, many of the dancers came over to thank Elena for her instruction and the rest trickled by over the course of the evening to do likewise. At first Elena tried to escape back to her corner, but Gaenor prompted her by whispers to be polite and let them thank her. After a minute or so, Elena came out of her shell and got much easier with the people there and even found herself chatting animatedly with a gentleman from Drombra who had been studying various forms of folk dances and who had a thousand questions about the Olakan versions of the dances.

“I’ve seen half a dozen different versions of the ‘Harvesting,’ dance you started off with in Archaxu and Kolme,” he told her, “but I’ve never seen one quite like yours. May I ask where you are from?”

“Olaka, sir,” she replied.

“Ah! That’s one of the islands off the coast of Archaxu, isn’t it?” She nodded. “I’m afraid I missed my opportunity to visit them on my last trip to Cilbe. I did learn the band was from Kalaina, though.”

“Kalaina?” Elena repeated. “That’s right next to Olaka.”

“Yes. They were amazed that someone here knew nearly the same steps to their dances they were accustomed to. ‘Harvesting,’ for example is danced to an entirely different tune, and a slight slower one for the most part on the mainland. I almost didn’t recognize it myself when you started leading your set, but as they started learning it and as I watched you more closely, it became obvious.”

They spoke for another two hours as he feverishly wrote down descriptions of all the Olakan dances Elena had lead. The fact that he carried a notebook like Gaenor did was a revelation to Elena and she found herself wishing she had brought her journal with her.

Finally, as he finished taking notes he got up and with a quick bow to Elena said, "It's been a pleasure, my lady. If you're ever in Omb, please feel free to visit me at the University." He handed her a calling card and disappeared into the crowd.

"Who was that?" Gaenor asked her a few minutes later.

"I didn't ask his name," Elena replied. "He gave me his card, but I can't read it."

"Neither can I," Gaenor admitted. "They use a different alphabet in Drombra."

A lady who was sitting a few feet away, however informed them, "That was Doctor Telemarne. He teaches ethnology in Omb."

Elena thanked the lady, stood up and suddenly felt dizzy and sat back down again. Gaenor noticed and realized how long Elena had been talking to the Drombran academic.

"Elena have you eaten anything this evening?" she asked concernedly.

"Not yet," Elena admitted. "I was about to when Doctor Telemarne came over."

"Okay, sit there and let me get you something."

"No!" Elena protested a bit too loudly. She softened her voice to say, "I should be serving you, not the other way around."

"Nonsense, Elena," Gaenor told her. "You're my student, or my apprentice if you want to sound archaic, not my servant. You just sit there while I get something for you to eat and drink."

Gaenor went to the long tables that were being kept filled with all sorts of food. Artur's initial report had been accurate as far as it went, but it turned out that Banallius had ordered more than just the Ponga-Uxerian feast. There were delicacies from all over the southwestern world and Gaenor quickly filled up a large plate with a variety and a tall glass of a non-alcoholic punch and brought them to Elena.

"I can't eat all that!" she protested.

"Eat what you can," Gaenor told her. "I'm feeling a bit peckish too." She suited her actions to her words and reached over and picked up a baked and stuffed olive.

They all woke up late the next morning to find a messenger from the Nimbrian Royal Bureau of Revenue waiting for them. He handed Artur a large brown envelope and remarked, "Senator, this is the information you requested."

Artur tore open the envelope and read the single sheet that was inside. "He's in Boraedne? That's

almost a week and a half of travel to the northwest.”

“Not really, Senator,” the messenger replied. “Boraledne is only a few hours away by locomotive.”

“What’s a locomotive?” both Artur and Gaenor asked.

“I guess you could call it a steam-powered wagon train, although that’s not entirely accurate. You’ve seen the steam engines we run our lifts and carriages with. We’ll take a really big steam engine and connect a bunch of cars, some closed, some open together behind one and put it on a set of tracks. You can buy passage to Boraledne in a sleeper and be there just after breakfast tomorrow morning.”

“A locomotive,” mused Artur. “Sounds like fun. Where does one purchase tickets?” The messenger told him and Artur turned to the others, “Better start packing. I’ll have one of the embassy staff take care of the arrangements, then our next stop will be Boraledne.”

Five

The journey to Boraledne excited all of them. They stayed up late in the dining carriage, unable to sleep, but one by one they decided they may as well try, especially since they had paid for cabins with beds. Eventually only Gaenor and Elena were still awake.

Gaenor had made good on her promise to buy better reading material for Elena, so now she had both fiction and textbooks to read. The Cilben language was in popular use for fiction in the southwest countries, although Nimbrian was the language all the texts were written in. Fortunately Briané was written in the Cilben alphabet and was as regular a language as Cilben itself so they were both able to work their ways through the textbooks.

Elena was disappointed that none of the texts covered magical subjects, but Gaenor explained that. “The Nimbrians barely believe magic is even possible, ‘Lena, so they aren’t likely to publish books on the subject. But the books on chemistry and physics should keep us going for a while. A lot of this is stuff I’m rather weak on too, so we’ll be learning together.”

Elena had an odd expression on her face. “What did you just call me?” she asked softly.

Gaenor thought back. “Oh. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have taken liberties with your name. It’s just that back home that’s how your name might have been contracted among friends. My close friends call me ‘Gae.’ What do your friends call you?”

“‘Lena,’” she replied and then amplified, “Until I met you, I didn’t have any friends. Not really. ‘Lena,’” she repeated, tasting the flavor of the nickname. “I like it. Thank you, Gaenor. . . uh Gae?”

Gaenor smiled her approval and Elena hugged her.

“Cornellya seems like a good friend to you,” Elena observed when they broke apart. “Why doesn’t she call you ‘Gae?’”

“That’s her way,” Gaenor replied. “The Vieri take names very seriously. They believe a name describes the person or thing it is attached to. To change the name is to change the nature of the person or object, therefore they always sound a bit formal. Although aside from that quirk, I found them a very warm and

openly welcoming people.”

“I like Cornellya,” Elena commented. “I’d like to visit her Village someday and meet her people.”

“She’d like that,” Gaenor told her, “and I think the Vieri would like you.” Suddenly Gaenor yawned. “Oh. The rhythm of this train on its tracks is a bit hypnotic isn’t it?”

“Hypnotic?” Elena asked.

“I mean that it can lull one to sleep easily. I think we both ought to get to bed anyway, don’t you? Tomorrow may be a long day.” Elena nodded and together they headed back to their cabins. “G’night, Lena,” Gaenor told her when they reach her door.

“Good night, Gae.”

Baraledne, while not as large as Tandra, was similar in many ways. Her buildings stood a bit shorter, but they were built and decorated along the same lines and the streets were paved with the same cast and glazed paving cobbles. If anything there were even more steam carriages on the streets there and the streets themselves were wider and straighter than in Tandra, suggesting Baraledne had been a planned city where Tandra had the look of a city that had just evolved around a collection of cow paths.

“What’s first?” Vito asked as they left the railroad station. “Do we find a hotel to stay in?”

“The Revenue Bureau was able to give me Jimeleo’s address. Why don’t we look him up. If he turns us down we can take the next train to Adde and start off toward Teliodena.”

“Too bad we cannot take the train all the way there,” Gaenor commented.

“In a year or two from now it’s possible we would be able to,” Artur told her. “I understand Nimbria is under negotiations to extend their rail service into Baria, Drombra and Maxforn and Banallius has been working toward a treaty that would bring the service into the Empire on several vectors. The Nimbrians are hesitant to commit to that, however, in which case I have no doubt Cilbe will build her own railroads.”

“I wonder how long it will be before Mishanda builds them,” Gaenor commented. “Compared to Nimbria, Mishanda seems so backward.”

“Only in physical technology,” Artur replied. “When it comes to magic the northeast kingdoms are the most advanced. If you want to see backwards, wait until we get into the Southlands. They have no magic and distrust most modern physical technology. But in answer to your first comment, I think as soon as the adepts in Mishanda hear about railroads, they’ll find a way to do the same thing with magic. Perhaps you should write another letter,” he suggested.

“I’ll do that,” she replied.

“So where is Jimeleo’s place of business?” Vito asked.

“On Welbing Way,” Artur replied. “Problem is, I don’t know where Welbing Way is, but I plan to ask around.”

It took several tries, but eventually they found someone who knew where they wanted to go. It was a mile from the railroad station and while Vito insisted he could walk that far, Artur decided it would be best not to make the Wanlarian adept move around more than necessary, so he left Vito with Cornellya and Elena in an open sidewalk restaurant and went with Gaenor to find Jimeleo of Laria.

“I don’t like the look of this neighborhood,” Gaenor commented worriedly.

“It’s not the high rent district,” Artur replied dryly. “Are you prepared?”

“I have an amulet on my belt,” she replied. “Should have had one in Tandra, but it had been a while.”

“I was equally at fault,” Artur told her. “This time I have the old flint and steel ready at hand. Should have thought of an amulet, however.”

“Can’t think of everything,” Gaenor replied.

Their preparations, however were not necessary this time and they eventually found themselves in front of a somewhat dilapidated brownstone building.

“Are you sure this is the right place?” Gaenor asked, looking around. In her experience no adept was ever forced to live in such squalor. Even Vito’s hermit-like existence in the Mountains of Aston was only to aid his research.

“2145 Welbing Way,” Artur replied, “lower level. I guess that means he’s working out of this old sublevel storefront. Let’s find out.”

As they walked down the stairs, Gaenor tried to look into the grimy storefront window, but she was only able to see the back of a large bookshelf. Finally, at the bottom, next to the door was a small hand-printed sign that said “Jimeleo of Laria, Magic for All Practical Uses.”

“That doesn’t look particularly hopeful,” Artur remarked.

“Doctor Lastor of Arshemouth recommended him,” Gaenor reminded Artur. “He said he wrote interesting letters.”

“So he did,” Artur agreed, “so let’s find out.” He reached out and took hold of a bell pull, which fell off in his hand. “Terrific,” he said flatly.

“So knock,” Gaenor suggested. Artur did so and a few moments later the door opened to reveal a man in his earlier thirties with curly dark brown hair and beard. He was wearing a rather archaic long robe that made him look like a wizard from one of the old picture books Gaenor had seen in the Narmouth Public Library when she was still learning to read. All that was missing was the tall pointed hat with stars all over it. The robe was clean, but badly worn out.

“May I help you two,” he asked nervously speaking very fast. “A love potion, perhaps.” Artur groaned.

“If you don’t already know there’s no such thing,” Gaenor told him in Shandi, “then you aren’t the adept we’re looking for, Jimeleo of Laria.”

“Mishandan?” Jimeleo asked.

“I am,” Gaenor replied. “Artur is originally from Cilbe.”

“And you are adepts?”

“We are,” she replied. “Are you going to ask us in or do you want to continue playing the Questions game?”

“Please, come in,” Jimeleo invited them in his nervous seeming way. “I have only heard of one woman adept from Mishanda, but you couldn’t possibly be her. Have you studied perhaps with Master Gaenor of Narmouth?”

“I am Gaenor of Narmouth,” she replied while Artur chuckled softly.

“Really?” Jimeleo asked. “I wouldn’t have expected you to be so young. I’ve read your book and when I heard you were a master I would have thought you were my age or older.”

“Doctor Lastor and the rest of his faculty gave me a Master of the Arts degree for my work on that book, which was really just a series of articles describing my notational system and my extrapolations of Menandan’s Principal. I don’t know who compiled them into the book and called it a thesis, but they were pretty insistent that I be given a Master’s degree. Someday I’d like to attend some formal classes. The closest I’ve come to that was sitting in a few at Mita, and lecturing there and in Misha.”

“Mita?” Jimeleo asked. “I wasn’t aware of a school there. It’s such a small town. If it weren’t on the border it probably wouldn’t have ever been more than a small village.”

“Doctor Haxmire of Kandoe and Master Fallendir of Castoe founded a new school of magic there after the department at the University at Es was closed,” Gaenor replied.

“I hadn’t heard about that either. I appear to have been stuck in Nimbria too long,” Jimeleo replied ruefully.

“What are you doing here?” Artur asked.

“Trying to earn enough money to get out of here,” Jimeleo replied.

“Maybe we can help you there,” Artur replied and proceeded to explain about the hostile spell originating on Ichtar that was causing rain in the Parch.

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” Jimeleo commented, “except for the Vieri. They really exist? Yes? Well, I can see how changes in the climate are going to cause disruption, but what could the people of Ichtar possibly hope to gain by changing the climate of the world?”

“We think they are actually trying to deplete the world of all magic,” Gaenor explained.

“Can they do that?” Jimeleo asked uncertainly.

“Magic energy isn’t infinite,” Gaenor replied, “and it has to come from somewhere. I have a few different ideas concerning that, but they all depend on a certain amount of background energy that can be used as

a catalyst to free up the rest. I don't think the energy is really used up in the same way, say, a candle would burn up, but it does change from a form of energy we can use to one we cannot. Of course this is local and the amount of energy in the universe is immensely greater. In time, perhaps, magical energy we can use would build up again or maybe not, but probably not for a very long time. It will be thousands, maybe millions, of years before magic could be practiced here again."

"We can't have that!" Jimeleo replied quickly. "It's all I have. It's the only thing I know how to do?"

"Will you help us, then?" Artur asked.

"You'll pay my way out of Nimbria?" Jimeleo asked.

"All the way to Ichtar and back again," Artur replied.

"Not back here," Jimeleo shuddered nervously. "Back to Misha or Mita, would be far enough. When do we leave?"

"How soon can you pack?" Gaenor asked.

The next morning they helped Jimeleo ship a trunk full of books to his family in Laria and after breakfast they caught the morning train to Adde in Baria.

Ambador

One

The trip to Adde took all day because the train had to stop to allow a large flock of sheep to cross the tracks.

"Shouldn't the shepherd keep his flock off the tracks?" Gaenor asked when a steward came by to explain the delay.

"He should, miss," the man replied, "but the shepherds up this way are an independent lot and often protest the railroad in this fashion. It's not legal and if caught he'd liable for a big fine, but if we kill any of his sheep we would have to make restitution at triple damages, so we are under orders not to."

"When the line extends north into the plains of the Cilben Empire and Barbaria you'll have other problems. There are still large herds of bison that migrate with the seasons there," Artur told him.

"That will likely be someone else's problem, sir. From what I've heard the owners do not want to extend the line beyond the Nimbrian Peninsula, but would prefer to sell licensing rights. Excuse me I need to get to the other carriages."

They lost two hours while the sheep were cleared from the tracks and then only moved on for another half an hour before having to stop for more sheep. This time the delay was much shorter, but, combined with the first delay, meant they were almost three hours late into Adde.

Gaenor and Cornellya used the time to instruct Elena although all three women got stumped several times in trying to understand the basic physics text Gaenor had bought. Jimeleo was able to assist there. It turned out he was fairly knowledgeable about the physical sciences and was able to show them where their vector calculations went wrong. Gaenor asked him if he had read any of Doctor Nyima's papers. He had not, but was a bit skeptical about the conversion of mass to energy and back again. However he also admitted to not being totally closed to the idea, but would need to see Nyima's mathematical proofs before making a decision. He also pointed out that theory is fine, but even mathematical proofs can be misinterpreted. "The best proof," he opined, "is from physical observation."

Jimeleo's entire attitude had changed since leaving Boraledne. He still had a tendency to talk too fast, but he didn't seem quite so nervous. He explained to Gaenor, "I was beginning to think I'd never get out of Nimbria. They tax a person's individual income here just like in Cilbe, but they don't collect it until the end of each year, so the tendency is to lose track and end up owing more taxes than you have cash on hand. I never quite ended up owing more than I had and a good thing too since that would have landed me in prison, but I was never able to save up enough to pay for passage home. There's just not enough work for an adept there."

"Maybe you should have tried leaving instead of moving from Tandra to Boraledne," Gaenor suggested.

"I couldn't afford it," Jimeleo told her. "I moved to Boraledne because the Nimbrian government was offering grants to businesses who moved to Boraledne. They think the city is going to be the central hub of their international rail service and they want to increase the size of the city and the number of services offered there. It didn't actually cost me anything and because I was frugal it gave me an additional six months living expenses. The problem was that by accepting the grant I was obligated to stay in Boraledne for at least a year."

"How long ago was that?" Gaenor asked warily.

"Oh, don't worry," Jimeleo assured her, "That was fourteen months ago. I'm free to leave, but by the end of the year I couldn't afford to walk out of town. I was getting just barely enough business to eat once a day, so I started working part time in a local lumberyard. Terrible hard work that was. I suppose I should have let them know I was leaving but as far as I can tell no one else ever did so it won't be any particular surprise. It's good to be on the road again!"

Adde was a Barian city on the border with Nimbria. Because of that all passengers were required to disembark and go through customs at the station in Adde. Passengers continuing on to Baropolis would then board the train again, but Artur, Gaenor and company were planning to buy horses and a carriage for their trip to Maxforn. The Customs official, a tall dark woman in a deep gray uniform and with her black hair cut short, asked them the usual questions in a bored manner until it came out they intended to ride directly for Drombra.

"You are headed for Drombra?" she asked, far more alert now.

"Yes," Artur replied politely. "We're on our way to Teliodena in Maxforn and it's the fastest route. Is there a problem?"

She didn't reply, but instead signaled to a pair of women who wore the deep brown uniforms of the Barian Amazon Legion. They came over quickly but without seeming to hurry. The customs woman was tall, but the Amazons were more so, taller even than Artur by a few inches. "Problem?" the one with a sergeant's stripes asked.

“They’re planning to go to Drombra,” the customs official reported.

“I didn’t realize that was illegal,” Artur commented dryly.

“It isn’t, sir,” the sergeant Amazon replied. “All of you, please come with us” The Amazon Legionaries led them away from the customs booth and to a room upstairs in the train station. “Wait here please,” the Sergeant told them and closed the door behind them.

“I’ll bet that door is locked again,” Elena commented worriedly.

“I’d be disappointed in the efficiency of the Azamon legion if it isn’t,” Artur commented.

“What do you mean, Senator?” Elena asked.

“I don’t know what the problem is, Elena,” he replied, “but my guess is that relations between Baria and Drombra could be warmer than they are at present. It’s the only reason I can think of why Baria’s most elite soldiers are on duty in a customs station. In a case like that they probably routinely interrogate anyone planning to travel to Drombra. I doubt it’s anything worth worrying about. Once we convince them we are just passing through and have no affiliation with Drombra, they’ll let us continue on our way.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t have mentioned that was where we were going,” Elena commented.

“No, that might have made it worse,” Artur told her. “When we reached the Drombran border they would have asked why we hadn’t stated our intention of traveling there on entering Baria. Better to get that over at the start. At least we cannot be accused of entering under false pretenses.”

“So we just sit and wait?” Vito asked.

“I suppose we could try breaking out with magic,” Gaenor replied sarcastically, “but I’ve already had to fight my way across two or three kingdoms once. I hope you’ll forgive me if I don’t try it again.” She pulled out a notebook and glance through some of the notes, then started writing again.

They were held in that room all night and kept there except for occasional sanitary breaks during which they were allowed out only one at a time and kept under heavy guard. They were eating a sparse breakfast when the door opened and the sergeant stuck her head in to request that Artur come with her. He got up and followed her out of the room. Gaenor continued writing in her notebook and a few minutes later Elena found her journal and stated writing too. Cornellya pulled out some spell tools and cast a variety of light spells. It looked as though she was just playing, but when Jimeleo asked, she replied, “I’m working on fine control. I started with a single light and then caused it to split into several identical spheres. Now I’m placing ever smaller spheres of light within each one.”

“You could accomplish all that with a single spell,” Jimeleo pointed out.

“I could yes, but that isn’t the point of the exercise,” Cornellya told him. “I’m casting many individual spells and getting them to mesh. It’s much harder than constructing a single complex spell.”

A half hour later the door opened again. Artur did not return, but this time the sergeant had Vito follow her out of the room. The others continued finding ways to keep busy. Gaenor stopped working on her notebook and instead started writing a letter to Tallicia in Wahton. Cornellya eventually tired of her exercise and instead picked up one of the texts Gaenor had bought for Elena. Jimeleo started pacing

around the room, but didn't keep it up for long when the sergeant returned to take him off to wherever the others had gone.

"What's happening?" Elena asked worriedly.

"I think they're interrogating us all one at a time," Gaenor explained, "to make sure our stories are the same."

"What if they aren't?" Elena asked.

"They will be," Gaenor assured her. "When it is your turn, just tell them the truth as far as you know it. Don't make anything up. If they ask you something you don't know the answer to, just say you don't know."

It was Gaenor's turn next. She felt none of the calmness she had advised Elena to feel, but was determined not to show her fear as she followed the tall uniformed women down the hall into another room. The interrogation room was barely more than a large closet, but it had room enough for three wooden chairs and a small table. The chair Gaenor was told to sit in had marks on its arms where manacles had at times held occupants in place. Gaenor took heart at the fact that the Amazons did not feel the need to bind her to the chair.

Waiting in the room was another Amazon whose insignia Gaenor could not identify, but she guessed this woman was an officer. The two guards who escorted Gaenor here waited outside the room and the questions began the moment the door closed.

"I am Captain Naria Rokenschant," she informed Gaenor flatly. It was obviously required of her to introduce herself. "Your name?"

"Gaenor of Narmouth," Gaenor replied, then added quickly, "That's in Mishanda."

Captain Naria nodded and wrote that down. "No titles?"

"'Lady of the Court' is the full title, but it's usually just shortened to 'Lady.'"

"Why didn't you mention that when I asked your name?" the captain pressed.

"It's not part of my name, just an indicator of rank. It sounds grander than it is. Actually it's just the equivalent of a knighthood for women and I was only elevated to the gentry a few months ago. I guess I still don't think of myself as a 'Lady.'"

"Quite unusual," the captain remarked. "I've met other recently ennobled people. Generally they go out of their way to let me know their titles and rank and are more than just a bit full of themselves as well." Gaenor didn't know what to say to that so she said nothing. "So, Lady Gaenor, what is your business in Baria?"

"Minimal, Captain," Gaenor replied. "We're on our way to Teliodena to confer with an adept known as Sarmuel the Sorcerer. Baria just happens to be along the way, although I wouldn't be surprised if Artur bought a fair amount of tobacco while we are here. It's hard to find back home."

Captain Naria made another note and asked, "You are adept yourself?"

"I am," Gaenor replied. "Oh no," she added seeing a familiar look in the captain's eye, "You don't want to see a trick do you?"

"You get a lot of that?" Captain Naria asked.

"I do. Oh very well, here," Gaenor sighed. She pulled out her flint and steel and cast a quick light spell, but modified it to circle the small room light before fading out. "By the way," she added, "don't ever let an adept use these tools if you expect trouble." She put the flint and steel down on the table closer to Naria than herself.

"Why not?" Captain Naria asked.

"I could have easily reduced you to a small pile of ash with these same tools and with an even shorter incantation. Actually, there is no aspect of magic that isn't dangerous in some way. That's why students are fully trained before being initiated and allowed to cast their first spell."

"And yet you leave these tools in my keeping?" Naria asked coolly, although Gaenor thought she detected some degree of unease in the large woman's eyes.

"A gesture of good faith," Gaenor shrugged, although she kept to herself the fact that if she wanted to kill the Amazon captain there were several means at hand still within her reach at least two of which she could use with little if any chance of the captain being able to stop her in time.

Captain Naria swallowed hard, but a moment later came back as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened. "Who are the other two females with you?"

"Cornellya Vasylya is Artur's goddaughter," Gaenor began.

"She's not even human," Naria pointed out.

"No, she's a vari. The Vieri live in the Parch which is where Artur fled when Emperor Lusius ordered him killed twenty-five years or so ago. He lived in their Village for two years or so and befriended her parents. That's why her name is almost Cilben."

Captain Naria paused a while to write all that down. She then proceeded to ask a number of questions about the Vieri. After several of them Gaenor was forced to admit, "I don't really know. I was only in the Village a short time. You'll have to ask Cornellya."

"All right. What about the other one? Elena, is that her name?"

"Elena Carolena. She's my student and originally comes from Olaka."

"Olaka? Where is that?" Naria asked.

"It's an island off the coast due west of here," Gaenor replied. "That's where I met her."

"She's a bit young by Cilben standards," Naria pointed out. "Why did her parents allow her to leave with you?"

"She is underage," Gaenor admitted, "but she has no parents. She was living on the charity of the people of Olaka, for what that was worth. When we left she stowed away and we didn't find her until we had

roundedCapeNimbre .”

“How did a nice young lady from Mishanda happen to become a chief among the Temi?” Captain Naria asked suddenly.

“Where did you hear that?” Gaenor asked.

“It’s in your dossier.”

“Really? Me? How did you even know you would need such knowledge of me in Adde? This isn’t someplace I might normally have come if it hadn’t been for an unplanned trip to Boraedne.”

“I’ve had time to send to Baropolis for the information,” Captain Naria told her. “The Amazon files include data on all persons of note in the world.”

“Since when am I a person of note?” Gaenor asked.

“According to this, you are one of only a handful of female adepts in the world and an acknowledged genius in the field of magic. Further you are the first woman to be granted a knighthood in the very male-dominated northern kingdoms. If that doesn’t make you a person of note, then the fact you have been adopted by the Temi, a people who hold themselves apart from all others, certainly does.”

“It began in Firdan,” Gaenor told her. She proceeded to tell Captain Naria how Artur had been forced to leave the Firdani coronation when the Cliben ambassador had hired the Ridec clan to kill him and they had made their way across Firdan and Gostrina. She explained how Leracus had challenged them and their nearly fatal trek across the Parch.

“You did all that with magic,” Captain Naria.

“Some, but Artur was rapidly losing his ability and I was not yet adept. Any magic I used was stored in amulets. However it’s a good thing I had them because I was damned lucky the one time I was forced to fight with a sword.”

“You fought a Temi swordmaster and lived?” This time there was awe in the captain’s voice.

“It’s not something I would do from choice, but I was more than a little crazy with worry about Artur,” Gaenor replied.

“I would hope not,” Naria replied. “Oh, hell! This is ridiculous. I’m just going through the motions and have since I verified Senator Arturus’s identity.”

“Well, if that’s the case, I hope you’ll go gently with Elena. She’s sick with worry that you’ll have us killed or something.”

“No, I think I’ll stop here,” Naria decided. She slid the flint and steel back toward Gaenor, who picked them up and put them back in the special pocket of her purse. “The four of you I have spoken to have essentially told me the same stories so not only is Senator Arturus who he says he is and therefore an honored foreign dignitary, but I’m satisfied you aren’t spying on us for King Bourinda of Drombra. Besides, we need to be on the next train for Baropolis and you lot deserve decent meal and a lot of apologies before we leave.”

Two

“We can’t go to Baropolis,” Gaenor protested. “We need to get to Teliodena.”

“I understand, but the matter is out of my hands,” Captain Naria shrugged. “I’m under orders to deliver you to Her Majesty in Baropolis and it’s worth my life to not do so.”

“Look, we have nothing but respect for your queen,” Gaenor replied. “But we really don’t have time for social calls.”

“This matter is no mere social call,” Captain Naria informed her. “It is a matter of international security.”

“Tell me about it,” Gaenor requested.

“Sorry. That goes leagues beyond my orders. You’ll have to wait until we’re in Baropolis. Queen Jallito will tell you everything you need to know.”

“Am I the only one who writes to people?” Gaenor complained.

“Could be,” Naria told her. “Royalty like to talk directly to people.”

A little while later, they were all enjoying an early dinner, although Cornellya and Gaenor were spending as much time calming Elena down as they were eating. Elena had remained outwardly calm until the sergeant opened the door the next time and then she broke down and started sobbing. When the sergeant tried to comfort her, however, she panicked and tried to run away. She got out the door and ran straight into Gaenor returning from the interrogation. Elena, still sobbing, put her arms around Gaenor and held on for dear life.

“Hey!” she gasped. “Calm down. Everything’s okay now. We’ll have a decent meal then we’re all off for Baropolis.”

“I thought we were going to Teliodena,” Elena replied, starting to release her grip.

“Just a detour,” Gaenor assured her. “That seems to happen to us all the time. Detours and surprises. So we’ll go to Baropolis and talk to the queen. After that we’ll continue on again.” Silently, she added, *Hopefully.*

Another long train ride followed the River Bar through grasslands and tobacco fields. The tobacco was in full flower and the scented blooms filled the air. In all, it was a pleasant journey as they headed toward the end of the Tandra-Baropolis rail line.

After a long nap to make up for the lack of sleep they had suffered the night before, Gaenor spent more time with Elena. Today they were discussing basic chemistry and the elements. Gaenor had purchased a fairly new text in Tandra and was delighted to see that two new elements, rubidium and cesium, had been added to the periodic table, bringing the total of known elements to fifty-one.

“Even though we have not yet found the elements that fit into the open spaces,” Gaenor explained to Elena, “some of their properties can be deduced by their positions in the table.” She went on into detail, having read that section in the text only a few days before, until she noticed Elena was staring out the

window.

“What are those?” Elena asked.

The train was passing through an area of tall grass, but in the distance near some odd-looking trees were several incredibly large brownish-grey animals. “I believe they are elephants,” Gaenor told her, staring out at the incredible creatures. “I’ve only seen them in picture books,” she added.

“We have quite a few of them,” Captain Naria informed them from a nearby seat. “They range across Baria and into northern Nimbria and most of Drombra and there are even a few in Maxform.

“Are those male, female or a mixed group?” Gaenor asked. “Can you tell from here?”

“They travel in matriarchal groups, each one led by the eldest female. That is why the Amazon Legion uses the elephant as our symbol. The adult males are usually solitary creatures, joining the females only when they are ready to mate. This group definitely looks female. Yes, see there are some young calves, mostly hidden in the tall grass.”

“Are there many of them?” Elena asked.

“If you ask the tobacco farmers there are too many, but actually there are fewer each year as hunters kill them for their ivory. There is a movement among the Amazon Legion to have them declared a protected species, although we may have to settle for hunting quotas.”

They did not arrive in Baropolis until well after dark, but the city was well lit with gas lamps. Gaenor hadn’t actually seen any part of Adde beyond the rail station, but Baropolis was a city of red brick that reminded her of Misha. The buildings of Baropolis may have seemed homelike, but the people were not. Mishandans were a fair-skinned people and while Gaenor’s hair was dark brown, light brown and blond hair were actually more common there. Barians were dark-skinned and black hair was the norm. They reminded her slightly of the traveling merchant Tomasi Kaguru, although their facial features in general were finer and their hair straighter.

It was also in Baropolis that Gaenor saw that the Amazon Legionaries were not typical of their people. The Amazons had been chosen for their height and build, but the normal Barian men and women averaged slightly shorter than Gaenor. Many of them were wearing uniforms, she noted, although these were not the deep brown of the Amazon Legion. Instead these were green and butternut. However, in spite of the large number of military people in the capital city, the overall atmosphere was one of a great party. There were loud crowds in every tavern they passed, shouting and singing and, in some cases, dancing and a lot of happy-sounding people on the streets.

“Is this a holiday?” Gaenor asked Captain Naria. The captain had arranged for them to ride in a large black carriage with the Barian arms emblazoned on the doors. There were a few steam-driven vehicles on the streets, but this carriage was pulled by a team of horses.

“Hmm? No, anything but,” the captain replied.

“But the crowds...”

“Baria is on a war footing, Lady Gaenor. It’s a very nervous time and any of us might be ordered to fight at any minute. Many people find some form of release in this sort of revelry, although you will never find one of my sisters engaging in such nonsense, not when we’re on alert and never in uniform.”

“With whom are you at war?” Gaenor asked.

Captain Naria started. “I’ve already said too much, Lady Gaenor. I would take it as a special favor if you don’t let anyone know I said even that much.”

“I never heard a thing,” Gaenor replied dryly.

They continued on until they reached a large grey stone building in the center of the town. Aside from regularly spaced towers along the perimeter wall, it was no taller than its neighbors, but it covered several of the city’s blocks and all the streets either circled or radiated out from it. “This,” announced Captain Naria, “is the royal palace.”

“The Harrace,” Artur added, naming the palace.

“I thought you hadn’t been here before, Senator,” Naria commented.

“I haven’t,” Artur admitted, “but Baria has long been a favored trade partner with Cilbe and Cilben children grow up hearing about the wonders of Baria, Maxforn and our other neighbors. The Harrace is listed among the wonders of the world, and I would say it is at least as impressive as the Temple of Jube and the Great Bridge of Misha.”

“The Pyramid to Nauo in Es may top all three,” Gaenor commented, “but I suppose there has to be one more impressive than the rest.”

The drive brought them up to the main gate of the Harrace where they were met by half a dozen Amazon guards in ornate, gold-trimmed uniforms. Captain Naria got out of the carriage and spoke with them briefly before the gate was opened and the carriage was allowed to drive into the palace complex.

Gaenor had seen several palaces by now and thought of a central complex as a normal part of such an edifice. However, the Harrace had no such feature. She learned later that there were several carefully kept gardens within the expanse, but there was no large and open area into which the carriage could drive. Instead the carriage entered a tunnel that went downward on a gently descending ramp and into the very heart of the palace complex. It finally came to a halt in a gas lamp-lighted, cave-like area beneath the rest of the palace. They got out even as palace servants were unloading their luggage.

“Your things will be waiting for you in your rooms, I am sure,” Naria promised them. “I’m under orders to escort you directly to the throne room. This way.”

They climbed a wide set of stairs up two flights until they reached a brightly lit hallway. Naria led them through that hall and down two others before they reached a broad set of double doors with a pair of men in green and butternut.

“Senator Arturus Cornellian Marno,” Naria told the men imperiously, “Lady Gaenor of Narmouth and their party to see the queen.” While one of the men entered the throne room she turned to the others and explained, “I don’t think Lady Gaenor is expected, but I am having her announced as a courtesy to a visiting person of a certain rank. I meant no disrespect to the rest of you, it is just our custom. Had any of you been expected or had direct business with Her Majesty, I assure you I’d have made sure you were announced by name.”

“They may enter,” could be heard through the doors. Just then the doors were opened wide and Naria

told them to approach the queen.

The throne room was a long hall with rows of brightly painted pillars along the walls. Between the pillars were bas reliefs, which had also been emphasized by being painted. The floor was a long and beautiful mosaic of members of the Amazon Legion and the ceiling appeared to have been covered with gold leaf. At the far end of the room, the queen was seated on a backless chair. It was difficult to tell for certain, but Gaenor thought she was not much taller than Cornellya. Her skin was nearly as dark as Cornellya's as well. She had a heart-shaped face and kept her black hair nearly as short as the Amazon Legionaries did. She wore a long dress that looked a little like the green and butternut uniforms of her regular army and a simple golden circlet, that Gaenor learned was considered an informal crown; the formal one weighing several pounds and covered with gems.

"Welcome to Baria, Senator," Queen Jallito greeted him, "and you Lady Gaenor. You honor our court with your presence."

"It is our honor to accept your invitation," Artur replied.

"You are too kind, considering our Captain Naria forced you to come here," Jallito remarked, breaking through the polite fiction. "We assure you we would never have done any such thing in a more normal time. Oh, we would certainly have invited you to the Harrace, but not by coercion."

"Captain Naria was quite polite," Artur assured the queen, "at least she was after establishing my identity. So in what manner may we be of assistance to Your Majesty?"

"That is a matter best discussed in private," Jallito told him, "and you must be tired after your long and unplanned journey. Let us discuss this tomorrow morning in a more comfortable venue?"

"As Your Majesty wishes, of course," Artur replied with a bow.

They met again over breakfast the next morning. Gaenor was surprised that Queen Jallito chose to break her fast in private, rather than surrounded by the members of her court. This room had walls of carved panels and overlooked one of the palace's gardens. The beauty of that garden was such that Gaenor found herself ignoring her meal to look out the large window.

"It is beautiful, isn't it, Lady Gaenor?" the queen asked. "I much prefer to eat here than in the banquet room. You may not have been here long enough to tell, but this is not a quiet palace even at the best of times and now I swear we are just one step from bedlam. Did you sleep well?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. Quite well," Gaenor replied.

"No need to be formal," Jallito told her, "not in this room at least. Just call me Jallito while we are here. I practically grew up in this room, it was always my favorite, so this is where I come whenever I need to stop being queen for a few minutes."

Gaenor then noticed Jallito had not used the royal plural since arriving in that room. "Then thank you for seeing us here."

"No, dear. Thank you for coming. But my manners are abysmal. Would you do me the honor of introducing the rest of your party?"

"Of course," Gaenor nodded. "These are the noted adepts Jimeleo of Laria and Vitautis of Senne." She

began by pointing out the people to the queen's left and then continued around the table. "You know Artur, of course. This is his goddaughter Cornellya Vasylya and my student Elena Carolena."

The queen nodded to each in turn as they were introduced, but not surprisingly her eyes kept returning to Cornellya, except that when Gaenor took another look at the vari she noticed Cornellya had used magic to hide her ears again. "Why are you doing that?" Jallito asked. "Hiding your ears, I mean?"

Cornellya's hands shot up to her head. "You can see them?"

"I told you it was likely to happen," Gaenor told her. "Remember how Verika of Candro saw you when you were completely invisible."

"I can," Jallito replied at the same time. "It is like looking at two paintings, each with one eye, and there is a slight difference between them."

"You can see through illusion?" Cornellya asked.

"I suppose that is what I am doing," Jallito replied calmly, "although it feels more like I am seeing something that is not there. It has been a handy talent on a few occasions, although not very often. I don't usually let on that I've spotted such an illusion since it would be useless to let an enemy know my talent. Besides, usually the illusion is being used to cover something the other person is just embarrassed about, but your ears, my dear, are quite becoming and you look so much better with them. There is something wrong about your face without them."

"My mother always says they are my best feature," Cornellya agreed, letting the illusion fall away, "but it is a bit disconcerting to have people always staring at me."

"Men always stare at a beautiful woman," Jallito told her. "It is their nature. Accept it as your due and trust me, it isn't the shape of your ears they are staring at."

"And what are the women staring at?" Cornellya countered.

"Potential competition, perhaps?" the queen suggested with a smile. "But we really must get down to business. Senator Arturus, I am unsure of the protocol here. Does one congratulate you on having been dictator or having stopped being dictator?"

"In my case, for managing to not be emperor," Artur chuckled. "You might congratulate me for having my son chosen as emperor, however, although I'm not sure I did him any favors there."

Jallito laughed politely and replied, "I think you would have been an excellent emperor, Senator, however, I am thankful you chose not to be for it affords me the chance to ask a favor of you that I might not have been able to without sacrificing the autonomy of Baria to the Cilben Empire."

"Perhaps not," Artur replied. "I am on record as being opposed to the annexation of Baria, when old Girdecus suggested it."

"I was new to the throne when that happened, Senator, and feared the Cilben Legions may well have decimated this land, so I am in your debt for that as well."

"Cilbe may have been able to conquer Baria, Jallito," Artur replied, "but only at great cost to herself; far too great a cost and at no appreciable gain."

“Still I propose to put myself even deeper in your personal debt, Senator.”

“Let’s not speak of debt, Your Majesty,” Artur replied courteously. “Ask your favor and if it is honorable that I grant it, I will.”

Jallito swallowed hard, cleared her throat and then spoke, “You have noticed the preponderance of women and men in uniform since you arrived in Baria?” she asked.

“I noticed them,” he replied, “although, never having been in Baria before, I was not aware it was unusual.”

“It is,” Jallito assured him. “I have been forced to mobilize all our reserve forces. Have you ever heard of Badnir?”

“Can’t say that I have,” Artur admitted. “Is Badnir a who or a what?”

“Badnir is a small district in northeast Baria or northern Drombra, depending on which side of the fence you happen to be living. It has always been a disputed land, although until recently there was nothing worth fighting over and both Baria and Drombra were content to abide by the armistice line that was established three centuries ago. How were we to know that the area was rich in sapphires and rubies, especially the star gems?”

“That could be troubling, Jallito,” Artur agreed. “Are a few gemstones really worth going to war over?”

“Of course they are not,” Jallito retorted immediately, “but this isn’t just about sparkling rocks.”

“It never is, really,” Artur agreed. “It’s about prestige and respect. It’s about what the Tinds call ‘saving face,’ isn’t it? You cannot afford to appear weak and by allowing His Drombran Majesty full access to the gems and the revenues therefrom would do just that.”

“I knew you would understand,” the queen told him. “It takes a ruler to understand another sometimes.”

“Surely there must be room for compromise,” Gaenor put in.

“Of course there is,” Jallito agreed, “at least there is as far as I am concerned, although I cannot speak for King Bourinda. He is young and has been king just over a year now. Relations between our countries had been uneasy before this, mostly because he is still trying to establish himself as a strong leader in the eyes of his people. It is normal enough and in time, I’m sure it would have passed, but now...”

“Which side of the armistice line are these gems on?” Gaenor asked. “Perhaps a truce can be established on that count.”

“That is part of the problem, Lady Gaenor,” Queen Jallito replied. “Badnir is very rough country and difficult to survey. Nobody is really certain just where on the map the new mines lie. They could be on one side or the other or even exactly on the line. Oh, there are times I wish we had never been separated from our brother kingdom.”

“Brother kingdom?” Elena asked in spite of herself. She had been quiet up until now, being utterly in awe of the queen and afraid of embarrassing Gaenor by misbehaving.

To Elena's intense relief, Queen Jallito smiled at her. "Over two thousand years ago, or so the legend goes, Baria and Drombra were a single kingdom called Ambador until a pair of twins, one boy and one girl, were born to the then king and queen. The law at the time was that the eldest child, regardless of gender would inherit the throne, but supposedly the midwife refused to say which twin had been born first. I've always been a bit skeptical about that, but that's how the story goes. So both twins claimed the throne on the death of their parents. This led to the division of ancient Ambador. There were a number of notable wars between the two realms in the early centuries after our formations, but since then relations have generally been cordial with only the occasional tensions and incidents that have marked our history, although we have never formally declared peace."

"So, what is it you would like us to do, Majesty?" Artur asked.

"I'd like you to act as my emissary and deliver a letter from me to King Bourinda," Jallito replied.

"Do they shoot the messenger in Drombra?" Artur asked sardonically. "What is in the letter?"

"It describes my proposal for an equitable disposition of the gems from Badnir," she told him, then went on to describe her plan.

Three

Leaving Baropolis they also left the speed of modern conveyance. However Queen Jallito did provide transportation for the party in the form of a royal carriage and assigned Captain Naria to see them safely to Omb. It would also be her responsibility to eventually return the carriage to Baropolis. They wasted no time in their journey to Omb, but were forced to do so at a slower pace and consequently had more time to view the fields of tobacco and on two occasions they spotted elephants again.

Pursuant to the possibility of war, there were frequent road blocks as they drew closer to the Drombra border. There were traffic slow-downs at these road blocks as travelers were forced to endure identity checks and searches of their belongings. However, by traveling in a royal carriage, the adepts, as an official delegation from the queen, were exempt from these questions and searches. Finally, after several days of travel, they arrived at the Drombran border.

The Drombran officials were never actually rude, nor did they break diplomatic protocol by searching the adepts' belongings, but they did nothing to speed them along their way either. Each member of the party was questioned separately in a process that took two hours. By the time they finished up and were cleared to enter Drombra it was nearly dark and they were required to drive until well after dark before reaching an inn where they could stay the night.

Artur discovered the inn served what he called a quite acceptable porter and he stayed up late with Vito and Jimeleo playing a Wanlarian card game, while Gaenor, Cornellya and Elena learned a local form of bowling played on a long polished table with flat, heavy metal disks. Naria sat at a table by herself while the other women were playing the game. Games did not interest the Amazon captain and in her deep brown uniform the locals dared not approach her unless she signaled. After a few games, Gaenor decided to join Naria for a while.

“Is it always like this for you?” she asked.

“Do you mean, ‘Do people always try to avoid me?’” Naria translated. “To an extent, yes. The life of an Amazon is not a lonely one, however. Strangers avoid me, of course, but I have two families that love me. One is the one I was born to and the other is my Amazon sisters. I am rarely able to make friends with those outside the Legion, but many Amazons marry and have children so not every man is intimidated by the brown uniform.”

“You don’t seem all that frightening to me,” Gaenor opined.

“You were not this comfortable near me when we met,” Naria pointed out.

“I had a lot of things to worry about. No offense intended but a powerfully built woman in a brown uniform wasn’t even a consideration.”

“You’re an unusual person, Lady Gaenor, or perhaps it is just that you are not from around here so you haven’t heard all the cautionary tales mothers tell their children about what happens to people who annoy an Amazon.”

“I haven’t,” Gaenor admitted, “but I have heard all the stories they tell about angering an adept. I don’t suppose there’s much difference. Both sorts of stories say, ‘If you anger a powerful person they will kill you or worse,’ right?”

“Pretty much,” Naria agreed, “and I suppose you’ve heard the tales they tell about the Temi?”

“Not all of them, but then a little over a year ago I’d never even heard of the Temi,” Gaenor remarked.

Naria shuddered. “If there is any group of people who make me nervous, it is the Temi,” she admitted.

“They are formidable,” Gaenor agreed, “but once I got to know them, I found they were no different from anyone else. They love their children, they appreciate fine art, they love music and many are superb musicians and they especially love to listen to stories. They most love to hear stories about themselves, of course. Everybody does, I think. They also love hearing new stories of all kinds however. Being assassins and doing other dirty work is what they do for a living. It does not make them who they are, however.”

The next morning they continued on toward Omb. The Drombrans did not have as many security road blocks as the Barians did, but Gaenor did spot military encampments alongside the roads while she had seen none in Baria.

Captain Naria was not impressed. “They’re being foolish, showing us the strength of their forces so openly like this. You wouldn’t catch Baria making such an open display, placing her troops where anyone could see and count them.”

“What if these are just the extras, the ones they could not hide away?” Vito suggested.

“Hah! Not a chance! It’s just a basic strategy difference between Baria and Drombra. They think to intimidate us with a show of strength, but we know from history that Drombrans seem to bluster and threaten the most when they have little to back their threats up with.”

“Have they been blustering much this time around?” Artur asked.

“Not as much as we might have expected,” Naria admitted, “but still more than we have.”

“So maybe they do have some strength to back those threats up with,” Artur replied. “These are not empty tents set up along the roadside to impress visitors. From what I can tell, there aren’t a lot of travelers being allowed to go between Baria and Drombra at the moment, so maybe King Bourinda is just stationing troops in locations from which they can be most rapidly deployed? Face it, they will move more quickly along the roads than by going across tobacco fields.”

“You could be right, Senator,” Naria admitted after some thought. “You were a general once, weren’t you?”

“That was a long time ago,” Artur replied.

“Some things you don’t forget, though.”

“Perhaps. I do know,” Artur told her, “that Queen Jallito is worried about this impending conflict as any good ruler should be and while she has faith in the ability of her armies, she would rather not have to send them into battle if a peaceful settlement can be arranged. I don’t know this young King Bourinda yet, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he is similarly worried and for the same reasons. The trick will be to present Bourinda an option in which he won’t look like he’s backing down.”

They continued on to Omb. Where Baropolis was a sprawling city with no trace of her ancient walls, the builders of Omb had chosen to maintain the city’s now antiquated defenses and built the buildings inside the walls an extra few stories. There were some residential neighborhoods outside the walls, but from the direction they were approaching only a few small buildings stood between the adepts and the main gate.

There was a contingent of the Royal Guards on duty at the Omb city gates. Several carts and carriages were waved through the gateway until the Barian carriage’s turn. At that point a barrier was lowered in their path and they were asked to disembark from the vehicle. Captain Naria stopped the others from doing so, but she exited to confront the Drombran guards.

“They will certainly not stand for your inspection, Lieutenant,” Naria told the leader firmly. She stood half a head over the Guard lieutenant and used the advantage to intimidate the man. “These people are the duly appointed legation from Her Royal Majesty, Queen Jallito II to His Royal Majesty, King Bourinda IV. Do not dare to bar their path.” It was a forceful speech but it demanded actions beyond the scope of the young officer and he knew it.

“Captain, please forgive me, but I cannot allow you to pass until I have heard from my superiors. However, I will send word ahead with all due speed if you will wait patiently.”

“This is unheard of,” Naria stormed, but it was to no avail. However the lieutenant’s word was good and they only had to wait a quarter of an hour before an honor guard arrived to escort the legates into the city with full honors. The captain of the guard formally apologized for making them wait and was so polite to all of them, including Captain Naria, that she was forced to forgive the Drombrans and even smiled at their captain once.

The streets of Omb were neither straight nor wide, but someone had obviously arranged to clear the way for the party as they made their way to Bourinda’s palace. The people of Omb stood at the sides of the streets and watch them pass, unsure what to make of the Barian carriage. On some streets the people

watched them with eerie silence, but on some blocks there was polite applause. Such a positive reaction was sparse when they first entered the city, but after a while the applause grew so that the cheers were fairly loud as they entered the palace gate.

The Palace of Omb was the only point of similarity between the capital cities Omb and Baropolis. The Omb Palace was not absolutely identical to the Harrace but it had been designed by the same architect. Like Harrace, the entrance led down into a subterranean chamber where the party was able to disembark and climb a wide staircase up into the living areas of the palace. Unlike in Baropolis, the party was brought directly to their suite and allowed to make themselves comfortable before the king would see them later in the day.

Gaenor and Cornellya were testing Elena with algebra problems an hour later when the suite's door opened quietly and a young black man in his early twenties, but not otherwise particularly distinguished, slipped into the room without their noticing. Vito and Jimeleo were sleeping in their rooms and Naria was using the suite's bath. Artur was reading on a long couch and saw the man enter the room, but something about his manner suggested he was more interested in observing, so in turn Artur observed him as well.

Elena had no trouble memorizing long passages in the various texts Gaenor had purchased for her, but mathematics was more than just memorizing all the multiplication tables and the concept of the variable 'x' eluded her. She didn't realize just how far she had come nor just how amazing it was that she had arrived with such speed. Instead the slippery concept kept dancing just out of reach.

"So in order to keep the equation in balance I need to divide by four on both sides?" Elena asked tentatively.

"That's right," Gaenor told her. "What ever you do on one side of the equation must be duplicated on the other. Once you do that, you'll still have several steps to go, but the idea is to get 'x' alone on one side and whatever is left on the other side will be the value of 'x'."

"So 'x' isn't really a variable," Elena concluded. "It's just an unknown value."

"Correct, but this is just the simple stuff comparatively. Once you master this we'll move on to multiple variables. Then you'll have deduce a range of values. Remind me to pick up some graph paper somewhere, so you'll be able to chart the results."

"Oh, I always hated those equations," the young man interrupted, startling them. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to scare you, I just didn't want to interrupt the lesson."

"King Bourinda, I presume?" Artur said, at last, rising from his seat.

"You knew?" Bourinda asked.

"It seemed an obvious guess," Artur admitted. "Who else would enter so surreptitiously? A servant would have cleared his throat or attracted our attention in some other way and most nobles would have done so as well. But the king might feel at home in his own palace enough to just enter without knocking."

"I should have knocked," Bourinda admitted. "Actually I should have had you summoned to my throne room, I guess, but I thought perhaps it might be best to just talk with you all informally before we had to do so in earnest. May I sit?"

“Actually I think we’re supposed to ask if we may,” Gaenor pointed out.

“Forget that nonsense,” Bourinda told her, “well, in here at least.”

“Why is it that so many young kings are so anxious to cast formality aside?” Cornellya remarked.

“There aren’t a lot of people who will just talk to me any more,” Bourinda confessed. “I was hoping that since you speak with Queen Jallito’s voice we could chat.”

“All right,” Gaenor replied easily, “pull up a seat and we’ll chat. So how are the crops this year?”

“Hmm? Oh the tobacco did well enough although we aren’t sure of the quality of the crop yet. The grapes are doing very well and the peaches are wonderful, we’ll have some at dinner tonight. I’m afraid the wheat crop may not be all I’d like it to be, but... Hey, this is the same sort of thing my ministers talk to me about,” Bourinda protested.

“I imagine so,” Gaenor replied, “but it’s also the sort of small talk people make when they’re just passing the time of day. Another difference is that they’re telling you all that. Judging from the quality of your recital, I’d guess you hear about that a lot, don’t you?”

“I do. How about you. I can see right away you’re not originally from Baria. You’re as light-skinned as a Nimbrian, but your facial features are all wrong for that too.”

“Well, I’m from Mishanda,” Gaenor told him. “Elena here is from Olaka in the Cilben Empire and Cornellya normally lives in the Parch.”

“I didn’t know anyone lived in the Parch,” Bourinda told them, “and the only person I’ve ever met from Mishanda was a herald a few months ago.”

“That would be Sir Winniam,” Gaenor replied. “He does get around, doesn’t he? But don’t you at least know our names? I thought our credentials had been presented to you.”

“Not to me. I suppose someone would have eventually introduced me to you, but my advisors tell me I’m too busy to handle all these details myself,” Bourinda replied.

“Ah,” Artur interrupted, getting up and coming over to the table, “now there’s a problem. They are right that you have to let others handle the details, but as king you should be the one deciding who does what, not your advisors. Remember the derivation of the word. They’re advisors; they advise. They are not supposed to be making your decisions for you. That’s your job.”

“I suppose,” Bourinda replied uncertainly.

“And Artur here ought to know,” Gaenor informed the king, “considering he was the Dictator of Cilbe and his son is now emperor.”

“Senator Arturus?” Bourinda asked. “Really? They should have told me, I think.”

“Arturus Conellian Marno,” Artur introduced himself, “although in Mishanda I’m known as Artur the Southlander.”

“You’re no Southlander,” Bourinda laughed. “They’re as dark-skinned as I am.”

“No, but the average Mishandan wouldn’t know that,” Artur replied. “And since I was a bit mysterious about my origins at the time they just made an assumption and the name stuck. This is Lady Gaenor of Narmouth, my fiancée by the way, and Cornellya Vasylya, my goddaughter, and Elena Carolena, Gaenor’s apprentice.”

“Student,” Gaenor corrected him.

“What’s the difference, Gae? You may think of Elena as a student and she is, but you are also treating her as an apprentice. Oh,,” he paused as the door from the bath opened, “and this is Captain Naria Rockchant?” he ended uncertainly.

“Rokenschant,” both Gaenor and Naria corrected him.

“Of the Amazon Legion,” Artur continued. “Our other two companions, the master adepts, Vitautis of Senne and Jimeleo of Laria, are napping in their rooms.” However, King Bourinda was only half listening at that point, his eyes glued to Naria as she approached the table.

She noticed his attention and shrugged it off with a polite nod, the closest any Amazon Legionary would come to any form of bow or curtsy, even to their queen. “Your Majesty?” It was half question and half challenge.

“Oh, excuse me, Captain,” Bourinda apologized immediately, looking embarrassed.

“I overheard some of what Senator Arturus was telling Your Majesty,” she informed the king, “and he is right. You have to remember that you are the one who rules Drombra, not your advisors. Advisors, no matter how loyal, inevitably have their own agendas and will seek to further them even as they serve you. If left unchecked, their own plans will take precedence over yours. A strong ruler does not allow that to happen.”

“Thank you, captain, for your gentle instruction. The situation isn’t as simple as that, but what you say is true enough, I guess.”

“You guess?” she asked.

“I inherited my advisors along with the crown when my father died. They helped establish me in the eyes of my subjects. It would be exceedingly ungrateful to cast them aside now.”

“Did they tell you that?” Cornellya asked archly, then immediately looked uncomfortable, knowing she had not been polite.

“What my goddaughter is trying to ask, I think,” Artur put in. “is did they manage to convince you of their own indispensability? I don’t know these worthies, but I’ve never found a court in which there weren’t one or two people trying to be the power behind the throne. However, it would be presumptuous of us to try to do the same thing so we won’t,” he added with a pointed look at Cornellya. “That won’t stop us from trying to give a friend advice, however. We’re as meddlesome as anyone else.” He chuckled at that.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Bourinda replied, trying to mimic’s Artur’s tone. “So how do you all happen to be acting as Queen Jallitto’s emissaries?”

“We were in the right place at the right time,” Gaenor replied, “or maybe it was the wrong place and the wrong time.” She went on to explain how it had happened.

“You were traveling by rail?” Bourinda asked as she finished. “I’ve been wanting to get Nimbria to extend the service into Drombra, but my advisors are against it. They say it would ruin the economy by hurting the shipping industry.”

“How many of them have invested in ships and the cargo they carry?” Naria asked.

“Nearly all of them, I would think,” Bourinda replied easily. “Any one with money does. What does that have to do with it?”

Gaenor rolled her eyes. Could he really be that naïve? However it was Artur who pressed, “And what would happen to their investments if they are right about the shipping and the grain futures?”

“I suppose they would not make as much profit.”

“They could lose their entire investment,” Artur pointed out.

“Then maybe they should invest in the railroad instead,” Bourinda replied.

“Maybe,” Artur allowed, “but they know the shipping industry. The railroad they don’t know as well. It’s only natural they should want to remain with a business they know.”

“That still should not affect the advice they give me,” Bourinda replied defensively.

“If they are all perfectly honest and selfless, you are right,” Artur agreed easily.

“Honest and selfless?” Bourinda laughed. “You haven’t met these people, have you?”

“I don’t need to,” Artur chuckled, “I’ve met their philosophical relatives.”

“Oh,” Bourinda said as Artur’s words sunk in at last. “So you think they’re giving me advice that best suits their own business?”

“Maybe,” Artur nodded. “I don’t know what advice they’ve been giving you, of course, so I could be wrong.”

“I’ll think about that,” Bourinda told him.

“Your Majesty,” Elena began hesitantly, “I thought you wanted to just chat.”

“I do, why?”

“Somehow we keep getting back to all the things you were trying to escape,” Elena noted.

“So we do. You’re from Olaka? What was that like?”

“Not very nice,” Elena told him frankly. “That’s why I left. What was growing up in this palace like?”

“It wasn’t all that wonderful either,” Bourinda told her.

“I find that hard to believe,” Elena opined.

“You’ve never been a prince,” Bourinda replied. Elena looked down at herself and giggled. “or a princess,” he added embarrassedly.

“You’ve never been a penniless orphan forced to work for anyone who demanded it of you,” she countered once she got a hold of herself.

“That does sound pretty horrid,” Bourinda agreed. “Father was very strict and not particularly loving either. I don’t recall ever doing anything that pleased him.”

“What about your mother?” Elena asked.

“She was afraid of him as I was, I think, not that I saw much of her after the age of six. He had me trained in the army academy and that was hard enough on it’s own but I was three years younger than any of the other cadets in my class. He could have at least put me in the naval academy, I like boats, always did. We had a summer palace on the Gulf shore. Two weeks every summer was the closest to happiness I ever had. I learned early that if I pretended to want to understand naval tactics and strategies, I could spend most of the day sailing.”

“That sounds nice,” Elena told him. “I had a loft in a barn I used to go to when it all got too much to bear. I think old Willimus must have known I was there but he never let on. Sometimes he even gave me a meal without asking me to work for it. Not very often, but then it was more than anyone else did.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever even been in a barn,” Bourinda admitted.

“You haven’t missed all that much,” Elena assured him. “There are often mice and rats, although Willimus’ cats kept them down pretty much and there are always stinging flies and fleas and other vermin.”

“But you liked that barn?” he asked.

“It was better than scrubbing a floor while the mistress of the house beat me whenever it struck her fancy, yes.”

“What’s scrubbing floors like?” he wondered.

In answer, Elena glanced at the floor of the room they were in. “Feel free to try it. It’s good honest work and it will give you a real appreciation for being a king, I think.”

Cornellya had stopped paying attention to the conversation and was checking the equation they had been working on again. Gaenor had to stifle a laugh and when she glanced at Artur she saw he was amused as well. Of them all, only Naria was confused and maybe a little bothered by the exchange, as though she was trying to imagine her queen scrubbing floors and finding her imagination unable to meet the challenge.

“I’m fairly certain it would earn me another lecture concerning what is proper behavior for a king,” Bourinda replied at last.

“Try talking to my friend, Ibbet of Ander,” Gaenor suggested. “She’s affianced to the king of Mishanda,

at least she ought to be by now, and will be the next queen. There was a bad storm in Mishanda last spring and she spent a lot of the time helping the people of Ander repair their homes.”

“You mean like a carpenter?” Bourinda asked, confused.

“As a thatcher. The walls of the commoners’ houses survived well enough, but a lot of roofs were blown off. In Ander thatched roofs are still the norm. Since there was more work than the local thatchers could handle on their own, she learned the craft and helped out as well. She also helps plant crops in the spring and harvests in the fall.”

“A noblewoman?”

“The daughter of the Baron of Ander, yes,” Gaenor nodded.

“Remarkable,” Bourinda noted. “I think they would lock me up if I tried that, but it must be nice to be able to do that sort of thing.”

“If it makes you feel any better most of the noblemen seem to have taken up a new table game called Caroms,” Artur put in.

“I have a Caroms table,” Bourinda told him, “it was a gift to my father a few years ago from one of the ambassadors, from Pahn, I think, or maybe Sorvohn, but I don’t really know the rules of the game. You see we have the table and the balls, sticks and other paraphernalia, but no book of rules.”

“Gae can help you out there, she’s a master of the game,” Artur told him.

“No I’m not,” she denied, “but I do enjoy playing. Why don’t you show me your table. By the way did you know it is customary for Caroms players to address each other by their unadorned first names?”

“Is that so, Gae?” Bourinda asked.

“Of course, Bouri.”

Four

“Your Majesty,” a middle aged earl protested, “I really must object. You aren’t listening to anything we say.”

Gaenor and Bourinda had played Caroms deep into the night. Elena expressed an interest in the game and became an enthusiast as well. Naria tried her hand at it but while she was very good especially for a first time player she did not find the simple form of the game Gaenor was teaching very challenging and soon lost interest except to observe the others play. Gaenor concluded that Naria was like Artur in that respect, having such excellent eye-hand coordination that she honestly didn’t understand how others had to practice for hours or even years to be able to accomplish what she could naturally. Gaenor did point out some of the more complex bank shots and how accomplished players played games in which they were required. This interested Naria a bit, but she was content to watch most of the time.

The real accomplishment of the evening, however, was that Bourinda got a taste of what it was like to have real friends and it also started him thinking for himself. This new independence manifested almost

immediately when they met formally after breakfast the next morning to discuss Queen Jallito's proposal.

"Not really, no," Bourinda admitted. "So far all your advice has done was to get us into this mess, so your record is just a bit stinky if you ask me... us"

"But..." the earl tried again.

"Actually it's quite stinky whether you ask us or not," Bourinda snapped.

"Your Majesty," another noble was indignant, "it is not proper for a king to speak so to his loyal advisors."

"Duke Kirungo," Bourinda replied coldly, "You and your colleagues have been bullying and guiltning us into going along with your wishes ever since our father died. We can't help wonder what he would have done if one of you had tried to tell him what is and isn't proper for a king to do. Oh, wait a minute. Didn't Earl Hadduma do something like that five years ago? Now what happened to him?"

The council of advisors stirred uneasily. Earl Hadduma had simply disappeared one day while traveling back to his county seat. Bourinda had no idea what had happened, but from the reaction of the council it was obvious they did.

"We suggest you remember who is the king and who are the advisors in the future," Bourinda told them. "Remembering that the job of an advisor is to give advice might be intelligent as well. My lords, your job here is to see that we have the best possible advice to aid us in our job of protecting the realm and people of Drombra. Part of that protection is keeping the realm out of unnecessary wars and part of it is finding ways to bring the benefits of progress to the people. While it is not on our agenda today, we wish to inform you that we will be sending word to our ambassador in Tandra to reopen negotiations concerning the proposed rail service. We see the rail as a new portal into prosperity for Drombra. If you see this as damaging to your current investments, you may wish to reevaluate your portfolios. Now let's get back to the proposal by our royal cousin."

There was another gasp from the councilors. This was the first time in generations any relationship to Baria had been admitted by the monarch of Drombra. After the gasp, they erupted in a new string of angry protests. Bourinda nodded at Captain Naria, who had been standing near one of the doors in her deep brown uniform. Naria opened the door to the council chamber and three pairs of Drombran guards entered the room and stationed themselves around the perimeter. The Councilors immediately quieted and looked around nervously.

"Thank you, Captain," Bourinda told her warmly. "Please join us at the table now? Your queen's letter requests us to accept all members of your party as her legates."

"Your Majesty," Naria replied, "I am sure she did not intend to include me as anything but a guard of honor."

"Doesn't say that here," Bourinda remarked, waving the letter. "And since your regular ambassador was recalled a month ago it seems only fitting that there be at least one loyal Barian in these negotiations."

Naria wasn't happy about that, but could see no way to refuse. She sat down and Artur began immediately. "Her Majesty, as you all know, wishes to propose a truce effective immediately. She proposes that both Baria and Drombra pull their armed forces back from their common boundary to the positions in which they were a year ago before the recent discovery of gemstones in Badir."

“And what good will that do?” Duke Kirungo asked belligerently.

“Your grace, I’m a little out of practice at holding my patience. Not having had to deal with the Senate for a quarter of a century or so, I have been free to speak and act as I feel proper without having to compromise with anyone. Consequently there is very little to keep me from pointing out that Imperial Cilbe is watching both Baria and Drombra very closely because the Empire has no desire to have a war going on just over her border.”

“Do you mean to say that Cilbe would send the Legions to intervene?” Duke Kirungo asked.

“I mean that it is in Cilbe’s interest that Baria and Drombra be at peace. Make of that what you will.” Artur paused to let that sink in. In truth he had no idea if Colchicus was watching the situation or not. He did recall that Sir Winniam had mentioned something about it before he left Cilbe, although the details, if any slipped his mind. “Now, shall we continue with the rest of Queen Jallito’s proposal or would you like to waste some more time first?”

“All right,” Artur continued testily. “The queen also proposes that both kingdoms agree to export all the gems from the disputed mines and split the profits.”

“And this will be overseen by a commission composed of an equal number of Barians and Drombrans,” King Bourinda added.

“Precisely,” Artur nodded.

“We may need to back that up,” Bourinda replied. “I propose we form a special unit made up of Barian and Drombran soldiers to help ensure there are no thefts on either side.”

“They will have to be trained together so there will be no partisanship issues between them,” Captain Naria pointed out.

“Sounds reasonable. We’ll have to write all that up into a formal treaty, but I’m satisfied on those counts, but there is one problem. “Have any of you seen the gems from Badir yet?”

“I can’t say that I have,” Artur admitted.

“I don’t know if Jallito has yet either. There hasn’t been much mining there yet since this problem came up almost immediately, but I have the first stones right over here. The light is bad for viewing them in this room, but if you’ll step over to the window...” Bourinda stood up and walked over to a heavy leather case on a nearby table and then led the way over to the window. There was a low table there and he put the leather case down and opened it to reveal about two dozen brightly colored, polished stones. Over half of them were cut in cabochon style and the others were faceted stones. Most of the cabochons were star gems and in the sunlight the stars shone brightly against the background color of the stones. “Look at these beauties,” Bourinda told them. “Perfect cornflower blue and pigeon blood red crystal-clear on the faceted stones. And look at the star gems. My assayers tell me they’ve never seen such a high number of quality stars from a mine. And the colors are fantastic, aren’t they? Blue, red, pink, grey, silver, even one purple stone.”

“They are nice,” Gaenor agreed, “and fairly large too. Not quite as large as the stone in my signet ring, but I don’t see any visible flaws in these.”

"I suspect the flawed stones weren't sent to me," Bourinda admitted. "I'll have to look into that just so that every stone is accounted for, but I really have to admit that I have a fondness for the star gems. It's going to be difficult to give those up, especially since I was hoping to have some of these mounted on the crown."

"Your Majesty," Duke Kirungo spoke for the first time since Artur had snapped at him, "surely these first stones, mined before the treaty, belong to Drombra."

"It is just that sort of thinking that got us into trouble in the first place, your grace," Bourinda pointed out, although his tone was not as accusatory as it had been.

Cornellya spoke, "I don't see why some of the stones might not stay within the kingdoms."

"It would open us up to accusations of keeping the best stones for ourselves," Bourinda explained.

"Not if you and Queen Jallito each chose select stones for each other. Maybe a certain number each year for your crown jewels," Cornellya suggested.

"That would work," Bourinda agreed, "Captain, do you think that would be acceptable to your queen?"

"It sounds fair," Naria allowed. "I'll have to see how the actual treaty puts it, but assuming it says that, I think I can go along with it, yes."

"And do you think our royal cousin would approve my taking this stone here," he picked up the largest blue star sapphire, "and presenting it to this remarkable lady?"

"Your Majesty," Captain Naria replied, "I don't believe that Baria will object to your generosity."

King Bourinda did not give the stone to Cornellya immediately but had it mounted in a gold ring first and then presented it to her before his court the next afternoon as part of the formal ceremony in which the treaty was signed.

Bourinda's council of advisors was looking disgruntled at the turn of events and Artur correctly guessed it was because the once pliable king now had a mind of his own. Such drastic changes, Artur knew from history, had a habit of being resolved through regicide, so he had a few words with the advisors directly after court was adjourned and assured them that he and the Cilben emperor held them directly responsible for seeing to the king's prosperity. Already somewhat shaken they had another shock a little while later when Captain Naria had a rather similar chat with them concerning Queen Jallito's fondness for the young Bourinda.

Gaenor, Elena and Cornellya spent another long evening playing caroms even though they were planning to leave soon after breakfast the next morning, but none of them could refuse Bourinda's request especially since they all knew it was unlikely they'd see him again any time soon, if at all. Having given him a taste of friendship, Gaenor hoped he would be able to find companions who wouldn't attempt to use the young monarch for their own selfish reasons.

"Gae," Bourinda asked about mid-way through the evening, "do you know Captain Naria very well?"

“Not really, Bouri,” she replied. “I’ve spent a fair amount of time with her these last couple of weeks, but she’s very reserved and I had no reason to pry. Why?”

“Oh,” Bourinda replied a bit embarrassed, “no reason, just curious.”

“She’s several years older than you are,” Gaenor pointed out as she lined up her next bank shot.

“Not that much,” Bourinda replied a bit too quickly.

“I’m not even sure how she feels about you,” Gaenor replied, “or men in general for that matter. There are certain stories about the Amazon Legion, you know.”

“Yes, but I know that most of them marry men and have children too. I’m thinking of asking Jallito to station her here with the embassy.”

“Well, I wouldn’t hold out a lot of hopes, Bouri,” Gaenor told him. “I mean I don’t think she actively dislikes you, but I suppose you will at least be able to expect Naria to be completely honest with you.”

“It’s a start,” Bourinda commented.

Maxform

One

As a parting gift, King Bourinda provided Artur’s party with transportation to Teliodena. The coach he loaned them was a little larger and more spacious inside than the one Queen Jallito had provided. He wanted to provide a driver, but Artur assured him they could handle the carriage and the horses and would deliver them to the Drombran embassy in Maxform.

The day was hot and hazy, reminding Gaenor of a late summer day in Narmouth, rather than the mid-autumn day it was on the southern side of the equator until she realized that much of Drombra and Maxform were in the tropics and in spite of the calendar the terms summer and winter did not have the same meaning they did at home. Here, instead the seasons were Wet and Dry and with the winds coming northward from the Gulf of Nimbire, she suddenly realized that the Wet season must be imminent.

“I was about to complain about how hot it is inside the carriage,” she told Cornellya, “until I took a look outside and saw the clouds coming up from the south. I think we’re in for some rain.”

“It is hot in here,” Cornellya admitted, “but what makes it so uncomfortable is how sticky everything seems to be.”

“The humidity,” Gaenor supplied the word Cornellya was obviously searching for. It was odd, but after all this time, Gaenor occasionally forgot that the vari had grown up in the Parch and therefore only knew of water within the sub-ground level city her people called the “Village.” She was only reminded of that when Cornellya rarely found herself at a loss for an otherwise common word.

“Humidity, right,” Cornellya added.

“It doesn’t seem that bad to me,” Elena commented.

“That’s probably because we’re not too much farther north than Olaka and being an island you would have humid breezes most of the time,” Gaenor explained. “I admit that I’d be more comfortable if the air wasn’t so damp, but it’s probably more bearable outside. In here it’s like an oven with the sun baking us.”

“Not for much longer,” Jimeleo commented as he opened his eyes and looked outside. He had fallen back asleep nearly as soon as they were back on the road. Gaenor privately wondered how he managed that. The carriage had better shock absorbers than any she had experienced in Mishanda – she made a mental note to herself to make a sketch of them for the town blacksmith in Narmouth – but the roads were not all that smooth and the bumps would have kept her awake no matter how tired she was although as far as she knew, Jimeleo had gone to bed early the night before. “I suspect we’ll be on a rather muddy road before too long. Of course about this time of year it rains for a while every day, but it’s not unusual for the weather to clear up again by evening.”

“Have you spent much time around here, Jimeleo,” Gaenor asked.

“Before I moved to Nimbria, I tried setting up a practice in Maxforn, in a small town on the Minue named Olene. Adepts aren’t held in particularly high repute in Maxforn and there isn’t a lot of demand for their services. I think the Maxfornians are too influenced by the Southlands on that count. They don’t outlaw the practice of magic like they do in the Southlands, but they tax practicing adepts at a higher rate than other professionals. Not only that but even when someone there has the need to consult an adept, it embarrasses them to such a degree that they’ll often decide not to rather than let it be known by their neighbors that they had employed magic. And of those that do, most will refuse to pay afterward.”

“They obviously haven’t heard of the old Mishandan superstition then,” Cornellya commented.

“Which one is that?” Jimeleo asked.

“That something terrible will happen if you cross an adept,” Cornellya laughed. Elena smiled shyly at that, but Gaenor just rolled her eyes at the poor joke.

“Oh they have that superstition all right,” Jimeleo sighed. “The problem is they figure the bad thing will happen to the adept. Sadly, the belief has the force of law behind it. Malicious magic is punishable by anything from heavy fines to death depending on the nature of the accusation and whether one has been accused before.”

“You make it sound like no one ever has to prove the accusation,” Cornellya pointed out.

“It seemed like that was the case while I was there. I saw several colleagues driven into bankruptcy and one executed before I took the hint and left for Nimbria. The courts just tend to rule against adepts.”

“Then what ever possessed you to try to practice there?” Gaenor asked.

“There’s always a need for a good adept and maybe I’m deluding myself, but I do think I’m a good adept.”

“Why didn’t you set up practice in Wanlaria then, or one of the other eastern kingdoms as the Cilbens

call us?"

"There's a lot of competition back home," Jimeleo replied. "I was hoping that by hanging out my shingle in a land where there were fewer adepts I would be able to establish myself more easily and, without the competition, be able to charge top rates as well. I probably should have gone home when I left Maxform but that would have meant a very long journey either by way of the Thimdra States and Gostrina or through the Ocean of Sorrows and I just didn't have enough money for such a trip. And I couldn't have worked as a traveling adept along the way in either direction."

"Couldn't you have gone straight across the Southlands?" Gaenor asked.

"Are you kidding? A lone adept trying to cross those kingdoms? Even being able to cast a spell is a capital offense there."

"You wouldn't have had to tell them you were adept."

"Actually I wouldn't have had a choice. Maxform customs stamped my passport and insisted I was entered as a foreign adept. Actually the word they used was sorcerer, but that's worse if you ask me. I would not have been allowed in any of those countries and if caught inside their borders I'd have been executed."

"It can't be that bad," Gaenor told him. "One of the adepts we're trying to recruit practices in Sorvohn."

"Really? Well, maybe the stories are exaggerated, but I was always warned to never try it. Who would ever want to practice there?"

"His name is Faber Gerhardsson. He's from Aston, I think and the way I heard it was that he was granted a special license to practice there by their king."

"That doesn't sound very likely," Jimeleo commented. "The king of Sorvohn is also their high priest, but perhaps he decided to keep a trained adept around to consult or something. From what I hear, the upper echelon priests in the Southlands are all adept but they are only allowed to cast certain types of spells."

"I've heard that," Gaenor agreed. "What sorts of spells do they cast?"

"I don't know. They never admit to being adept. It's just that so many of their ceremonies end with special effects that could only be accomplished by magic. I suspect they mostly do illusions, but the fact is they have no problem recognizing magic when they see it. Are you saying we'll have to go through the Southlands?" he finished nervously.

"Somehow or other," Gaenor replied. "How else are we to find Master Faber?"

"You could write," Jimeleo suggested.

"Be glad to. Do you have his address?" Gaenor countered. "We would have written to you if we knew where you were. The problem is that most of the adepts we know how to find aren't interested in going to Ichtar, although many are willing to help out so long as they can stay home."

"I probably would have been among them if I had been successful in Nimbria," Jimeleo admitted, "but I promised I'd help out if you could get me back east."

“You don’t regret the promise?” Gaenor asked.

“No, not at all. I’ve been meaning to ask you though, what made you choose the symbol you did for iron?”

“It was the one Artur taught me,” Gaenor replied. It’s the Cilben abbreviation for their word for iron. A lot of my symbols are like that actually. There was one Master on the faculty of the University at Misha who would have preferred I used all Mishandan symbols, but by the time I learned what many of them were, my thesis had already been accepted. Since then I’ve added new symbols a bit more carefully and usually as suggestions, in case there were already common symbols in use for the items I was trying to notate. Doctor Lastor usually accepts whatever I suggest.”

“He seems to think quite highly of you,” Jimeleo noted. “He’s mentioned you and your work several times when he’s answered my letters.”

“He’s the one who suggested we search you out,” Gaenor replied. “He told us you ask interesting questions.”

“Did he?” Jimeleo asked. “I’m not sure why. All I did was to ask about things I wasn’t certain about, like specific catalytic reactions between spell ingredients.”

“Evidently he found the questions insightful for the answers they eventually provided. No doubt he had to learn those answers before giving them to you,” Gaenor told him. “That’s the sort of question a professor finds interesting after all.”

“Your book helped a lot on that sort of thing,” Jimeleo told her. “I’ve been able to invent some fairly effective spells since I adopted your notational system. I think the most amazing part was the table of ingredients, although I hope you won’t be insulted that I think it still needs a little work.”

“Not at all,” Gaenor told him. “What did you have in mind?”

“Well, I think it needs to be reorganized into something more closely resembling a periodic table of the chemical elements.”

“It would have to be a very large table,” Gaenor replied, “unless…”

“What?” Jimeleo asked.

“I wonder if there may be some relationship between the chemical elements and spell ingredients. I’ll have to work on that. It could be that we can take the families of spell ingredients, and tools too, and compare them to the families of elements and then of known groups of chemical compounds. We already know that similar ingredients react similarly, but if we can tie them to their physical components, we can predict their behavior even more accurately.”

“I thought you had done that already,” Jimeleo commented.

“Not quite. I didn’t consider their chemical composition, but merely classified them by known magical properties. There are so many ingredients and tools that are commonly used, I never had to consider looking for reasons why they are similar. But this is a fascinating avenue of knowledge to go down, even if it turns out to be a dead end, we’ll still have learned something.”

“May I help?” Elena asked.

“Of course,” Gaenor replied instantly. “This will be an excellent chance for you to start applying what we’ve taught you so far and I do think it is time we started teaching you basic magic theory.”

“May I read your book?”

“If you think you’re up to it,” Gaenor replied, “but I’ll warn you, your grasp of physics will need to be a bit stronger before the whole thing makes sense to you. I also want you to start studying world history. I really don’t know why you haven’t been interested in that. It’s easier than the math you’ve been soaking up.”

“I just don’t see what value it has to an adept,” Elena replied.

“Knowledge is power,” Jimeleo cut in, “and all of it is useful. You may not see that use now, but you will.”

“Elena,” Gaenor continued the thought, “knowing what’s happened in the past allows us to go on without making the same mistakes in the future. It’s not enough to be able to do things, with or without magic, but you also need to have some notion of the consequences. A study of history will help you there. It will also allow you to understand how the current world came to be and why things are the way they are. Never forget that the study of magic is the study of the world as a whole.”

They started discussing the possibility of elemental spell ingredients and the conversation went on all day while Gaenor took frantic notes and Jimeleo and Cornellya made suggestions. When they stopped for lunch, Elena, realizing that for now they were talking completely over her head, found the history book and Gaenor’s thesis and started reading. In deference to Gaenor’s instructions, however, she started in on the history text first and found it interesting in spite of her earlier preconceptions of what she would find in it.

The discussion of magical elements, as they started calling them, eventually involved Artur and Vito as well, each adept having something to add to the discussion. This kept them going for several days as they continued on toward the Maxforn border. The discussion was pretty much only stopped while eating or sleeping, or when spotting more of the large elephants. Once they were a day out from Omb, they found themselves riding past banana, plantain and manioc plantations, which at first appeared to be jungle to Gaenor until she noticed how well organized and regular the plantings were. After that she started noticing workers in the distance maintaining the fields and removing weeds.

One evening, Jimeleo confronted Artur concerning the matter of crossing the Southlands on their way to Vohn. “They actually marked in your passport that you are an adept?” Artur asked.

“I was there on a work visa,” Jimeleo explained. “The way Maxforn notes that is directly in one’s passport.”

“I was hoping to avoid the Cilben embassy,” Artur muttered.

“Why?” Jimeleo asked. “I mean what good would the Cilben embassy do us?”

“I can have them issue you a new passport, of course. One that doesn’t mention your profession.”

“They can do that? But I’m not a Cilben citizen,” Jimeleo protested.

“True enough, but they can issue you a passport as a friendly alien. Basically the intention is to say that they recognize that you are who you say you are.”

“And who am I?”

“Oh, please let’s not start getting philosophical at this time of night,” Artur groaned. “I just mean that it would say that Cilbe recognizes your identity.”

“Oh, have you ever been to Maxform before?”

“Can’t say that I have, no,” Artur replied.

“Well, you’ll want to remember to bribe the customs agents,” Jimeleo advised.

“Why in the world would I want to do that?” Artur asked.

“So they won’t go search our packs for smuggled goods,” Jimeleo replied as though it was obvious.

“What are you carrying in your bags?” Artur asked suspiciously.

“My clothes and spell tools,” Jimeleo replied.

“Assuming that’s true, why do you think anyone else in our party is attempting to smuggle anything into Maxform?”

“I don’t, actually, but the customs agents will. They won’t find anything, of course, but we can save an hour or two at the cost of a few silver coins.”

“I’ll put you in charge of the arrangements,” Artur told him sourly.

Two days later, Jimeleo talked to the Maxform customs for about two minutes before the entire party was waved on through and into Maxform.

Two

Teliodena was a city of contrasts; of tall vertical textures and also wide open spaces. The business district was very much like the city of Tandra, but the residences were much shorter, most not being any taller than three or four floors, although further out from the center of town there were rows of townhouses only two stories high and beyond them were single-family detached dwellings. However in the very center of the city, surrounded by the tall buildings of the business center, stood the palace of King Donaldi II surrounded by the one hundred and fifty-acre expanse of the fabled Royal Gardens of Teliodena.

There were nearly as many steamer carriages on the streets of Teliodena as there had been in Tandra. Gaenor wondered why these new contraptions hadn’t made their way into the rest of the world yet. However, horse-drawn transportation was still common as well.

They had to ask for directions several times, but they eventually found the Cilben embassy occupying an

entire city block just beyond the business district. They drove the carriage up to the front door of the complex and were challenged by a pair of guards who only looked vaguely like Cilben legionaries because of their uniforms. “Who wishes to enter the territory of His Serenity, Emperor Cornelius Arturus Colchicus Marno of Cilbe?”

Artur raised an eyebrow and replied dryly, “Arturus Cornelian Colchicus Marno, his father.”

The two guards looked at each other in confusion. Finally one of them replied, “Welcome to Cilbe in Maxform, Illustrious Senator!”

“Is the ambassador within?” Artur asked.

“Yes, Senator. I’m sure he’ll be glad to see you,” the talkative guard replied.

“I wouldn’t put any serious money on that if I were you,” Artur replied. “However, I’m sure he’ll make every gesture of welcome, just in case I’m still somebody. We’ll carry our own packs in, but would you see that someone returns this carriage to the Drombran consulate?”

“Yes, Senator, I’ll return it myself.”

“Won’t that get you in trouble for deserting your post?” Artur asked.

“Not really, as long as one of us is on duty. Besides, it is only two blocks away.”

“Very well,” Artur sighed and led the party into the Cilben embassy.

The inside of the building had been decorated to look as much like a Cilben villa as possible. The floors were covered in mosaics and the walls with frescos. In the center of the large entry hall, what would have been the atrium in Cilbe, was a pool of water with colorful fish swimming around in it. However, the room was much darker than most Cilben buildings so they had trouble seeing all this until their eyes adjusted to the low light levels.

They didn’t have to wait long to see the ambassador, a short, rotund man named Gaius Tellarian Horran. He was bald with only a fringe of grey-brown hair and was wearing a garment that appeared to be half tunic, half robe that Gaenor recognized as being a decade or two out of date for Cilben fashion although looser-fitting and probably more comfortable than what was currently being worn in Cilbe City.

“Senator,” he greeted Artur, “It’s a genuine pleasure to find you and your friends here in Maxform, although I don’t recognize two of them.”

“Recognize?” Artur asked. “Have we met? In the last twenty years or so? I mean, I know your family. Honorius Tellarius Horran is currently commanding the Third Legion as I recall. Your son?”

“Yes, Senator. The family is very proud of him.”

“And you have every reason to be, Your Excellency,” Artur assured him. “Now what’s this about recognizing us?”

“Uh, well, perhaps we should discuss that after you’ve had a chance to rest. I assume you were intending to stay here in the embassy while in Teliodena?”

“It will save on expenses,” Artur admitted, “and our party is starting to get large. Also I’m going to need a favor from you.”

“A favor?” Gaius asked. “How may I be of assistance?”

“We can discuss that later too,” Artur told him. “Don’t worry, it’s a perfectly routine matter.”

“Then perhaps we can discuss it over dinner,” Gaius suggested. He guided them to a nearby room where a small woman was busily sorting a large pile of envelopes. “We have company, Marta.” He performed what introductions he could and Artur filled in the rest. Marta, it turned out, was Gaius’ wife and was also his administrative aide. “Marta, dear, do you think you could find rooms for our guests?”

“Of course,” she replied. “We always have room for such noble guests. Senator, it is an honor to meet you and all of your party,” she continued as they started walking through the complex. “We’ve been hearing such fantastic stories from the capital. Are they all true?”

“Depends,” Artur told her. “What have you heard?”

“That you defeated a Temi chief in mortal combat in order to co-opt the use of the entire clan, for one thing.”

“It has a shred of truth,” Gaenor commented.

“But just a shred,” Artur added. “Madame Marta, what actually happened is that Lady Gaenor and I were fleeing a Temi assassination contract while being chased across Firdan and Gostrina. We used a number of tricks to defeat the initial assassins, but eventually the Temi chief was forced to confront us directly. I was very ill at the time we met and the unique Temi sense of honor forced him to present us with a choice between mortal combat or accepting an equal or greater challenge. We chose the challenge and won. That’s all.”

“But then you led an army of Temi to conquer the city of Cilbe,” Marta concluded.

“Having met the chief’s challenge,” Artur explained, “we were later adopted into the Ridec clan. It is the highest honor they confer and do so rarely. After that the chief took it on himself to provide an honor guard as we approached Cilbe. I wasn’t aware until far too late that the entire clan had joined us. Anyway, it was not just the Temi who defeated the Imperial Guards. By then we had enlisted the help of the Twelfth legion as well.”

“But you killed Emperor Lusius, didn’t you?” Marta asked, leading them around a corner.

“No. He jumped out a window, and before you ask, Sinius Girdecus died of a heart attack,” Artur added.

“But you really did turn down the Oak Wreath, didn’t you?” Marta asked.

“I refused to be emperor,” Artur replied, “yes. It’s no job for an honest man.”

“But you set up your own son for the job,” Marta pointed out, confused.

“Each man must learn that lesson for himself,” Artur chuckled.

"I see. Well, I think I see," Marta commented. "Well, here we are. There are four suites in this wing. Each suite has four bedrooms, so why don't you take the two on the left side of the corridor? They conjoin through an inner door, so you'll have two common rooms." She opened the first door on the left and showed them inside. Then she walked over to the door that joined the suite to its neighbor and left it open. "Any questions?" she asked. "I'll see you all at dinner then." And left them to choose their own bedrooms.

"Oh, I should have asked if there was a bath in the complex," Gaenor noted.

"I'm sure there is," Artur replied. "Cilbens usually build them into all permanent embassies and in this climate it would be positively essential."

"The Maxformians prefer swimming pools to Cilben style baths," Jimeleo told them. "That can be even more refreshing at times."

"I prefer swimming in the ocean, myself," Vito commented.

"We're a bit far inland for that," Gaenor pointed out, "but the chance to wash off the road dust would be appreciated."

After choosing their rooms, Gaenor led Cornellya and Elena off in quest of the embassy's baths, which turned out to be situated just off the central court yard of the large complex. Their timing was good. The baths were not kept heated all day long, just for a few hours in the afternoon and early evening in keeping with Cilben custom, but they managed to find it just as it was opened for the day. They met several other women, mostly wives of the ambassadorial staff, but a few were staff members themselves. Gaenor had been unaware that Cilben women worked in the professions and asked about it.

"Not very much at home," one lady named Rallia, who was from a prominent equestrian-rank family, admitted, "but quite a few of us do so in provincial and foreign postings."

"Really, I never saw any women among the delegates to Mishanda," Gaenor replied.

"Oh, not in the Eastern kingdoms, they are nearly as backward about what is a proper woman's place as Cilbe herself," she replied.

"And not in the Southlands either," another woman put in.

"Good heavens, no!" Rallia laughed. "They still think women are property."

"So do the Gostrinans," Gaenor pointed out.

"Not really," Rallia disagreed. "That's really just a social convention. In the Southlands, all women are literally owned and the men who own them have the title deeds to prove it. Disgusting. The far southern lands are different and in Nundro it's necessary for the deputy ambassador to be a woman or they wouldn't deal with us at all."

"The Nundrites are just strange!" the other woman laughed. "But in Maxform, men and women are equal in law at least."

"That may be because men and women have so little to do with each other in public," Rallia commented. "I don't know what they do at home, but in public you would think there were two different countries

here. They are nearly completely segregated. Businesses cater either to one gender or the other, even if the service or product is one both would be interested.”

“That does sound strange,” Gaenor agreed, “but how can you tell which businesses are which?”

“There is always a little symbol above the door,” Rallia explained. “Triangles for men and circles for women. Sometimes, very rarely, you’ll see a lozenge or diamond shape. Those businesses cater to both genders, but they are very rare and the owners of such businesses are generally desperate.”

“Most often,” the other woman added, “you’ll see two doors side by side for what elsewhere would be the same business. Generally, they really are the same business, run by husband and wife with a wall or even just a thin, rice paper divider between them.”

“Yes,” Rallia agreed, “and sometimes not even that, just different sales counters, but that’s not too usual. Maxformians prefer to maintain the illusion. They get very embarrassed if they accidentally walk through the wrong door too. I’ve seen that happen several times, not counting the adolescents who dare each other to do that.

“Two years ago, we were contemplating adding a second gate to the embassy,” Rallia continued. “Fortunately we eventually decided against that when it turned out the Maxformians respected our customs in what is technically Cilben territory so long as we respected theirs when in public. Just as well, we would have had to increase our staff for what is essentially the same work.”

“Are there occupations that are generally considered more the province of one sex or the other?” Cornellya asked.

“Not really,” Rallia explained. “You’ll find more men doing jobs that involve the handling of heavy objects and in the army and navy, but for the most part there’s no such thing as a man’s or woman’s job. It’s just so amusing to watch them trying to ignore one another in public. One wonders how they ever manage to get married!”

“So what sort of business would an adept run? For men only or for women?” Gaenor asked.

“Adept?” Rallia asked.

“Wizard or sorcerer then,” Gaenor replied.

“Are they for real?” Rallia asked. “I thought they were all charlatans.”

“Not all of us,” Gaenor replied.

“You’re a wizard?”

“I prefer to be called adept,” Gaenor replied, “but yes. So is Artur and most of our party.”

“And I’m learning magic,” Elena added enthusiastically.

“We’re looking for a colleague who set up shop here in Maxform. Maybe you’ve heard of him? Sarmuel the Sorcerer?”

“Can’t say that I have,” Rallia replied thoughtfully. “I’ve never had a need to find an... adept, you say?”

Well, no need to solve my problems with magic anyway. It was illegal in the Empire until recently anyway. Oh, that was your doing?"

"Artur's, actually," Gaenor replied, "and if anything the penalties for witchcraft are stricter and more easily enforced now. What the new law actually does is define a witch as a person who uses magic to harm someone else, making beneficial magic legal to practice."

"Sounds like a fine distinction, but where do you draw the line?"

"I imagine that will be up to Colchicus and his tribunes to decide," Gaenor replied, "and any adepts who choose to practice within the Empire will have to be very careful to track how their magic is used, since many spells can be used both helpfully and harmfully. So you have no idea where we may find this Sarmuel?"

"Well," Rallia replied thoughtfully, "like I said, I've never felt the need for magic, but it's not generally held in high regard in Maxform anyway. So if I needed to find an adept, I imagine I'd look around the outskirts of the city in areas where the rent is lower."

Three

"I never realized how large this city was," Jimeleo complained two days later when he and Vito returned from their second foray in search of Sarmuel. They were sitting around one of their common rooms in the embassy, having already bathed, but finding it too early for dinner.

"Did you try opening a practice here too?" Vito asked.

"No, I was just passing through on my way to Olene, but it seems a lot larger when you're practically going door to door."

"Unfortunately," Artur told them, "the Maxformian Inland Revenue Service is unwilling to release any of its records. Can't blame them, really, it's against the law for them to do so."

"It wouldn't be a problem," Gaenor added, "if they had some other system of registering businesses, but the only form of advertising around here is word of mouth. At home you could at least peruse a newspaper for the advertisements and that newspaper would probably have a list of local businessmen anyway. There is almost no advertising in the local papers, which probably explains why they are so much more expensive than elsewhere. I tried talking to the publisher of the 'World' this morning. He asked why I thought anyone on his paper would know such a thing, so I told him about advertising and you would have thought I was trying to recruit him into some sort of heresy. Kept going on about he could never report news objectively if he had sponsors."

"It was worth a try," Artur replied. "We'll just have to keep looking for a while. Remember it took us a while to find Jimeleo too and that was with a chamber of commerce to consult."

Just then there was a knock on the door and Ambassador Gaius poked his head in. "Yes," he began, "Senator Arturus, might I have a word with you."

Gaius' demeanor suggested that he meant to be alone with Artur, but Artur chose not to take the bait, gestured toward an empty seat and replied, "Of course. Come in and have a seat."

Gaius looked as though he wanted to say something, but changed his mind and with the look of a man doing something he found distasteful, he sat down and requested, “Senator, I wonder if I might have your assistance in a matter of Imperial importance?”

Artur sighed. This was precisely why he had hoped to avoid contact with Cilben officials. It was far too easy to get pulled into petty intrigues masquerading as major threats to the welfare of the Empire. “How may I help?” Artur eventually replied.

“I’m having trouble negotiating with King Donaldi. It should be a fairly routine trade agreement, but he refuses to discuss anything about it. However, this afternoon, he did express an interest in meeting you.”

“Me?” Artur asked.

“You are famous, after all,” Gaius replied. “General, Senator, Dictator. I’ll admit that most of the stories going around about you are fairly unbelievable.” Gaius laughed nervously and added, “King of the Temi, indeed...”

“First I’ve heard that one,” Artur nodded, wondering how it had grown to such an absurd level.

“Of course,” Gaius agreed, “As if such a notable patrician would have anything to do with the Temi.”

Gaenor cleared her throat in preparation to speak, but Artur cut her off with a quick gesture. “Uh,” she muttered, catching on instantly, “just clearing my throat. Sorry.”

“So you would like me to go have a chat with His Majesty?” Artur concluded.

“If you would be so kind,” Gaius replied, “and while you’re there if you could sort of make the following proposals for a new trade agreement.” He handed Artur a sheet of paper. “I’ve already made an appointment for you tomorrow morning.” He stood up and started for the door. “We’ll discuss it at dinner,” came his parting shot.

“We certainly will,” Artur grumbled looking at the paper.

“Maybe King Donaldi can help us in our search for Sarmuel?” Gaenor suggested hopefully.

“Well it’s my old fellow travelers!” a voice sounded out across the plaza. Gaenor and Artur turned to see a familiar figure approaching them. They had last seen Tomasi Kaguru in Doldo, one of the Thimdra States far to the north of Maxform, where they had formed a temporary alliance to sneak across the Candro-Doldo border without being caught by the authorities. Artur and Gaenor were merely trying to avoid being arrested as illegal magic users, but they never did learn exactly why Tomasi was avoiding Customs.

Tomasi closed the gap between them, shook Artur’s hand and then embraced Gaenor in a powerful hug that lifted her off the ground. “Oof!” Gaenor gasped. “It’s good to see you again Tomasi,” she continued once he set her back down, “but you nearly cracked my ribs.”

Tomasi laughed exuberantly. “Never!” he told her. “Let me buy you breakfast!”

“We’ve already eaten,” Artur demurred, “but perhaps later.”

“Then at least let me buy you a cup of qahwah,” Tomasi insisted.

“We really can’t,” Gaenor tried to explain. “We have an appointment with the king.”

“Good!” Tomasi exclaimed with another laugh. “It’s always best to let him wait just a bit especially since he’ll make you wait anyway.”

“We are a little early,” Artur admitted.

“But the way businesses are here, we couldn’t all have our qahwah in the same place,” Gaenor objected.

“Ah!” Tomasi replied dismissively, “that doesn’t apply to travelers! Come!” He led them around the next corner and went through to a red-painted doorway with a small gold triangle over it. Gaenor was ready for the people inside to object to her presence but Tomasi merely announced, “Oy! Mikasi! I honor you with the custom of travelers!”

“Back again, Tomasi?” an elderly man asked tiredly. “I thought you had gone to Culu.”

“And now I am back!” Tomasi replied enthusiastically. “How about a pot of your best qahwah?”

“How about settling up from your last trip?” Mikasi countered.

“You don’t trust me?” Tomasi replied, sounding hurt.

“Not even as far as I can throw an elephant,” Mikasi replied seriously. He held the pose for a few moments and then suddenly flashed a grin even larger than Tomasi was capable of.

“Oh! You really had me,” Tomasi admitted. “I really thought you were angry.”

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten the tab you ran last trip,” Mikasi warned him, but he pointed them toward a nearby table and signaled a young woman to deliver the requested qahwah.

“The Traveler Gods forbid!” Tomasi laughed.

While this exchange had been going on, Gaenor kept her eye on the men in the room. When she had walked in, it seemed like they were all staring at her, but it could well have been Tomasi’s flamboyant entrance that had caught their attention. However, after a few seconds, no one was paying them the least attention. It was obviously a scene they had witnessed far too many times to have novelty value and if anyone was surprised to see a woman being served in a supposedly men’s restaurant, you could not prove it by their behavior. Gaenor paused to wonder just how strict the division of the sexes in Maxform really was. Or perhaps Tomasi was correct and “travelers” – traveling merchants, smugglers, and other people who as a matter of routine went from one place to another – were not bound by the same conventions as other folk.

“So how was your trip into Rolta?” Gaenor asked Tomasi after her first sip of qahwah. She had grown accustomed to the bittersweet beverage, but still preferred tea.

“Very successful,” Tomasi told her happily. “I sold all my wares at Junction. Do you know the place? Yes? And I managed to fill my packs with still more goods and traded them all the way back here and brought them into Nider and Taxo as well. Then I went back and did the same thing again. But don’t tell Mikasi there, I owe him for my last pot of qahwah,”

“Didn’t sound like a mere pot of qahwah to me,” Gaenor teased him.

“No, just a pot of qahwah and a few nibbles to go with it,” Tomasi replied, then shrugged. “Perhaps he expects me to pay for the other thirty men I bought for as well, you think?”

“He might,” Gaenor replied with false solemnity. “Have you ever thought of settling the debt?”

“That would ruin Mikasi’s day,” Tomasi replied in the same tone, “but I’ll tell you a secret. I will pay him before I leave Teliodena again, for the last trip at least. So how went your business in Peln?”

“Not quite so well,” Artur replied. “We found the man we were looking for, but he wasn’t what we needed.”

“What ever did you need?” Tomasi asked curiously.

“An adept,” Artur replied. “A sorcerer if you prefer.”

“In Peln?” Tomasi asked. “I could have told you not to look there.”

“It was a long shot that didn’t pay off,” Artur shrugged. “It wasn’t a complete loss and we did conduct some profitable business, but just not what we had planned.”

“Ah well, so long as you made a profit, eh?” Tomasi told them. “So why are you off to see old Donald?”

“An acquaintance is looking to increase the trade between here and Cilbe and asked us to try negotiating with the king,” Artur explained round-aboutly.

Gaenor wouldn’t have let it go at that, but Tomasi did, reminding Gaenor that travelers, as Tomasi called them, almost always accepted the story of another traveler graciously regardless of whether the story was even plausible.

“Well, I wish you all the luck in the world on that count, and for one I wouldn’t mind being able to sell more in Cilbe, but no matter how much the king may approve of it, I’m still the one who has to go looking for customers.”

“So you don’t see that it would make any difference in what you do?” Gaenor asked.

“Not really, no. Kings and emperors make or break trade agreements, but travelers do what they do with little regard for that so long as we can go from one place to another.”

“So if Cilben customs suddenly turns you back from the border...?” Gaenor asked.

“You remember the Doldo Pass,” Tomasi replied. “Anywhere you find a customs agent, you’ll find a way to avoid him.”

Gaenor took another sip of the spicy qahwah and asked, “So where are you off to next?”

“Back into the Thimdras, I think,” Tomasi replied vaguely. “Are you headed that way too?”

“Unfortunately, no,” Gaenor told him. “We’re still looking for adepts and when we finish looking here, we’ll be off to Vohn.”

“Vohn? Better you than me. I’ve never been comfortable with that mountain over my head.” He paused a bit then added, “I only know of one sorcerer in Teliodena. He has an office a block away from here.”

“Would his name be Sarmuel?” Gaenor asked interestedly.

“That’s the one,” Tomasi replied. “Never met him, myself, but you can’t miss his sign. You’ll see it on your way to the palace. What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Gaenor replied, “it’s just that we’ve been looking for him on the outskirts of the city.”

“Why would you do that?”

“Evidently on some bad advice. Remind me to never ask a Cilben for directions,” Gaenor sighed.

“Excuse me?” Artur teased her.

“You’re a knight of Mishandan,” she laughed. “Mere flirtations with Cilben governmental power don’t count.”

“I never thought so,” Artur laughed.

“I’m missing something here, aren’t I?” Tomasi commented.

“It will come to you, I’m sure,” Artur told the man. “Well, thank you for the qahwah, Tomasi. Do you have dinner plans this evening?”

“I always have time for a fellow traveler,” Tomasi replied.

“Well, come on by the Cilben embassy and I’ll return your hospitality,” Artur told him, getting up from the table.

“Tomasi,” Gaenor added as she too stood up, “if you’re going through Wahton, I’ll have a letter I’d appreciate if you could deliver for me.”

“Oh I always stop in Wahton on my way to the Thimdras,” Tomasi replied easily, “and if I can’t find your friend, I’m sure old Clortius will know where to find him.”

“I dare say he will,” laughed Gaenor, “since it’s to his daughter.”

“You know them? Ha! I knew you were true travelers after all!”

King Donaldi left word at the palace gate that he would meet with the Illustrious Arturus in one of the fabled royal gardens. It turned out there was no direct path to the king's choice of venue and they spent the better part of half an hour negotiating the maze of paths. They walked through rows of neatly trained roses, tall topiaries, broad expanses of explosively colorful tropical flowers and cool paths shaded with a vast variety of trees until they reached a small open area surrounded by palm trees and with plantings of jasmine that scented the air.

"My apologies for keeping you waiting, Your Majesty," Artur began.

"No need," King Donaldi replied. "We chose this garden because it was so remote from the rest of the palace. At our age a little extra waiting is restful." Donaldi was in his eighties, Gaenor guessed and his once black hair was now a tightly curled cap of white. "Please join me and have a seat. Senator Arturus, I have admired you and your accomplishments for years, not the least of which is the fact that you seem to have kept your youth. What is your secret?"

"It's a very long story," Artur replied, "and I nearly died twice along the way. Take it from someone who has been there, it's not the length of life that matters, but what you do with what you have."

"Of course," the king agreed immediately. "And who is your delightful companion?"

"Forgive my lack of manners, please, Your Majesty," Artur replied. "I present my intended, Lady Gaenor of Narmouth from Mishanda."

"We are honored, our lady," Donaldi replied. They chatted for a while until the king was ready to get down to business. "So Ambassador Gaius sent you to do his dirty work for him?"

"You might say that," Artur replied. "Has there been a problem with Cilbe's chosen spokesman?"

"Other than the fact he's as arrogant as they come and doesn't have the wit to understand that Maxform is not a client state to the emperor?"

"All that? It didn't show when I met him, but then arrogance seems to be a Cilben trait whenever we're away from home."

"You do not appear to have that reputation, Senator," Donaldi observed.

"My head was deflated decades ago. In my youth I was probably as arrogant as any of my compatriots," Artur admitted.

"We somehow doubt that," Donaldi disagreed.

"You are too kind," Artur replied. "It is possible that Gaius has been in Maxform too long and is due for a new posting. My son is still new to the oak wreath and I doubt he has had time to review the records of all his ambassadors. I imagine there will be a lot of replacements within the next few months."

"One who can at least pretend he respects us would be appreciated," King Donaldi admitted. "So this is about the trade agreement, is it?"

"So I have been informed, although I must admit that Gaius has neglected to supply me with the

proposed terms.”

“Then we hold that in common,” Donaldi replied. “So far he has been here half a dozen times and has yet to make a proposal on paper or parchment. From the way he goes on, I suspect he would like Maxform to agree to buy goods exclusively from Cilbe, while offering no advantages to Maxform in return.”

“Almost any negotiator would consider such an agreement a coup,” Artur chuckled, “but it is hard to believe and even Gaius wouldn’t expect to fool you into agreeing to such a deal. Your traveling merchants, no doubt, would be happy for the situation to remain as it is but would love to have fewer inspections as they cross the border, but from a conversation I had with a self-described ‘traveler’ just this morning, avoiding customs is not only routine, but easily accomplished.”

“It is odd that you bring the travelers up, Senator,” Donaldi remarked, “since that was one definite demand Gaius made; that we do something to keep our merchants from avoiding customs, as if we had such power.”

“The best way to convince them to behave legally,” Artur replied, “would be to offer them a legal alternative that is more attractive than the illegal one. It may take a while to think one up, but perhaps we can come up with some incentives. But what do you want out of a trade agreement?”

“The same thing as anyone else,” Donaldi replied, smiling. “A favorable deal for ourselves, of course.”

Four

Sarmuel the Sorcerer had a highly successful practice with a prestigious office near the top of one of the tall buildings in the business district of Teliodena. While Artur continued to negotiate with King Donaldi, Gaenor, Vito and Jimeleo visited Sarmuel and tried to recruit him to their quest. He listened politely to what they had to say, but found no reason to abandon his lucrative practice. Sarmuel was an adept of the old school. He had heard vaguely about Gaenor’s work, but saw no real advantage to it.

“I know all my spells and I have the notational system my master taught me,” Sarmuel explained as they sat in his office sipping tea, “why should I need to learn another at my age.”

“Gaenor’s system is being accepted all over the world,” Jimeleo told him. “It is revolutionizing our ability to communicate with one another.”

“I suppose it might,” Sarmuel allowed, “and that is wonderful for academics, but I’m not an academic sort of adept. I didn’t even learn my craft in a university. Everything I know I learned with my master and when I was ready, he arranged to initiate me into the craft.”

“The craft,” Gaenor repeated. “So you practice magic as though it is an art. My approach is more scientific. There are fixed rules to magic in how it will work and how all the parts of a spell work together to produce the end result. Once you know all these, the development of a new spell is relatively easy.”

“Why ever would I need a new spell?” Sarmuel asked. “I know over one hundred spells, more than enough to support me in the manner in which I have become accustomed. Further, I have no desire to teach them to anyone else. That would only allow others to compete with me.”

“I doubt there’s a spell you know that Gaenor here couldn’t duplicate merely by knowing the desired end result,” Vito told him.

“Perhaps,” Sarmuel replied easily, “and if you were planning to stay in Teliodena I might even be worried about the competition, but by your own admission you’re just passing through. Besides, you can tell me that magic is a science, but I still maintain that it is a craft and that only the most clever and creative adept can create a new spell. It is a very dangerous activity; I know that for a fact, and, as my master told me, only once in a great while does a true magical genius come along who can create more than one or two new spells without killing himself in the process.”

“Gaenor can do it with ease,” Jimeleo told him. “Vito and I can, although we are not as proficient.”

“Ah,” Sarmuel replied, “but you have already told me that Lady Gaenor is a magical genius and I accept your word for it. Lady Gaenor, I feel honored to have met you, truly I do, but I just do not see why I should cast my practice aside to go off with you to Ichtar, wherever that is.”

“So you are not convinced of the threat to the world that the Vieri have detected. If they are correct and we do not stop it, there may be no magic for you to make a living with,” Gaenor told him.

“I believe that you believe the threat is real, my lady,” Sarmuel replied politely, “but no, I’m not convinced. I don’t really believe in your Vieri and I’m not sure I even believe that magic is some sort of finite resource that can be depleted. By your own admission you aren’t absolutely certain either.”

“No, I’m not,” Gaenor admitted, “but it’s the best hypothesis I can come up with given the available facts. I’m not sure how I could prove such a notion safely and unless I can prove it, I’m not about to lie about it.”

“That speaks much to your credit, Lady Gaenor,” Sarmuel said approvingly. “There are many who would not qualify their assertions so honorably.”

“Well, Sarmuel,” Gaenor replied, “I’m sorry for having wasted your time.”

“Not at all,” Sarmuel assured her. “I did enjoy the discussion even if there is nothing I can do for you. If you remain in Teliodena for a while, please stop in again. Who knows? Maybe you’ll convince me to chase after rainbows with you after all.”

Several weeks passed as Artur continued to negotiate what became an ever increasingly complex trade agreement. During that time Gaenor and the others made repeated attempts to recruit Sarmuel but, while he remained unfailingly polite, he continued to be equally adamant against leaving Teliodena. However, he was not entirely closed-minded and when Gaenor brought Cornellya to meet him, he admitted, after examining her closely with two spells of his own, that she was indeed not human and that if she said her people called themselves Vieri then indeed Vieri must exist.

Gaenor also brought Elena to meet him on one trip. Gaenor’s original intention was to show Elena how limited the old ways had been but in the end the only trait she told Elena to note was Sarmuel’s courtesy even when in complete disagreement. “One can be firm in one’s position without being belligerent.” Gaenor told her student.

Because of their prolonged stay in the city Gaenor also had the opportunity to visit the royal library with Elena. The library, it turned out, was one of the few institutions in Teliodena with the non-gender specific lozenge above its door, and was a treasure trove of learning and featured books on almost every subject

known to human civilization. Gaenor was surprised to find a copy of her own book in it, but on speaking to the librarian, learned that by royal command the library was to be as complete a collection of the published works of mankind as possible. However, she was disappointed to find that they had no books by Doctor Nyima on the subject of Relativity. Unable to remove books from the library, however, Gaenor mostly chose to study philosophy with Elena, although she did spend some time trying to get a handle on the sort of advanced physics she needed for her own research. It puzzled her that the two books she did find by Doctor Nyima were actually mathematical treatises and not works on physics.

Tomasi Kaguru stopped by the embassy one afternoon, unsure if he had really been invited or if his fellow travelers were playing some sort of joke on him, but was delighted to find Gaenor, Cornellya and Elena in the central courtyard, discussing Elena's latest lesson.

"Tomasi!" Gaenor called as he entered the open area. "It's good to see you. I was afraid you wouldn't come."

"Ah, but when a traveler invites, another will always accept!" Tomasi laughed. Gaenor privately believed Tomasi made up such sayings as he went along, but she had to admit it was part of his great charm. "You said you had a message you needed delivered."

"Yes, and a small gift as well," Gaenor replied, "but we also invited you to dinner, so I hope you'll stay for that as well. Artur should be back soon and it is nearly time for the baths to open for the afternoon. It will be a truly Cilben evening, if you think you're up to it."

"I imagine I can tolerate the enjoyment," Tomasi laughed. "Have not had a Cilben bath in months, but you must let me take you all to a restaurant nearby. It is a very special one, Tindi in fact."

"All right," Gaenor agreed, "but we invited you. It's our turn to pay."

"Now how can I refuse?" Tomasi laughed.

The Tindi restaurant was everything Tomasi had promised. Each dish was a combination of vegetables and some sort of meat; beef, chicken, shrimp, pork, and fish, but also each was entirely different from the last with some being hot and spicy, some mild and one dish was sweet. Most were served with rice, but one had lightly fried noodles on the side. This was Gaenor's first encounter with any form of pasta, although she had heard of it as a common ingredient in Wanlarian food. The big surprise, however, was the rice wine that was served with the meal. Wine that was heated and served hot was not unknown in Mishanda, but the mulled wine Gaenor was acquainted with had lost most of its alcoholic content. Tomasi warned them to go easy on the rice wine, but even so most of them were at least a little tipsy by the time they left the restaurant.

Finally, after a month in Teliodena with Cornellya getting increasingly antsy to be moving on, Artur reported that he was nearly finished with the trade negotiations, although there were still a few sticking points. It was on that day that Locius Armenius Flacco arrived in Teliodena.

"Arturus, old boy, good to see you again," Flacco greeted him after entering the adepts' suite. Artur was enjoying a morning pot of qahwah before another session of wrangling with King Donald.

"Flacco," Artur nodded politely. "Would you like some qahwah? I thought you were helping my son in Cilbe."

"Thank you," Flacco accepted a cup. "I was helping him in Cilbe and now I'm helping him in Maxform."

Your report on the situation here was taken very seriously and His Serenity has decided to recall Gaius Tellarian Horran in favor of a new ambassador. He and his lot are packing right now, but to keep everything all friendly, I offered them a big send-off party once they were ready. Told them to take their time too, but from the way old Gaius was going on, you'd think he couldn't wait to get back to Cilbe."

"I'm sure he can't," Artur replied. "It was part of the problem. He's been here too long. When an ambassador is at the same post too long he either goes native or starts to despise the local people. Gaius isn't the sort to go native."

"Neither am I, really, but I'll not likely be here for more than a year or two on the outside."

"Working on a Senate seat next?" Artur asked lightly.

"Not really, no. I'm far more interested in doing something with what's left of my life. Now that I'm my own man again, I really cannot understand why I stayed with Girdecus for so long. No that's not true, I know exactly why," Flacco confessed. "Working for the old man gave me free reign to give in to my basest political instincts. I was able to do things behind the scenes at his orders that I would never resort to on my own. Well, it took a bit after you took me on during the Dictatorship..."

"Is that what it's being called? The Dictatorship?" Artur asked, amused.

"Oh yes and in another generation you'll hear the old-timers looking back on the good old days of the Dictatorship," Flacco laughed lightly. "Anyway, you forced me to work on a higher plane and I must admit that once I grew accustomed to it, I found I was enjoying life so much more than when I worked in Girdecus' shadow. It's a shame we couldn't get that toad Martius to drop dead when his father did."

"What did happen to him?" Artur asked.

"Haven't the foggiest, old boy," Flacco shrugged. "Lusius reassigned him from Firdan to Sorvohn, but when the courier arrived to present him with his recall papers late one evening, he refused to see him, claiming to be ill. The next morning he had disappeared."

"He'll be back," Artur predicted.

"You could always assign some of your Temi brethren to track him down and, well..." Flacco shrugged.

"I don't think so," Artur replied. "He isn't worthy to bloody their blades. Even if I wanted to, I don't have the time to go back to the Empire to hire them."

"I doubt you would have to actually pay them," Flacco disagreed. "You're their chief."

"It's an honorary title," Artur shrugged.

"It isn't, actually," Flacco informed him. "I spoke to Leracus about that. As far as the Ridec clan is concerned, you and Lady Gaenor are as much their chiefs as Leracus himself is. One other thing, a Temi chief never travels without a guard of honor."

"I haven't seen a Tem since I left Cilbe," Artur replied.

"No, and they were most alarmed about that. That's why I had that little chat with Leracus. He wanted to know where you had gone. I knew you had sailed for Tandra and told him so."

“Why did you do that?”

“Artur, old boy, I’ve known Leracus a lot longer than you have and I’ve learned that anyone wanting to live a long and happy life would do well not to refuse to answer any of his questions. I don’t know how long your honor guard has been with you, probably since your little stop in Baria, maybe sooner...”

“Certainly not in Tandra,” Artur noted. “We had a minor run-in with some of the locals there. They seemed to think we had something they wanted.”

“Yes, you would have seen him if he had been there,” Flacco nodded.

“Him? Just one?” Artur asked. “Well, that’s not too bad then, what makes you think I have a tail now, however?”

“Well, I could be mistaken. Maybe he’s on some other mission, but I did see one red-clad gentleman just a block from here last night when I arrived.”

“Terrific,” Artur sighed, “I wonder if I could send him back?”

“I doubt it. By the way, I understand I owe you my thanks for this posting.”

“Cochicus made the right choice,” Artur replied, “but I didn’t recommend you to this post.”

“No? Then it must have been your original recommendation in the first place that helped,” Flacco replied.

“Congratulations on your advancement to the Equestrian Order,” Artur said suddenly.

“You heard about that?” Flacco asked.

“No, but it goes without saying. An ambassador must be of equestrian rank at least and Colchicus is too savvy to push you all the way to the Senate in one leap.”

“He reminds me of you when you were in the Senate a little,” Flacco commented, “but just a little. I hope you won’t take offense, old boy, but you were rather naïve, don’t you know?”

“I always preferred the term, idealistic,” Artur replied.

“That as well,” Flacco nodded. “I do have a message from your son and daughters, however, so I hope you’re still idealistic.”

“That doesn’t sound like happy news,” Artur commented sourly.

“Let’s just say I’m glad I know you won’t shoot the messenger.” Flacco handed an envelope to Artur.

Artur opened it and spat out a few harsh words that would have scandalized Gaenor. “Do you know what’s in it?” he asked Flacco.

“Not word for word,” Flacco replied. “I got the impression that they would rather not have you running around the world on some sort of magical quest they don’t understand.”

“This letter implies that I’m senile,” Artur told him. “My children, although privately I suspect it was Jullia who convinced the others. As the baby of the family she always got her way with her siblings. What I have here is a plea to please come back to Cilbe because I have obviously lost my wits. Why else would a man turn down the oak wreath in favor of wandering the world like a vagabond? You may inform them that I am a free citizen of the Empire and if I so choose to tour the world for the rest of my life that is my business and none of theirs. No, better yet, I’ll tell them myself.”

“Maybe I had better tell them,” Flacco suggested. “You may be a bit too close to the problem. Where are your associates?”

“Gae took Cornellya and Elena to the library again this morning.”

“Elena? Have I met her?”

“Not unless you’ve spent much time on Olaka,” Artur replied. “She grew up there a ward of the village.”

“Never been to Olaka, but if it’s like the rest of the colonies on those islands, you did right to get her out of there,” Flacco commented.

“She got herself out,” Artur replied. “She developed a bad case of hero worship concerning Gae and stowed away in order to stay near her. She wasn’t found until we were off Cape Nimbre. How she managed to stay undetected while we were in Colch, I can’t say, but I think Gae made the right decision to accept her as a student. She seems to just absorb everything we throw at her. Anyway, they’ve been living at the Royal Library and between teaching Elena and working on Gaenor’s latest project that’s taken up most of their time. Vito and Jimeleo – he’s another adept we picked up in Nimbria – are out trying to convince a local adept to join us, but frankly I think it’s obvious he won’t. I’m about to go meet with Donaldi for another fun session of tight-fisted trade negotiations. Care to join me? It’s going to be your responsibility anyway.”

“I think I will,” Flacco decided. “I need to present my credentials to him anyway and the sooner the better.”

“All right,” Artur said, putting his empty cup down. “Let’s go. I can brief you on the way.” He stood up and Flacco followed suit. “The main thing to remember is to try to avoid the old Cilben arrogance. It really doesn’t play well,” he added as they left the suite.

“It never did,” Flacco agreed.

“Well, Gaius evidently forgot that lesson or maybe never learned it. He was very polite and helpful to me, but...”

“Of course he was polite and probably a bit servile,” Flacco told Artur. “You’re the emperor’s father. Naturally he would be nice to you.”

“That’s probably it,” Artur admitted as they left the embassy. He paused to look around.

“Forgotten the way, old boy?” Flacco asked.

“No, just looking for that honor guard you insist is following me.”

“Maybe he is following Lady Gaenor this morning,” Flacco suggested. “From what you say she could probably use a little extra help at the library.”

Nundro

One

Gaius and his wife left Teliodena the next morning with very little fanfare, although King Donaldi had sent them an ivory statue as a parting gift. Artur had wanted to leave that morning as well, but Flacco convinced him to stay on at least one more day to help conclude the current negotiations.

When the adepts finally did leave the capital city, it was after a large reception in the Cilben embassy and as part of an almost triumphal parade, organized by King Donaldi in Artur’s honor. Artur privately doubted that any of the cheering people who lined their route out of the city knew what they were cheering about, but he appreciated the use of the steam carriages that carried him and his companions down stream to the Minue Estuary where they were able to board a ferry that would take them across to Nider.

The best route to Vohn, they had decided, would be to ride across Nider, just north of Lake Ni and follow one of the River Nider’s tributaries upstream most of the way to Vohn. The Minue crossing took nearly two hours by ferry, a slow-moving barge propelled by a dozen oarsmen. The ferry had a single mast on which a square sail had been rigged, but as this leg of the voyage was directly into the wind, tacking across the great estuary would have taken even longer.

Nider regulated her border along the Minue closely and Gaenor could see small military units patrolling the river’s edge as they approached the dock in Wachov. Cilbe’s southern neighbors were all ultramodern to Gaenor’s way of thinking, but her first view of Wachov had her thinking of the distant past. None of the wooden buildings were more than two stories tall and the city’s streets did not appear to be paved at all from what she could see. She never got a closer look, however, because of problems that arose in customs.

They gave their names to the customs agent and then waited as he wrote them down then checked them on a list in the top drawer of his desk. “You are Arturus Cornellian Marno, late the Dictator of Cilbe, also known as Artur the Southlander?” the customs agent asked formally.

“Yes, but...” Artur began.

“And you are Lady Gaenor of Narmouth?” he continued, comparing his notes from their initial interview.

“I am. What is all this about?”

“You are to leave Nider forthwith with your entire party and never return on pain of death,” the man told them coldly.

“Why?” Gaenor demanded.

“You are known witches,” the man sneered at them. “By law it is within my power to have you killed

summarily with no recourse under the law. It is only because His Holiness chooses to remain on friendly terms with godless Cilbe that I am empowered to spare your worthless lives and allow you to leave unharmed.”

“How dare...” Elena started shouting. Gaenor quickly clapped her hand over Elena’s mouth and with Cornellya’s help, dragged her out of the customs house and back to the wharf. “Why did you do that?” she asked furiously.

It was the first time Gaenor had ever seen her speak in anger. Gaenor privately thought it a hopeful sign for the girl, but thought her timing could have been better. “I was saving your life,” Gaenor told her. “Well, maybe. I don’t think he would have hesitated to kill you had you actually attacked him.”

“I wasn’t going to attack him,” Elena told her.

“He didn’t know that and when you started walking forward, gesturing the way you did, I decided it would be a good idea to get you out of there.”

“You nearly stopped my heart,” Cornellya told Elena quietly. “Didn’t you see the armed men on the other side of the room?”

“No,” Elena admitted, suddenly very quiet. “I thought they were just standing there.”

“They were only armed with clubs, not swords,” Gaenor informed Elena, “but I still wouldn’t care to be on the receiving end. Besides, I really would not have enjoyed having to kill all those men had you been hurt.”

“Could, I mean, would you have done that?” Elena asked.

“I could and would have,” Gaenor confirmed. “You know I always carry pieces of flint and steel in the outer pocket of my purse. Those two tools can be used for a wide variety of fire and light spells and the most destructive are very fast, indeed. They would not have had a chance, but they also might have killed you before I could have gotten started. Elena, in some parts of the world, and this is one of them, being an adept is very dangerous indeed. However if you still want to learn magic it is part of my responsibility to protect you until you can defend yourself.”

Elena’s eyes widened and her expression changed to happiness. “Thank you,” she told Gaenor, before hugging her.

Artur, Vito and Jimeleo joined them a minute or so later. “Well at least the ferry is still here,” Artur noted. He then turned to Elena. “Elena I’m glad to see you can stand up to others, but now that you can, please keep in mind that there are times when discretion is the more noble path.”

“Yes, Senator,” Elena agreed.

“Well,” Artur continued, putting his admonishment of Elena aside, “let’s get back on the ferry. We should be back in Maxforn in time for dinner.”

They walked back to the ferry and were met at the gangplank by the captain. “That was a short trip,” the captain observed.

“We’ve decided that the worse slum in Maxforn is a better place to be than the best in Nider,” Artur

told him.

“I could have told you that,” the captain snickered. “You’ll be happy to know I won’t charge you triple though to take you back across the river.”

“And to think,” Artur chuckled, “I had to come all this way to find an honest man.”

The trip back was with the wind and not only was it a far shorter trip, but the oarsmen were only needed at the very end when bringing the ferry into its dock. Once back on Maxfornian soil they returned to the inn in which they had stayed the night before. Then over a late afternoon pitcher of beer they discussed their options.

“We could try entering through another port,” Vito suggested.

“Don’t want to try that,” Jimeleo replied nervously. “By now they’ll be passing our names up and down the Nider border. “We’d be safer going through the Parch.”

“Not a good idea,” Artur told him. “Nider has Transminue settlements on this side of the Parch all the way to the Maxfornian border. Trying to cross the Parch from there would be difficult for a vari. For humans, even adept humans, that’s just too far.”

“We could stay close to the border of the Parch,” Vito suggested, “and only run into the desert itself when we’re worried about being spotted.”

“No,” Artur disagreed, “It’s likely the Niderians are keeping an eye out for us, just as Jimeleo suggested. Once we’re spotted, and with the distance we would need to go it’s likely we would be spotted eventually, food would be very hard to come by. We can’t hunt in the Parch, after all, and we wouldn’t be able to buy any in Nider.”

“Then our only choices are to either go north around the Parch,” Gaenor pointed out, “or south and try crossing Taxo and Karkominia and follow the River Cosl into Sorvohn. I don’t think we have the time to go north around the Parch. So if we do we’ll have to give up on finding Faber Gerhardsson.”

“We’ve already had to give up on Sarmuel,” Artur pointed out. “We do have enough of a party to go on without Faber as well, but I’d prefer not to. I can’t help but feel that we need to at least try to enlist every available resource.”

“So we sail south to Taxo,” Vito concluded.

It took three days for a riverboat to come down stream to the mouth of the River Minue. The *Thistle* was a two-masted, schooner-rigged boat that routinely sailed from Wimen in northern Maxforn to Minin in Drombra and Dryot in southwestern Taxo. Artur quickly bought passage for the entire party to Dryot and another four days later, the *Thistle* left Olene with the adepts on board.

Two

The journey downstream was a quiet and pleasant week for the adepts. The *Thistle* was an easy boat to manage and all the passengers needed to do was stay out of the way of the three-man crew. The boat stopped at least once each day, first in Nider then in southern Maxforn. The next stop was in Manist a

large port in Taxo, but when Artur tried to go into town, the customs officials turned him back just as their counterparts in Wachov had.

“Our friends in Nider appear to have let their neighbors know we might be coming this way,” Artur reported on his return to the *Thistle* .

“I’ve heard that the bureaucracy in Taxo is sloppy at best,” Jimeleo commented. “It’s possible that they won’t know we’re coming in Dryot.”

“I hope you’re right,” Artur told him. “If we cannot land there we’ll have to backtrack to Minin and find a ship headed even further south.”

“Maybe we should do that anyway,” Gaenor suggested.

“Much further south and we may have to find someone willing to sail through the Ocean of Sorrows,” Artur commented.

“Oh, I hope not,” Cornellya groaned. “The last time was terrible enough.”

“And it would be worse this time,” Gaenor added. “We’d have to sail that rough sea for days, probably.”

“Well, if we can’t enter Taxo or Pongaria,” Vito pointed out, “there’s always Ux and Nundro. Neither of them are the so-called Southlands and magic is perfectly legal there.”

“It won’t pay to cross Ux,” Jimeleo commented. “The mountains between Ux and Corinia are nearly impossible to cross. It can be done, I suppose, but there are no roads through them. To go from Ux to Corinia you need to either go north to Pongaria or south to Nundro.”

“Better Nundro, I guess, than trying to sail around,” Artur decided. “We’ll have to keep it in mind should we get turned away in Dryot.”

“This way is only marginally shorter than going north of the Parch, you realize,” Vito noted.

“Yes, I noticed,” Artur admitted. “Well, no helping it now. We’ll just have to keep moving on. What is that you’re working on now?” he suddenly asked Gaenor.

“Calculus,” she replied. “I think I’m going to need to understand it and even more advanced mathematics if I’m going to prove my Law of Conservation of Matter and Energy and that’s essential to the rest of my work, including all the questions I keep asking Doctor Nyima. I’ll certainly want to understand what he tells me, won’t I?”

“Can’t argue with that. Are you certain you need calculus?” he asked.

“No, I’m not,” she admitted, “but I don’t know that I don’t need it either and from what I’ve read of Doctor Nyima’s work, I’m going to need to understand very high mathematics indeed and if I can’t grasp calculus, which has been around over a century, how can I hope to understand Doctor Nyima’s proofs?”

“I’m not sure you’ll have to,” Artur commented, “but you’re probably right, you usually are about these things.”

The next day they were back on the river. As they approached the Gulf of Nider traffic, on the river grew heavier and they passed many boats similar to the *Thistle* and several small ships headed upstream to Maxforn. The captain and crew stopped to talk to the crew of one riverboat and after an hour of dickering one of the crewmen left the *Thistle* and a new man came aboard.

Finally, late the second day out of Manist, they made port in Minin, Drombra.

“We’ll be here unloading and loading up again all tomorrow and most of the next day, sir,” the captain told Artur, “so if you want to stretch your legs and look around a bit, now’s a good time.”

“Actually I was hoping to see what sort of traffic might be headed for Pongaria and Nundro,” Artur told him, “Just in case we can’t land in Dryot.”

“You’re the oddest set of passengers I’ve ever had on my boat, sir” the captain admitted. “What is it the Southlanders have against you? You don’t seem so bad to me.”

“We’re adepts,” Artur explained, “wizards or sorcerers, you might call us, and the Southlanders have outlawed all magic except that practiced by their priests.”

“So just don tell ‘em you’re sorcerers,” the captain advised.

“We haven’t, but it appears my reputation precedes me,” Artur sighed.

“The price of fame,” chuckled the captain. Artur merely nodded.

The next morning, as the stevedores began to unload cargo, Artur, Vito and Jimeleo started looking for a ship bound in their direction, while Gaenor, Cornellya and Elena went looking for a local library. They didn’t find it, although there was supposed to be one in the city, but they did find a street filled with bookstores. Elena was as thrilled as Gaenor was at the discovery. For a person who had only started reading a short time earlier, she had dived head first into all manner of writing, even to devouring the morning newspapers that were sold in Nimbria, Drombra and Maxforn, although she felt it was foolish that the words were spelled differently in each of those countries.

“Technically,” Gaenor informed her, “each nation speaks a different language, or maybe they speak different dialects of the same language.”

“I thought they just had odd accents and vocal mannerisms,” Elena commented. “Senator Arturus doesn’t speak Cilbe the same way I do either.”

“No, he doesn’t,” Cornellya agreed, “And neither do I.”

“I like your accent,” Elena told the vari. “It’s sort of silky, but you have trouble with some of the harsher sounds. Ooh! What’s this?” She took a book off the shelf. “Is this really an account of a trip to Tars? Is that possible?”

“I’m sure I’d have heard about it,” Gaenor commented, taking a look over Elena’s shoulder at the small, paper-bound volume. “Oh, it’s fiction. A made up story,” she explained dismissively.

But Elena’s fascination did not wane. “You mean someone was able to imagine such a trip, even though it cannot be done? I must read this!”

“But it’s just a work of fantasy,” Gaenor told her.

“Yes,” Elena agreed, “but what one person imagines, perhaps another might accomplish. This is an idea I’ve never even considered and I’d like to see if the author has other such ideas. How do the characters travel? They’d have to fly, I suppose. It will be interesting to see how the author explains that, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps,” Gaenor admitted.

“Oh, and here’s a story about the building of an artificial man. You could do that, couldn’t you?”

“What? Create life with magic?” Gaenor asked. “Some think that’s how the gods created the world and all the life on it, but I would barely know where to start.”

“No, if this description on the cover is accurate, the artificial man was built of metal, clay and wood. Is that possible?”

“An automaton? I’ve seen little clockwork figures that move around, but…” Gaenor started to reply, then got lost in her own imagination.

“Oh, oh,” Cornellya chuckled. “Now you went and gave her an idea. We’ll be lucky to get her to eat dinner now.”

“That’s not true,” Gaenor protested, “But the idea of self-propelled devices…” She trailed off again.

“See?” Cornellya asked Elena lightly. “Watch out, this could be you in a few years.”

“If I’m lucky,” Elena replied unconsciously. Cornellya just rolled her eyes.

They paid for their purchases and moved on to the next store. This had a very large collection with shelves filling the first floor, a deep balcony where a second might have been and even along the stairs going up to the balcony. As they worked their way to the back of the store, they discovered another book-lined staircase leading down into a basement that was two-thirds filled with still more books. The remaining small space was used for storage.

“I never knew there were so many books in the world,” Elena marveled as they went from row to row. “And on so many subjects! Why are there so many histories, though? History is history isn’t it?”

“It all depends on who’s telling the story,” Gaenor told her. “Also a lot of these are histories of individual countries and some of specific events, so there’s a lot of area to cover.”

“You said we had to get a basic text on physics too,” Elena reminded her.

“So I did,” Gaenor agreed. “You’ve memorized that chemistry book already haven’t you?”

“Yes, is there a more advanced text?” Elena asked.

“I’m sure there is, but the advanced texts are also more specific. Maybe I should get you started on organic chemistry, there seems to be a lot of advancement in that field lately. If it wasn’t for our current project looking for connections between chemical and magical elements, I’d say you have enough chemistry for now, but there’s no such thing as useless knowledge and I honestly don’t know what will or

won't be needed."

There were a lot of books to consider, but eventually Gaenor and Elena only bought two books between them, but Cornellya bought two for herself and was very mysterious about them. "Oh come on," Gaenor insisted, "What did you buy?"

"Oh just something about humans I was curious about," Cornellya replied evasively.

"You couldn't just ask?"

"I've noticed you tend to be a bit shy on this subject," Cornellya replied.

Gaenor was about to let the subject drop when she thought of something. "No. You bought romance stories?"

"Uh..." Cornellya stammered.

"Read them if you like," Gaenor shrugged, "but if they're like the two Relle brought to Firdan last year they won't be at all realistic. What language are they in?"

"Cilben," Cornellya replied. "Most of the books we've been seeing are. Actually Cilben is the only human language I read well enough to work without a dictionary."

"Yes, on this side of the world Cilben is the dominant scholarly language," Gaenor commented. "In the eastern realms it's mostly Shandi and Gostri, but then those are the two basic languages in that part of the world. I'm not sure in what language such books are written in the Southlands. Their religious books are written in their native languages. And in the far south Corin is the scholarly language. That's why I bought a book on that language in Tandra. I want to be able to read Doctor Nyima's papers without relying on a translator. I suspect my pronunciation is abominable, however, since I've never heard it spoken. Oh look, there's a small book store in the walk-down here."

It was much smaller than the last two and only one room on the sublevel floor of another bookstore. There wasn't much natural light in it because the only window faced the stairs that led down to the bookstore. However, the owner had gas lamps in key locations to illuminate the shelves and allow for reading.

That owner, an old gentleman, sat behind a glass case and greeted the women as they entered the shop. "Welcome, ladies. Are you interested in herbal medicines? Or perhaps occult studies?"

"The medicines may be interesting," Gaenor decided.

"Those books are on the shelves to your left," the man replied. "The occult section is to my right."

"What about the shelves at the back?" Cornellya asked.

"Oh, you wouldn't want those," the man assured them. "They are magic texts."

"Now that does actually interest us," Gaenor informed him.

"It's interesting, to be sure," the man admitted, "and a lot of people look at them, a few even buy them, but you can't just cast a spell. A sorcerer needs to be initiated in the craft with a special spell cast by

other sorcerers before they can work magic, so while you may be interested in them, what you learn isn't likely to be of any use."

"Actually I prefer the term adept," Gaenor told him while Elena and Cornellya rushed to those shelves, "but aside from that you do have the right of it."

"I prefer to be called adept too," the man admitted offhandedly, "but that's an Eastern word, in Drombran it's sorcerer." He paused a moment and asked, "You're adept?"

"And you are too?" Gaenor countered.

"Robero of Castoe," he introduced himself.

"He has your book, Gaenor!" Elena shouted from the back of the store before she could introduce herself.

"Then you must be Gaenor of Narmouth," Robero concluded. "I do indeed have your book. It is a quite remarkable extrapolation of Menardin's Principle. However did you come up with all of it?"

"That's Cornellya Vasylya and my student Elena Carolena," Gaenor introduced the others. "I didn't learn at a university. Instead I was taught by the town adept, but his education was as unconventional as mine and he is prone to experiment. As I learned, I tried to make sense of it all rather than just memorize everything. And as I wrote it down I needed a system of notation. It just grew up from there. Eventually the University at Misha gave me a master's degree for my work. I imagine your copy is one of the many ones Doctor Lastor sent out?"

"It is. I attended the University at Es with Lastor. We still write back and forth these days."

"He seems to be writing to the entire world, I think," Gaenor laughed.

"You should talk," Cornellya teased her from the back of the store. "You just sent off another dozen letters this morning."

"Guilty," Gaenor laughed, catching Robero's glance.

"Writing is communication," Robero told her. "Your style is very easy to read, as if you were talking directly to your reader. I'm not surprised that you also write letters. You are a communicator. It is, no doubt, part of who you are."

Gaenor smiled and asked, "Do you have any advanced works on the Principles of Sympathy and Contagion?"

"Nothing very new," Robero replied dismissively. "Then again, I don't think anyone has written anything new about either principle in a century or two. Why would you be interested in such dusty old laws?"

"I had been pondering them earlier this year. I even discussed them in lectures at Mita and Misha."

"Mita?" Robero asked confused.

"The magic department at the University at Es has been closed and Doctor Haxmire joined with a former student of his to start a new school in Mita," Gaenor explained.

“Ah. But I interrupted you. Sorry, please continue.”

“Oh, well, I wrote out a lot of ideas that I hope to publish, but before doing so I thought I ought to check out what else might have been said about them.”

“Well, there’s a reprinted copy of Tongire’s treatise which until you publish is pretty much the definitive work on the subject,” Rogero suggested.

“I’ll take it,” Gaenor told him. “So what is an adept doing in Drombra running a bookstore?”

“I came here years and years ago and had a modest practice. I married a local girl and pretty much settled down. The bookstore was her idea. After a while I realized I was making more selling books than I was as an adept. And how does one of the foremost adepts of the age happen to stumble into that bookstore?”

“I’d hardly say I’m a foremost anything,” Gaenor laughed, but she went on to explain the mission she, Artur and their companions were on..

“Ah, if I were just a bit younger I would be tempted to join you,” Robero admitted. “I don’t suppose you have a copy of that spell I could see.”

“Not with me,” Gaenor told him, “but I’ll see if I can get Doctor Haxmire to send one to you.”

“Thank you. I’ll look forward to your next book.”

“I’ll send you a copy,” Gaenor promised. “Oh, do you know if anyone has done research on magical elemental theory?” Robero was uncertain what she meant and she went on to describe her recent research, adding, “I was especially wondering if anyone has made any comparison and correlation with the chemical elements.”

“That’s completely new to me,” Robero admitted. “I don’t think anyone has ever done something like that. Maybe I should take on a student, if he or she could accomplish so much with unorthodox training.”

“Maybe,” Gaenor chuckled, “but there are many times I wish I could have attended the University. The ability to spend a few years like that surrounded by other students discussing all sorts of scholarly issues...”

“Highly overrated,” Robero told her. “In my day, and I doubt students have changed much since then, most students learned only enough to get themselves past their exams. Oh there were a few who took it all seriously and you, I imagine would have been one of them, but they were often so busy studying that they didn’t have time for the more social aspects of the school. And I don’t recall a lot of scholarly discussions outside of class. There were a few meaningless debates over ‘Which came first; the chicken or the egg?’ and similar sophomoric concerns but usually only to make sure our answers were right on the exams.”

“And yet, you, somehow came out of it with a degree and a practice,” Gaenor noted.

“Some of the knowledge drilled into one’s head tends to stay there and the word ‘practice’ sums it all up. I came out with a practical knowledge of magic, and maybe a bit more since I kept up my reading in the field and have even written a minor paper or two over the years, although nothing particularly

world-shattering. I have invented all of five spells in my life, three of which, however, were after I read your book, so I'm just your typical country adept," he concluded adding, "although I live in a city."

"Still, I'm surprised Doctor Lastor didn't mention you when we were asking about adepts," Gaenor commented.

"You were asking for unusual adepts," Robero told her. "You see he mentioned that to me in his last letter, it arrived nearly two months ago. More importantly you were asking for unusual adepts who were younger than he is. He and I are of an age, you see. He also knew I'm quite content with the bookstore and I dare say I have the best collection of books on magic in the southern hemisphere. Lastor occasionally asks me to find obscure texts for him and a lot of unusual books show up here in Minin. You'd be surprised how many of them involve magic. I don't normally have to pay much for them since there's not a lot of demand for them and my neighbors know I'm the only one in town interested in such things. I sell most of them to adepts up north."

"How many of them are sold here in Minin?" she asked.

"A few," Robero replied. "Adepts occasionally stop in if they're in the area and they've heard of me. And some locals won't believe me when I tell them they won't be able to make the spells work. They usually come back for a refund," Robero chuckled at the thought.

"Gaenor?" Elena asked. "What is a grimoir?"

"A book of spells," she replied looking around to see Elena holding a book up for her to inspect. She took it and flipped through a few pages. "Old-style notation I see. Do you want this?" Elena nodded. "Well, okay, it will be a good project for you to rewrite these spells in the notational system I taught you. We'll certainly want to make sure they're both safe and effective before trying any of them."

"I've tried a few of them," Robero commented. "They seem safe enough. I never heard of the author, but it looks like a student's handwritten notebook that someone made plates of and printed."

"Do you have a grimoir, Gaenor?" Elena asked.

"Artur and I have a collection of spells written down back in Narmouth, and I write everything I do down in one of those notebooks Cornellya teases me about so I'll transcribe them when we get home, but to tell the truth I do it more out of habit than need. I rarely need to look up an old spell, although I haven't been home since I was initiated, so maybe in a few years that will change. So far I haven't needed a book of spells though."

"Why not?" Elena asked.

"Because I make up a new spell for almost every use. Most adepts don't, they just memorize as many spells as they can."

"We were taught in school that magic is a very inexact art, not a science," Robero explained. "Inventing new spells was something only the most accomplished adepts did, at least until your teacher here came along," he added with a smile.

"I didn't realize I was doing anything unusual," Gaenor told them. "Artur was always working on new spells as he taught me, so I thought it was normal. It wasn't until much later that I learned otherwise."

“Sounds like your Artur is a very unusual man himself,” Robero commented.

“Senator Arturus is a real hero,” Elena agreed.

“*Senator Arturus?*” Robero asked. “The same Senator Arturus who was recently the ruler of all Cilbe?”

“That’s him,” Gaenor confirmed.

“I didn’t realize he was adept. Well that explains a few things.”

“Actually magic never played a part in the whole affair,” Gaenor replied. She suddenly realized that was not strictly true, but certainly Artur had employed none, and she and Cornellya had promised the Queen of Kimm not to discuss the spell they did use with any man. Since that spell was high-level divinatory magic, Gaenor doubted it had really affected the outcome anyway.

“Really?”

“Magic isn’t enough to defeat armies on its own, not without widespread destruction anyway,” Gaenor replied. “Instead he had the Twelfth Legion and the Ridec Clan of the Temi at his command. It wasn’t pretty, but they did conquer Cilbe without destroying the city. Oh my, it’s getting late. I do hope Artur found a ship headed south in case we can’t get into Taxo.”

“You don’t want to go through Taxo,” Robero told her after she explained what she was talking about. “If they knew who you were in Manist, they’ll know you in Dryot too. And having warned you off once they’re likely to try killing you on the second attempt.”

“They wouldn’t succeed,” Gaenor replied grimly, “but there was enough death in Cilbe when we faced the Imperial Guard, I don’t want more where it can be avoided. What do you suggest?”

“Well, if you really must go to Vohn, wait for a ship bound for Noatik in Nundro. I know that sounds like a long way out of your way, But it’s likely there are posters of you in every customs house on this side of the Southlands, so that leaves Pongaria out too. Besides if you skip Pongaria they may think you gave up on entering any of the Southlands, because unless you somehow forgot, Sorvohn is one of the Southlands too.

“When you get to Nundro,” Robero continued, “hire a land-yacht to take you to the banks of the River Nider. From there a riverboat can take you northward. As long as you stay on the boat you won’t have to go through customs. Change boats somewhere in Ond to follow the River Cosl into Sorvohn. That border isn’t watched very closely and you should be able to enter fairly easily. After that you’ll have to make your way overland to Vohn.”

“Thank you for the advice,” Gaenor told him. “You may have just saved lives there, possibly even ours. Cornellya, are you still looking for books?”

There was a giggle from the very rear of the store.

“Cornellya?” Gaenor called again.

“Oh, I just have to have this book!” Cornellya came forward laughing. “Kseniya will love it.”

Gaenor glanced at the cover. “*My Life Among the Vieri?*” she read aloud.

“Oh, it’s just so wrong and on so many counts. Even Vito knew more about us than the author of this book.”

“I was never sure if that was supposed to be fiction or not,” Robero admitted. “But it read like the memoir of someone who had actually lived among the Vieri, so I put it among the magical texts. But how do you know it’s wrong?” he asked Cornellya. She had continued to disguise herself while in public so she merely looked like a short and exotic human woman.

“Go ahead,” Gaenor urged her. “Show him.”

Cornellya let the illusion drop, watching Robero’s reaction. He studied her for a moment and then simply nodded. “Yes, I should have recognized you from the shape of your face, but then you were in the back of the store most of the time.”

“Have you met Vieri before?” Cornellya asked.

“No,” Robero admitted, “a former professor of mine had and he showed me his sketches of the vari he met long ago.”

“That must have been Doctor Julinir,” Gaenor guessed. “I met him in Misha.”

“Yes,” Robero agreed. “So he’s still teaching.”

“He’s semi-retired,” Gaenor informed him, “but he does still teach a bit. We are running late now though and I don’t want the men worried about us. Let us pay for the books and I promise to write every now and then.”

“If nothing else, now you know where to come for obscure magic books,” Robero reminded her as he started totalling the bill.

Three

“Why not just sail all the way to Sorvohn?” Vito asked one day when they were near Noatik.

“You really don’t want to sail through the Ocean of Sorrows,” Jimeleo told him seriously. They were on deck watching the coast of southern Ux pass by. Gaenor, Cornellya and Elena had stayed below and were still avidly reading through the books they had bought in Minin. “You had a taste of what it’s like rounding Cape Nimbres, but south of Nundro and Tindi the weather is even worse. There are some truly horrendous storms in that passage. Nobody sails through there.”

“I thought there were some ships that did,” Artur commented.

“Only the insane sail in the Ocean of Sorrows,” Jimeleo insisted.

“Ah! So someone does sail there?” Artur pressed.

“Very reckless sailors,” Jimeleo told him. “Tinds and Ondians mostly. As it happens we don’t need to sail through there. Besides, have you ever seen a Tindi ship? They’re poorly designed, top-heavy tubs.

You really wouldn't want to get on one of those wrecks if it was floating in your *tepidarium*, never mind the Ocean of Sorrows."

"If it was floating in a *tepidarium* it wouldn't be large enough to board," Artur pointed out, "but I take your point. Besides it is getting on toward winter and it could start snowing anytime now especially this far south. No, I think Robero gave us good advice. We'll cross Nundro and then board a boat headed up the River Nider."

"Just what is a land-yacht?" Vito asked.

"Haven't the foggiest," Artur admitted. "How about you, Jimeleo?"

"I never quite understood the descriptions," Jimeleo told them. "It's supposed to be a sort of boat that sails on land and evidently goes very fast."

"How could it do that?" Vito asked. "Levitation spells, maybe?"

"Maybe," Jimeleo shrugged, "but I never heard that magic was in common usage there."

"We'll find out soon enough, I'm sure," Artur told them both. "What do you know about Nundro, Jimeleo?"

"The ladies aren't going to like it," Jimeleo replied. "It's a very much male-dominated society. Nundran women are property from birth to death. Each one has a deed and can be freely sold by the men who own them."

"Gaenor's teeth will probably be on edge the entire time we're there. I'm glad Lady Relle isn't with us, however," Artur commented. "She would probably try to lead the women in an armed revolt. Can't say as I blame her, really, but we don't have time to correct all the wrongs of the world just now."

"No," Vito agreed, "first we need to save it as it is. We can worry about the rest of it later if that seems the thing to do. Of course we could just send a description of the Nundran society to the women of Kimm. I'm sure they'd find an excuse to 'heed the Balance' by invading the land." He said that bitterly, never having forgiven the women of the feminist thaumatocracy for imprisoning him and Artur.

"They might at that," Artur chuckled. "Or they might surprise us by saying that is part of the 'Balance.' That whole business was just a bit too mystical to me anyway. So the men pretty much control everything in Nundro?"

"That's the way I hear it," Jimeleo replied. "It's not really all that unusual, but it is the most extreme case I'm aware of. Even in Gostrina it's only a woman's property that is owned by her husband and in the event of divorce the woman gets almost everything to bring into her next marriage. That might be why the divorce rate is so low in Gostrina."

"Wanlaria is more like Mishanda and Firdan in that cultural aspect," Vito added. "A woman's property is her own, although only men work in the professions. Women stay home and keep the house in order."

Artur, who had spent some time in Wanlaria years earlier, knew that Vito was omitting one particular profession, but then prostitution was not considered a true profession in Wanlaria although the Wanlarians were no different from anyone else in that respect. "That's a cultural preference," he noted instead. "Are there laws against a woman trying to attend a college or starting a business of her own?"

“Laws? Not that I know of, although most Wanlarians, men and women alike, would find it odd and probably not approve,” Vito replied.

“There are two or three women in Laria who run their family businesses,” Jimeleo added, “but they don’t actually own the businesses themselves, just manage them. I doubt someone like Gaenor could ever have convinced an adept in Wanlaria to teach her magic. Until I met her, I thought Gaenor was a man’s name, in fact.”

“Most of the people in Narmouth thought she was an odd child when she was growing up,” Artur remarked. “She ran chores for her neighbors in order to pay for extra lessons from the town’s schoolmaster. She studied subjects with him that might normally been considered more appropriate for the boys, simply because girls weren’t supposed to be interested in the sciences. However, Master Prendur confided in me that she was the only child in years who had wanted to learn more than her sums, letters and other practical knowledge, although her sister Marlie tried to emulate her to a lesser degree. He was rather glad she did, however, since not only was she an excellent student, but it gave him the chance to teach subjects beyond the usual and often failed to charge her if they strayed into areas where he had to learn as well.

“However,” Artur continued, “Gae is a most unusual person in any land. She is comfortable being who and what she is and that tends to earn respect. Mishandan men are very conservative in their attitudes and I wasn’t certain she would be accepted as an equal at the University, but it appears I underestimated the academics of Misha. I started off by sending examples of her work but didn’t mention who she was, just a student I was teaching. By the time I told them she was a woman, they really didn’t care. The people we met on the way to Misha accepted her for who she is as well. So, actually it is only the folks of Narmouth who see her as odd anymore and even they have come to accept her oddities.”

“I’ve seen something of the same thing in Aston,” Vito remarked. “There were businesswomen in Remarscen. Most of them had taken over when their husbands had died or grew too ill to run the day-to-day affairs, but they were accepted by the businessmen of the city. I think it was because there were so few women running businesses they didn’t feel threatened by them. If more women were to start professional careers the situation might be entirely different. I think you’d find more resistance to women in the workplace, at least in managerial positions.”

“Could be,” Artur nodded. “There are quite a few women who engaged in the professions in Cilbe, but they do have to put up with a lot of discrimination. They have a harder time landing a job and often have to accept lower pay for the same work a man might be doing. Well, getting back to the subject, I suppose we’ll have to assume that only men can do business in Nundro.”

They arrived in Noatikport’s harbor just after dawn two days later. Artur was anxious to keep moving and spent most of the day trying to find a land-yacht owner willing to take them to the banks of the Nider. Land-yachts, it turned out were large open boats with rubber-tired wheels mounted on shock absorbers, similar to the steam-driven carriages of Nimbria. These land-bound boats had only one large triangular sail and the owners assured Artur that they could have him and his party on the other side of the kingdom in two days on the outside; one day if the winds were favorable. However, that was about as far as negotiations were able to proceed. Artur knew he must be breaking some cultural law of courtesy, but he was at a loss to figure out just what it might have been. Everything would be fine until it came time to negotiate on a price for the service and after a few minutes of frustrating discussion in which the land-yacht owner would grow increasingly hostile they would part without being able to strike a deal.

Instead they checked into an inn. To Artur’s surprise there was a woman working at a reception desk.

She listened to his request for rooms politely, but when she quoted a price she was looking at Gaenor. Gaenor glanced at Artur briefly but he was obviously confused, so she concluded the deal and paid for the rooms.

“What just happened?” Artur asked Gaenor when they were in the privacy of their room.

“I’m not certain,” Gaenor admitted, “especially since Jimeleo insists that women are property in Nundro. Maybe it’s the other way around?”

“Or perhaps it’s like doing business in Maxforn and women only deal with other women,” Artur suggested.

“No, I don’t think that’s it,” Gaenor replied. “Hold on a minute, I’ll go back and talk to her.”

She quickly left the room and found the woman at the reception desk. “Excuse me,” Gaenor began, “this is my first trip to Nundro and my friends and I are a bit confused about your local customs. Do you mind if I ask a few questions?”

“Not at all,” the woman told her, so she described what had happened when they tried to hire a land-yacht. “Ah. Your problem was a normal one for foreigners. You see while the men own everything in Nundro, they never actually handle the money.” She lowered her voice, “They think they control it all, but actually all they do is sign the contracts their women agree to. Signing their names is about all most of them can do with a pen, really.”

“They’re illiterate?” Gaenor asked in surprise.

“You got it, honey,” the woman winked at her. “Most of us girls, on the other hand are very well educated, You would be hard pressed to find one who hasn’t at least finished public school and most of us have attended college along the way. You don’t have to have an education to run a business, but it does make a big difference. Anyway the real truth is that women are really in charge here. We run all the businesses, we make the deals, run the households and we hold all the money.”

“What about men who aren’t married or foreign men traveling alone?” Gaenor asked.

“Well, most people who work in inns understand that foreigners may not know our ways. Single men can always use a female relative to make their deals for them. Foreigners or men without female relatives can always hire a woman to act as their agent. Quite a few professional women make a living that way and it is not unusual for businesses to hire a specialist for certain dealings.”

“So the problem we had was that I didn’t start dickering with one of the men’s wives?”

That’s pretty much it,” the woman agreed. She picked up a sheet of paper and started writing on it. Here’s the name of my cousin and where to find her tomorrow. Her husband owns a land-yacht service that travels the Great Highways all the time.”

“And she runs it?” Gaenor asked.

“You’re catching on,” the woman laughed. “Tell her I sent you and she’ll give you a discount.”

“Thanks,” Gaenor told her. She hurried back to the room she shared with Artur and told him how Nundro really worked.

In spite of the various land-yacht pilots' claims, Gaenor was completely unprepared for the speed at which they crossed Nundro that day. They found the inn matron's cousin fairly quickly and struck a deal with a minimum of haggling. Gaenor suspected in spite of the matron's assurances, the cousin was charging them more than usual, but from Artur's reaction she could tell he felt it was a reasonable price for the service.

They loaded their packs into the land-bound boat and then as they found their seats, the pilot handed them helmets equipped with glass visors. "What are these for?" Vito asked.

"They keep the wind out of your face," the pilot told him.

"It's not very comfortable," Cornellya complained.

"Then don't wear it," the pilot told her gruffly, "but don't blame me if you have trouble breathing and keeping dust out of your eyes."

When they were in their seats, he climbed in and nodded to his wife, who untied a line that was keeping the land-yacht anchored. He raised the sail and they were off. The boat started moving almost immediately. While Gaenor was used to the stately acceleration of a ship slowly leaving her dock or even of one of Nimbria's trains starting off from the station, this was closer to the experience she had in one of the steam-driven carriages. The land-yacht quickly accelerated to a nightmarish speed.

Gaenor was shocked by the speed of the boat and unnerved by the shakes and bumps that she felt whenever the land-yacht's wheels rolled over a dip or a bump in the otherwise flat terrain until she heard whimpers from her right and felt Elena grab her arm for comfort, but the student wasn't the one who was whimpering. Beyond Elena, Cornellya was staring, wide-eyed with dread, in fascination at the flying landscape beside them and Jimeleo had gone deathly pale under his deep tan. To her other side Vito and Artur seemed to be enjoying the sensation, which she realized was as close to flying as she was likely to come.

After a while Elena relaxed her death grip on Gaenor's arm and started looking around inquisitively but neither Cornellya nor Jimeleo were able to relax and enjoy the ride. There was very little talking until midday when the boat approached a way station.

There were several other land-yachts anchored at the station. Only one of them was headed back toward Noatik, the others had come up from the south and were heading back that afternoon. They ate a light meal and then had to struggle to get Jimeleo back into the boat until Gaenor cast a tranquilizing spell that all but knocked him out. Seeing that, Cornellya tranquilized herself although not enough to knock herself out.

Gaenor found the rest of the trip on what the Nundrans called the Great Highways something to be endured. She grew accustomed to the speed at which they flew across the wide flat expanses and at seeing numerous towns and cities pass by in the distance. She was saddened to realize that she would never visit them and that she had barely experienced the entire kingdom of Nundro for that matter, just a single day in the capital city and even then she spent most of the day with Artur and the others as they looked to hire a land-yacht. The closest to actually talking in depth to a native she had come to was the

brief conversation with the inn matron the night before and she had never even caught the woman's name.

Now, however was not the time to strike up a conversation with the pilot who was busy sailing the land-yacht at break-neck speed. It seemed to Gaenor that at these speeds the slightest mistake could have lethal consequences and yet on this second half of their journey to the River Nider she saw several smaller, sportier land-yachts with only enough room for the pilots and maybe one passenger passing them in both directions. She waved at the smaller boats and the people in them waved back. She learned later that these smaller boats were racers and the people in them were probably practicing for the upcoming trials that would determine the best racer in Nundro for the year, although some may have just been out for the thrill of the ride.

The motion in the boat was too erratic for her to read or write, so she tried to store up all her impressions so she could write them down later. Finally, the terror ride came to an end at a riverside station just south of a city named Mentik. Gaenor countered the tranquilizing spell on Jimeleo, while Cornellya woke herself up.

"That was wonderful!" Elena enthused. "I'm sorry it's over."

"You Cilbens are crazy," Gaenor told her without heat, then smiled.

"We sure are!" Artur replied with a laugh, resting his hand gently on Elena's shoulder.

As they were unloading their packs they heard a loud tooting sound of a steam horn from the north. Looking that way, they saw a large side-paddle riverboat sitting at dock nearly a mile upstream.

"You folks say you were planning to head up-river?" the land-yacht pilot asked.

"We are, yes," Artur replied.

"That there's your boat if you can catch it," the pilot told him. "She'll be in port for another hour or two loading passengers and cargo and then she'll head upstream. That's what that whistle was to announce, that passengers could start embarking. Next one won't be for a week so you'll need to hurry just in case she has a shorter than normal turnaround this time."

"Thanks," Artur told the man, "It was a great ride, by the way. Too bad the territory back home isn't flat enough to try it for myself." Gaenor just rolled her eyes and sent a quick word of thanks to all the gods of Mishanda.

They grabbed their packs and started hurrying toward the riverboat. It wasn't as easy as just following the river, they had to make their way by the city streets of Mentik. This time Gaenor took the time to look around as they walked quickly through the city. They never entered the business district of Noatik, but all the buildings Gaenor had seen there were two and three-story wooden structures and that was pretty much the same case in Mentik. The Nundrans faced their buildings with wooden shingles treated to make them flame retardant and while here and there she saw large glass windows consisting of a single large pane of glass, most windows were mullioned with as many small panes of glass as it took to fill an open space; some of them filled very large windows, indeed.

They finally found the street that ran down to the small river harbor and ran into the ticket office. After their experience in Noatik, they were surprised to find a man at the ticket window. He looked like a Nundran with light-colored skin, high cheekbones and epicanthic folds that made his eyes look as though they were slanted on his face. He looked up as they rushed to the window and he asked, "Whoa!

What's the hurry, folks?"

"We'd like to buy tickets for points north," Artur replied.

"Doesn't sound like too great a crime," the man chuckled in the manner of one used to supplying his own entertainment. "The *Queen of the Nider* won't be casting off for another hour so you all can relax. How far north are you all going?"

"We're headed for Sorvohn but would prefer to avoid traveling through Nider," Artur replied.

"Can't say as I blame you," the man chuckled again. "It's not a very pleasant place. The worst of the so-called Holylands if you ask me."

"The Holylands?" Gaenor asked.

"Yeah," he replied. "You probably call them the Southlands, but they're all north of here. Besides that's pretty much what they call themselves; The Holy Kingdom of Karkominia, The Holy Kingdom of Ond and so forth except that Nider and Sorvohn both call themselves 'Holiest Kingdoms' as if it was some sort of competition."

"Maybe it is," Artur observed dryly.

"Could be," the man agreed. "I'm just glad my home is in a nice sensible place like Corinia."

"That explains it," Gaenor noted suddenly. When the man looked at her quizzically she explained, "I was wondering why a man was conducting business in Nundro."

"Oh that, yes," he nodded. "The River Service is owned by the Republic of Corinia and we hire our own to conduct business in each port of call. We hire locals for most jobs, but only Corinians work in the offices like this. We did try using women only in my position here in Nundro and our women are as good as any man in a business deal, but we eventually decided that we would do business our way and the Nundrans would just have to like it. My supervisor is a woman and it was just plain stupid to make her work the desk when she had more important responsibilities."

"So how far north should we take the *Queen* out there?" Artur asked.

"You'll need to debark in Onda and transfer to a boat bound for Tos, which is the terminus of our line on the Cosl. I can sell you the tickets for that from here, although I'm not sure which boat you'll be on from Onda on north nor how long you'll need to wait for her there. There will be one-day layovers in Taopolis, Chiring, Tersa, Onda and several shorter stops in smaller ports, like Mosa and Min along the way. We call those whistle-stops and we usually just stop long enough to blow the steam whistle to announce we're coming in and for the offices there to let us know if we need to pick anyone or anything up. If not, and if there's no one to drop off, you won't be there more than a few minutes, just enough time to exchange bags of mail." He quoted a price for their tickets and Artur paid him off in *Cilbenaurei*. "Ha!" the man exclaimed. "Been a while since I had to exchange some of these things. Hope my references aren't too out of date. Wouldn't want to cheat you." He checked a large, leather-bound book for an exchange table and eventually handed Artur back several Corinian silver and brass coins. "There you go," he told them. "Just in case this isn't the right change, I gave you some of the better cabins near the bow. They usually cost extra, but we have a strict policy for honest dealings."

"That's refreshing," Artur commented. "Thank you."

“Your tax dollars at work,” the man joked. “Well, my tax dollars at work anyway. It’s a sensible enough policy especially since the River Service values repeat business. Enjoy your trip, folks!”

Corinia

The Corinian riverboat *Queen of the Nider* featured the most luxurious accommodations Gaenor had experienced outside of a palace. The rooms were spacious and exquisitely fitted out with hand-carved wooden moldings with goldleaf highlights. The furniture was ornately decorated and the carpets thick and lush. Each of the suites had been equipped with fireplaces, although they were more for show than anything else since the steam produced by the boat’s boilers was used to heat the rooms after the engine was done with it.

The meals served about the boat were superb with cuisines from all over the southern hemisphere. Artur commented that he was surprised the food was that good, considering the problems inherent with cooking for so many people in the confined quarters of the boat’s galley. Especially since the passengers did not really have a choice once they were on board,

Gaenor asked around and learned that the Corinians had actually invented the first practical steam engine and that it was the Nimbrians who copied and miniaturized it for their carriages. She asked if the Corinians also had steam-driven carriages. Apparently they had something the crewmen thought were better, but Gaenor didn’t quite understand what they were from the descriptions.

The riverboat was not as fast as sailing on the *Iris* had been, but it was still faster than riding on horseback. The boat made its stately way upstream and at least once or twice each day she pulled into a town or city on a whistle stop as the ticket agent had warned them. Gaenor was fascinated by the interesting construction of the Tindi towns they passed and wanted to explore them, but had to remind herself that she would get her chance during the layover in Chiring. Until then, she had to content herself with the distant views she had during the *Queen*’s progression up the Nider.

On the fourth morning after they left Mentik, they docked in Taopolis, Corinia. Taopolis was not the capital of Corinia, but it was the educational center of the republic. A brochure offered by the River Service informed them that there were several large specialized schools of higher education in the city in addition to the University. It reminded Gaenor that this was where Doctor Nyima lived and worked and that she would be a fool to pass up the opportunity to at least try to talk to this famous scientist to whom she had sent several letters.

As they debarked, the purser informed them, “We arrived half a day early so, to put ourselves back on schedule, we won’t be leaving Taopolis until just before dinner tomorrow evening. You are welcome to stay on board, but I need to warn you that the galley will not be open until we leave port.”

“Is that normal procedure?” Artur asked.

“Yes, sir. It is part of the agreement between the River Service and the communities we serve that we encourage passengers to patronize local businesses at each port of call.”

“That’s good to know in advance,” Gaenor commented, “but I guess we ought to let Vito and Jimleo know. They were planning to stay here.”

“I’ll do that, dear,” Artur offered. “I know you three want to visit Doctor Nyima and I was just going along to stretch my legs. Why don’t I meet you for dinner?”

“Where should we meet?” Gaenor asked. “At the end of the dock?”

“As good a place as any,” Artur agreed. “From what I understand, the University is only a few minutes walk from here so even if we end up retracing your steps it won’t be all that bad a detour.”

“All right,” Gaenor replied. “We’ll be back around sunset, if not sooner.”

“Good, but keep an eye on the weather. It looks to me like snow.”

“It’s cold enough,” Gaenor commented.

Gaenor, Cornellya and Elena, using the boat’s brochure, found the University fairly quickly, but finding the Physics Department building was another problem. The University’s buildings all looked alike to Gaenor’s eye. Some were larger than others, but all had been finished with coats of the same white plaster on their outer walls and trimmed with the same ornately carved wood that Gaenor had come to recognize as typical of Corninian design. That wood had been decorated with various shades of brightly hued paint which she imagined must help identify one building from another, but the riot of colors on the trim only made it all the more confusing for her.

After wandering around the campus for over half an hour, they finally found someone to talk to when a small man wearing brightly embroidered silk robes under a heavy woolen cape came out of one of the buildings and started heading for another. “Excuse me,” Gaenor called across the gap between them. The man turned and looked at her questioningly. “Could you direct us to the Physics Department?” she asked in halting Corinian.

The man obviously had trouble understanding her, but looking at her face and clothing, he asked, “Do you speak Gostri?” His accent was horrendous, but obviously not as bad as Gaenor’s attempt at Corinian.

“Yes,” she told him with some relief. Gostri had been the first foreign language she had learned. “Yes, I do.”

“Good,” he nodded. “I see you all from Mishandi, but while I read Shandi, I am told my pronunciation all wrong.”

“Obviously I have the same problem with Corinian,” Gaenor smiled.

“Yes,” the man nodded again. “It sounded like you wanted a finished avocado. I knew that wrong. I think your problem is that no one ever teach you what tonals to use.”

“Tonals? I didn’t realize Corinian was a tonal language,” Gaenor admitted.

“Is, yes,” the man affirmed. “So what is you really want. Avocados out of season,” he added with a smile.

“The Department of Physics,” Gaenor replied, then just in case this man was who she might be looking for, she added, “We are looking for Doctor Nyima.”

The man shook his head a bit as though trying to clear it. "Physics, physics... Let's see, I teach anthropology so I don't get to the physical sciences end of the campus very often, but if you take this path between those two buildings," he pointed to the northeast, "you reach another open quadrant with fountain. The fountain not run this season, but on other side you see two buildings, one with mostly blue trim. That is Physics Building."

Gaenor and the others thanked him and they were off. The next quadrant was not as nearby as the man had seemed to imply for the path ran lengthwise between two very long buildings, but it did eventually lead to an open area with an empty fountain in the center. They walked around the fountain and saw the building with mostly blue trim. As they drew closer they were able to read a sign in front of the building, or rather they were able to read half of it.

There were two inscriptions. One was in ideograms that Gaenor recognized as a traditional form of writing in these lands to the south of the Southlands. She had seen a few signs in Nundro that had been written in ideograms, but, as she hadn't had the time to go shopping, what they said had been of only passing interest at the time. In any case it was unlikely the Nundran ideograms said the same thing Corinian ones did so learning to read them would not have helped now. However the second inscription was in an alphabetic form of writing that Gaenor, Cornellya and Elena had learned to read in varying degrees of success and that part of the sign clearly read, "Department of Physics."

"I guess this is the right building after all," Gaenor observed dryly. "I hope the signs inside aren't in ideograms."

"Cheer up," Cornellya told her, "maybe they'll be in hieroglyphs."

"Charming thought," Gaenor managed to mutter sourly before the chuckle escaped.

As it happened the only ideograms were on the sign outside. The Physics Department building was three stories tall and according to the sign at the bottom of the stairs, Doctor E. Nyima's office was on the third floor. Elena groaned at the thought of all those stairs.

"Getting soft?" Gaenor teased her as they started climbing.

"I didn't know there were so many stairs in the world when I lived on Olaka," Elena explained. "One got into a loft by climbing a ladder, so the only stairs were on a few porches and then never more than three."

"We don't have any stairs at all in the Village," Cornellya told her. "All levels are connected by ramps. The only form of steps is in the lake at the bottom of our caves and those were cut into the bottom so we could walk into the water without slipping and falling."

They reached the third floor and looked around. Gaenor had expected the walls to be plastered and painted white as they had been in Mita and Misha. Here the walls were, indeed plastered and painted, but instead of stark white the walls were covered in vast murals depicting scientists making what Gaenor assumed were famous discoveries. They passed a few empty class rooms and office doors. Some of those doors were open, some locked, but none of them bore Doctor Nyima's name. They were nearly at the end of the long corridor before they found the office they were looking for.

The office featured a single desk and a wall filled with books and another long wall that was nearly all covered in smooth, matte-finished, black slate. There was a small window at the far end of the office, but what attracted Gaenor's attention were all the mathematical formulae drawn on the slate covered wall

with chalk. There was hardly any space for more, except that Gaenor could see that the wall had been erased at least once and recovered with more formulae. There was a small open door at the very back of the office.

Gaenor walked forward with Cornellya and Elena a few paces behind and looked through the doorway, which led into an empty classroom. Inside that classroom she discovered a short woman, no taller than five feet, standing with her back to the doorway Gaenor was standing in and next to a long table, swearing at the page of a notebook. She had light brown skin and long, straight, black hair lightly streaked with gray. She was dressed in a plain blouse and trousers and wore a gray cotton lab coat over them. She spun around suddenly as Gaenor cleared her throat.

“Yes?” the woman asked, frowning slightly.

“Excuse me,” Gaenor began. Without realizing it, she spoke in Shandi. “But we’re looking for Doctor Nyima.”

“You found her,” Doctor Nyima replied shortly, also in Shandi.

“You’re E. Nyima?” Gaenor asked, amazed.

“Eliyama Nyima, yes,” she responded. “Is that a problem?”

“No, not at all. Please forgive me for staring. I didn’t realize you were a woman. I mean, I read some of your papers on Relativity, but you only used your initial, so...”

“Ah, yes,” Doctor Nyima replied, softening her tone. “It is a standard convention in the sciences here to only use one’s first initial and last name on papers. You are a northerner, I see. I understand there are very few women in any of the universities there. Is that correct?”

“It is; yes,” Gaenor replied.

“Then I suppose your confusion is understandable. And who are you all and what do you want with me?”

“Oh, I am being rude today,” Gaenor gasped, shocked that she had failed to introduce herself immediately. “This is Cornellya Vasylya, Elena Carolena, and my name is Gaenor of Narmouth...”

“You’re Gaenor of Narmouth?” Now it was Doctor Nyima’s turn to be surprised. “Then I suppose we are even as I never realized that Gaenor was a woman’s name. I’ve received several letters from you and I must say I’ve been quite anxious to speak with you. Please have a seat, we have so much to discuss. Are all of you adepts?”

“I am,” Cornellya responded. Elena just shook her head.

“Cornellya was born adept,” Gaenor explained. “She’s a vari from the Parch.”

“I didn’t know life was even possible in the Parch,” Doctor Nyima commented.

“We like to encourage that belief or else humans might use adepts to move in and eventually push us out of our home,” Cornellya replied. She had been disguising her ears again and let the illusion drop.

“Oh my ancestors!” Doctor Nyima gasped. “You aren’t human, are you? I always thought the stories of Vieri were Mishandan and Gostrinan superstitions.”

“The stories aren’t really very close to the truth,” Gaenor admitted.

“And you, dear?” Doctor Nyima turned toward Elena. “You are not adept?”

“Not yet, ma’am,” Elena responded quietly.

“Elena is my student,” Gaenor added. “She probably won’t be ready for initiation for at least three or four years. I know the University at Misha would not approve at least until she is eighteen and they would prefer initiates be twenty-one years old.”

“We can always initiate her in the Village,” Cornellya commented.

“If the Council of the Wise approves,” Gaenor amended. The last thing she wanted was for a frustrated Elena to try to get to the Village without the benefit of magic. “When the time comes, I’m sure both Misha and Mita will be vying to be the school to initiate her.

“Doctor Nyima,” Gaenor started to continue.

“Call me Ely, Gaenor,” Eliyama interrupted. “We’re colleagues and hopefully we’ll be friends as well.”

“My friends call me Gae,” Gaenor responded instantly. “Anyway, Ely, I wrote all those letters, but if you’ve had a chance to respond I haven’t been home yet to have received them and since we had a one day layover here in Taopolis I absolutely had to meet you.”

“I’m glad you did. I did my best to answer your questions, but I had even more questions for you. You see, we do not have adepts in Corinia as far as I know. There’s no law against it like there is in the so-called Holylands, of course, but while we excel in the technological sciences, magic is pretty much an unknown here. We don’t doubt its existence, but we have managed to do without it.”

“And done very well, I think,” Gaenor agreed. “You have those magnificent steamboats on the river and on the way here we saw quite a few carriages that looked vaguely like the steam carriages in Nimbria, but they run by some different means, though I don’t know how.”

“Internal combustion,” Ely replied. “The engines run on distilled petroleum and are much smaller than their steam counterparts. They don’t smell all that good, but there are engineers working on that too. So what do you want to know now?”

“Everything!” Gaenor told her sincerely.

Ely laughed, “Yes, I know the feeling. Well since you never got any of my letters let’s start with your law of Conservation of Matter and Energy.”

“My law? I thought it was yours,” Gaenor replied.

“I set up the equations that prove it,” Ely admitted, “but you were the one who put it to words. I was so busy working out the equation of matter-energy conversion that it never occurred to me that the old laws of Conservation of matter and of energy needed to be combined into a new law. I hope you don’t mind that I quoted some of your letters in recent lectures.”

“Not at all,” Gaenor told her, still amazed that her letters were thought to be of such value.

“Oh good, because I was hoping we might collaborate on one or three papers while you are here.”

“I’m only here until tomorrow afternoon,” Gaenor protested.

“Plenty of time,” Ely insisted. “I have several papers outlined already. We can go over a few and you can fill in some of my blanks and maybe even use magic to provide some experimental proof, not that it ought to be strictly necessary. My entire Theory of Relativity was worked out purely mathematically, but the critics always claim it isn’t true without physical proof - as though my equations weren’t proof enough.”

“Well, okay,” Gaenor agreed tentatively. “I can at least take a look and see if I have anything to offer. I have to warn you, though, that I don’t have a lot of formal experience in physics or mathematics. I’m mostly self-taught, in fact.”

“If the insight you show in your letters is any indication, I may have to send some of my graduate students to study on their own in Mishanda too,” Ely replied with a chuckle.

“Do you know of a way to prove that magical energy is subject to the same laws as other forms of energy?” Gaenor asked.

“I see no reason to think otherwise,” Ely told her seriously. “Before I can answer that, however, I need to know more about magic and magical energy. I agree with you that the power behind magical actions cannot come from nowhere, there must be a source, or even a variety of sources, perhaps, but what we need is to be able to detect that energy before we can say anything certain about it.

“Still, I did like your suggestion that perhaps magic actually converts small amounts of matter to energy in order to accomplish what it does,” Ely continued.

“Only in some spells,” Gaenor pointed out. “It seems to me that in spells that use ingredients, items that are consumed, that is, may be releasing potential chemical energy with which to work. Much in the same way a fire releases energy from the wood or coal that is burning.”

“But even in a fire, I believe that some minute amounts of matter are converted to energy. I can prove that mathematically, but it would be difficult to prove it physically,” Ely admitted. “But, tell me, do you know of any cases of what might be radiation burns suffered by adepts or persons close to them while they are working spells?”

“I can’t say that I have,” Gaenor replied. “Could magic use the energy it releases so efficiently that little or none is released to harm the user?”

“Anything is possible,” Ely said, “but I doubt that. If you study the properties of radioactive elements, you’ll...”

“Radioactive?” Gaenor asked.

“The term was invented by a colleague of mine a few years ago,” Ely replied. “He was examining a sample of pitchblende for its ability to turn the air around it into a conductor of electricity. Still, there is a lot of work to be done in that field before we can totally understand what is at stake. We’re not even

absolutely certain as to what the structure of an atom might be. We seem to be equally split between those who believe an atom is the smallest possible piece of matter and those who are saying that even atoms must be built up of still smaller particles.”

“Where do you stand on that?” Gaenor asked.

“I don’t,” Ely replied. “It’s not my specialty. My training is actually as a mathematician and Relativity works well on the universe as a whole. I have not yet had the chance to look into how it applies at the atomic level. Several colleagues say it doesn’t apply at all and that I need to come up with another theory that encompasses both Relativity and what they claim to be observing at the atomic level. If that’s the case I guess I’ll have to, but I need to know more about what goes on that scale before I can be certain I can predict atomic behavior.”

“Are you working on that?” Elena asked, fascinated.

“Not yet,” Ely replied. “I’m still doing the finish work on the equations of General Relativity. You saw some of them on the blackboard in my office. Anyway I was talking about radioactivity. Some matter seems to emit this form of energy. Pitchblende is an ore of a recently discovered element known as uranium and it appears that this radioactivity comes from the uranium and several other as yet unidentified substances within it. The danger of working with pitchblende and its constituents is that a scientist can develop burns and lesions from the radioactivity and those wounds heal fairly slowly. The colleague I mentioned first became aware of the problem when he carried an ore sample in his pocket for a while and then discovered a radiation burn on his leg, although he didn’t realize what it was at the time.

“Of course,” she continued, “the question is what forms of radiation are harmful and in what quantities. Sunlight is a form of radiation and prolonged exposure can result in burns, but they don’t appear to be the same sort of burns we associate with pitchblende. Well, I’m speaking out of my field again, but since we know, or rather believe, that magic uses a form of energy, there should be a way to measure it. If you are right about some of that energy coming from the conversion of minute amounts of matter in the tools or ingredients, then I think it is safe to assume that the amount of energy released will be equal to the mass of that matter multiplied by the constant, that being the speed of light, squared - at least so long as my special theory of Relativity is correct, and I believe it is.”

“Therefore,” Gaenor concluded, “If we can determine the amount of mass that is converted we can determine the amount of energy that ought to be produced.”

“If we can measure the energy, we can also calculate how much mass was converted as well,” Elena added.

“Very good,” Ely Nyima approved, “although it will probably be easier to get an accurate measurement of the mass before and after.”

“Even there we have complications,” Gaenor pointed out. “A lot of the energy may be from chemical reactions. We get a lot of that in the use of ingredients; combustion, the formation of chemical compounds and all that. A fair percentage of mass might be lost as minute particles suspended in the air.”

“Then experiment with tool-only based spells,” Cornellya suggested.

“Spell tools could lose mass merely from friction,” Gaenor pointed out. “Not very much, but...”

“You’ll need a control set of tools,” Ely told her. “Tools you go through all the physical motions with that

you do with the real thing so you can compare them against each other.”

“Some energy, we believe, comes from within ourselves,” Cornellya commented, “and some from around us.”

“That’s just what this experiment will prove,” Gaenor replied, “One way or the other. But the number of spells we’ll have to cast before we can measure a difference may be incredible. I’ll have to think about what the best spells to use will be.”

“Why more than one?” Elena asked.

“We don’t have any proof yet about what spells may get their energy from mass conversion. It may turn out that none of them do, but if we use only one spell, I may choose one that doesn’t. The results would not be accurate,” Gaenor answered.

“Definitely you should include several variants on your flint and steel spell,” Cornellya told her.

“Good suggestion,” Gaenor replied. “There are a lot of very different spells that can be performed with those two tools. If we get no results we can always try other spells.”

“How soon can you do that” Ely asked.

“I probably shouldn’t do it while traveling,” Gaenor replied. “The chance of contaminating the evidence is too great. I probably won’t be able to start until I get back from Ichtar.”

“Ichtar?” Ely asked. “What the devil are you going there for?”

Gaenor explained, once again, the danger to the world that was presented by the spell currently emanating from that island. The explanation took a while especially since she felt she had to explain a lot of magical terms although Doctor Nyima did not ask her to. When she was finally finished, Ely commented, “Too bad we can’t take our measurements from these great spells you talk about. Spells that can change the world’s climate would almost have to convert mass to supply the energy and so should the spells that counter them. Oh well, we should eventually be able to calculate from the construction of the spell itself just how much energy is used and where it comes from. If we’re lucky it will be within our lifetimes.”

“Well, that certainly gives me a project when I finish my extrapolations of the laws of sympathy and contagion,” Gaenor sighed. “On the other hand, it will give Elena a lot of excellent practice before her initiation.”

“Me?” Elena asked.

“You wanted to help on this too, didn’t you?” Gaenor countered. Elena nodded. “Another avenue of study we are undertaking is looking for correlations between the periodic table of the elements and those elements’ magical properties. It seems possible that they may be magical elements as well as chemical and if not we’ll expand our search for spell elements to other *materia magica*.”

“Ambitious,” Ely murmured. “Well, when you start, please send me your results. In the meantime I’ll think on the matter and see if I can come up with a mathematical prediction of those results.”

“It will be interesting if I get the predicted results,” Gaenor replied, “but maybe it would be best if you

don't tell me until after. I can't guarantee that I wouldn't unconsciously fudge the results if I knew."

"Reasonable," Ely nodded. "Although do keep writing whenever you get an idea I can help with. This is some of the most fun I've had in a while."

"Where are all the students?" Cornellya asked suddenly. "This is a school, isn't it?"

"Students? In a university?" Ely asked in mock seriousness. "What an outlandish idea! Seriously? It's midterm vacation. You got lucky and popped in just after it began. In two weeks this place will be lousy with students again. Actually, I like teaching, but it does get in the way of the more important work. That's why I was working on my general theory calculations when you came in."

"Heh!" Cornellya chuckled, "It sounded more like you were swearing at them."

"What makes you think the two are mutually exclusive?" Ely countered impishly. "It's starting to get late though, and I'd still like to discuss those papers with you, Gae. Why don't I send out for some food? We can work into the night then start up again tomorrow morning before you have to leave."

"I promised Artur we'd meet him for dinner," Gaenor explained. "Why don't you come with us? We can talk over dinner and then come back here afterward."

"It's been a while since I've have a sociable dinner that wasn't with the same old faculty faces," Ely replied with a shrug and a crooked smile. "Why not? So what sort of low dive did you have in mind to drag me to?"

"Unless Artur's already found one," Gaenor chuckled, "I was hoping you might have a suggestion."

"Well there is a place the students and some of the faculty frequent during the school year, and by happy circumstance it's down in the harbor district."

Ond

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"By the time we get back to Narmouth," Artur observed as the *Queen of the Nider* puffed its way upriver, "you'll be spending so much time writing to all your friends you won't have much time left for anything else."

Gaenor chuckled, "It's not that bad. I write while we're traveling because it helps fill the time, but most of this writing can be done in the evenings. Besides, if I'm going publish those papers with Ely, I do need to feel I'm pulling my own weight."

"I thought she'd be writing the final drafts, since they would need to be in Corinian at least initially," Artur commented.

“Well, that’s because she already has a publisher in Corinia and she’ll be presenting the papers at Corinian symposia, but we’d like to be able to publish in either Shandi or Gostri as well. I need to find someone to pick up the Mishandan rights to our work, perhaps the University.”

“Your friends on Kimn might be interested as well,” Artur pointed out, “and Mita College may be a good outlet too, if they can afford the licensing fees.”

“I’m not sure if I’d want to publish through Kimn, although if there’s no better outlet, I might,” Gaenor considered.

“Why not?” Artur asked.

“I don’t really approve of them,” she replied. “It doesn’t seem to me that a society in which women dominate is any better than one with the men exclusively in charge.”

“Men dominate in Mishanda and even more so in Gostrina,” Artur pointed out.

“True enough,” Gaenor admitted, “but then I’m not asking the government of Mishanda or Gostrina to publish my work, am I? Mita might be a good choice, however. They could certainly use the income.”

“Who is publishing in Corinia?” Artur asked.

“Ely says she’ll submit it to the journal of a mathematical society in Taopolis. It’s a shame we don’t have such publications in Mishandan academic circles.”

“Perhaps you should help to found one, Gae,” Artur suggested.

“Me?” Gaenor asked. “What do I know about publishing anything? Where would I find the money for such an enterprise for that matter?”

“We have the money, Gae. Or we will have when Colchicus settles Pawlen’s suit.”

“Will he do that?”

“Oh yes,” Artur replied. “It’s actually a way for him to see to his ‘old man’s’ retirement. For that matter you still have the royalties from the publication of your thesis coming to you.”

“They won’t be enough to buy a printing press,” Gaenor laughed.

“You don’t have to buy a press, Gae,” Artur told her, “Just hire a printer. Give him the layouts of the magazine and have him set the type and print it out. Then all you need to do is find a way to distribute it.”

“That’s the problem. I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Ask Relle. She’s a well-educated woman with a lot of contacts. Frankly I think she’s being wasted spending all her time alternating between following Pawlen about and going to parties.”

“By now she’s probably working with Ibbet,” Gaenor replied.

“Same thing. Ibbet’s a pretty smart person in her own right. It won’t take long for her to learn how to be a queen and that will leave Relle back with a lot of time on her hands. Go ahead and see if she’s

interested in being a publisher.”

“She did tell me she always wanted to be an adept,” Gaenor admitted, “and she does know everyone worth knowing in Misha. She would also know who to ask to act as a jury for such a publication. Okay, I’ll ask her if she’s interested as soon as I finish this note to Ely and another to Marlie.”

Gaenor not only caught up on her correspondence before the boat docked in Chiring, but made the time to work with Elena on her lessons and with Cornellya, who had shown an increased interest in mathematics since leaving Taopolis.

Jimeleo and Vito had started working together on a set of defensive spells to shield the user from magical attacks. Gaenor took an intense interest in what they were doing and sat in on their discussions as time permitted and occasionally offered suggestions. Previously such spells were most effective when the adept casting them knew what he was defending against, but they were hoping to come up with a more general defense against magical attacks. “It could be essential on Ichtar,” Vito pointed out.

They were all able to play tourist in Chiring where narrow streets twisted their way between buildings that averaged ten stories tall. The city itself was broken up into dozens of little districts. The business district was further divided into subdistricts specializing in clothing, theater, manufacturing and financial concerns and each of those subdivisions had streets where directly competing businesses set up shop next to each other. Gaenor spent a fair amount of time in the clothing district where she bought several bolts of cloth at amazingly low prices for shipping directly home.

Elena was fascinated by the street with shops that were all filled with brightly-colored trim and Gaenor allowed her to buy as much as she wanted. She did not abuse Gaenor’s generosity and only purchased enough for two dresses that she planned to make from some of Gaenor’s cloth.

It was Cornellya, however who borrowed from Gaenor to buy a wide assortment of colored glass beads. “They’re just so pretty,” she told Gaenor, “and I’d like to give them to Kseniya. She embroiders for the fun of it and I’m sure she would love to work with these.”

“Do you want to ship them to Narmouth with the cloth?” Gaenor asked.

“I’m traveling fairly lightly,” Cornellya replied, “And I only bought a few pounds of beads. I’ll hold on to them for now. If they get too heavy, we can always ship them later, can’t we?”

“Of course,” Gaenor replied. “Speaking of Kseniya, it has been a while since we spoke to her. Do you think we should check in with her tonight?”

“It couldn’t hurt,” Cornellya replied. “although maybe we should call just before dinner. Our local time is a bit ahead of the Village’s right now, no more than a hour, but I wouldn’t want to wake her up. I’m not even certain if we could.”

“Fair enough,” Gaenor agreed. “Do you mind if I cast the spell this time around?”

“Not at all, you can be the one who yawns through dinner,” Cornellya laughed.

They did not find the street of books until late in the day and since the *Queen of the Nider* would be leaving at sunrise the next morning they were forced to forego the pleasures that would have entailed. However, while passing by a shop that appeared to sell various crystals and mineral samples for hobbyist collectors, Gaenor stopped in to purchase identical pieces of flint to be used later in their experiments.

"I'll get the steels from the local blacksmith," she explained to Elena. "The expensive part will be in acquiring a balance accurate enough to detect the minute changes we're expecting. Good thing the best are made in Gostrina, so it will be cheaper to buy it at home, although if we manage to go home by way of Es, perhaps we'll take the time to find one there."

They arrived back at the boat to find Artur, Vito and Jimeleo anxious to go out to dinner so Gaenor and Cornellya put off their call to Kseniya. Tindi dining turned out to be a long and relaxed affair that stretched late into the evening with many small dishes and entertainments of various sorts so that by they returned to the bat it was much too late to hope that Kseniya might still be awake.

"We'll be in Tersa in three days time," Gaenor considered over breakfast. "If there was something really essential for us to know right now, she probably would have tried calling us."

"That would have been much more difficult," Cornellya pointed out. "She doesn't know where we are and it is a directional spell."

"There is that," Gaenor agreed, "but there's no help for it now, is there? We're going to have to stay on board in Tersa anyway. Artur wants to make sure no one is looking for us in Sorvohn before we arrive."

"What will we do for meals while in Tersa?" Cornellya asked. "The galley will be closed."

"I'll go into town and bring some back," Elena told them. "They won't know me and I'm not an adept yet anyway."

"But the Niderians know you were traveling in our company. If they told their Karkominian counterparts..."

"What then?" Elena asked, "Are you going to conjure up a meal?"

"I wouldn't even know where to start," Gaenor replied, but then she got quietly thoughtful.

"Yes?" prompted both Cornellya and Elena.

"Well, I suppose there are ways. Creating matter from energy is certainly theoretically possible if Ely's theories are correct, but until we know how an atom is built, any results are likely to be dangerous - if there are even any results to begin with. Then, even if we knew how to produce, say, hydrogen from energy, to conjure a meal we would have to be able to produce the constituent chemicals in the exact proportions or else the food is likely to be poisonous. Even then the complexity of creating something that isn't just organic mush is so beyond what any one person could do... No, that is not within our capabilities at this time. Perhaps some day in the future we will be able to create magical machines, well, the equivalent of machines that could be used to cast the almost impossibly complex spells necessary to create edible food from energy. Not to mention you would need an amazingly big energy source to work with.

"However," Gaenor continued, "it might be easier to take a meal, convert it to energy, and then reconvert it back to the meal you started with. It may be possible, I think, to transmit that energy in such a way that the spell 'remembers' what sort of matter that food was and reproduces it exactly without the caster necessarily having to understand the atomic and molecular structure of the matter involved... maybe. I'll have to think about that, and write to Ely to see if she has any ideas along those lines. While I'm at it, I should ask Doctors Haxmire and Lastor, and maybe Kseniya when we speak to her next, if we have the time. There is a far easier way of making the food appear, however, although it involves

something akin to an illusionist's trick.

"That would be simply causing a meal to levitate from one place to another while no one was looking. I could do that. I could even make it invisible while it is traveling, although I'll admit I would have to know exactly where it was in order to pull it off. The other obvious option is to go past the customs booths invisibly, buy the food in town and then come back invisibly the same way."

"That sounds like cheating," Cornellya commented.

"You should talk," Gaenor laughed. "It's one of your favorite spells."

"Not really," Cornellya replied seriously, "but it is the one I've used more than any other."

"Well this time I think we can teach Elena how to cast the spell," Gaenor said decisively.

"Gaenor," Cornellya objected, trying to avoid looking at Elena's jubilant smile, "that isn't a simple spell. Certainly not the sort of spell a student should try as a first attempt. Wait a minute, she's not initiated. Elena, no offense intended, I think you've shown a lot of talent, but without the initiation there's no magic for humans."

"I forgot," Elena agreed.

"Cornellya, have you forgotten how I cast my first spell?" Gaenor asked.

"The blessing over the Village?"

"No before that. The binding ritual in Firdan," Gaenor replied.

"That was before I met you," Cornellya reminded her, "but I take your meaning."

"The way I see it, it is high time I gave you an exam, Elena. We're going to teach you how to perform an invisibility spell. You can practice it all the way to Torsa. If you can cast and maintain the spell absolutely correctly you may join Cornellya and me when we go into town. However, casting the spell itself is the easy part. The tricky part of this spell is maintaining it. It takes constant adjustment if you want to stay perfectly invisible. So we'd better start you off right away. Watch as I create an invisibility amulet now."

Gaenor stopped to rummage through her collection of spell tools and pulled out what she needed as well as one of the wooden carvings she and Artur used as amulets. A few minutes later she finished the spell and handed the amulet to Elena. Elena already knew how to invoke the amulet and did so immediately. Just as immediately she became invisible.

"Good so far," Gaenor told her "although anyone can invoke an amulet. Let's see you walk across the room, or rather let's not see you do it."

Elena tried but without instruction, Gaenor knew from the start she would have trouble, but together Cornellya and she told her what she had to do to make the spell work. Her mastery of the spell was still shaky, by the end of the day, however. "You have another day or so to practice, better let the spell go for now. It really drains you."

"It's not so bad, Gae," Elena told her as she became entirely visible once more. Then she started yawning uncontrollably.

“Not so bad, is it?” Gaenor laughed. A few minutes later Elena had fallen asleep.

The next day, however, it was apparent that Elena wasn’t making sufficient progress to be able to go into town safely. Not only was she disappointed, she was frustrated. “Let’s see you two do it,” she challenged both Gaenor and Cornellya. One at a time they both cast the spell and moved about the cabin. “Oh,” Elena said sadly, “that is pretty good. I can kind of see movement, but as I look more closely it stops.”

“That’s because we stopped too,” Gaenor told her, “the spell is not perfect and motion can be seen, although with practice and concentration you can keep that to a bare minimum. The problem is you weren’t keeping your surroundings sufficiently in mind as you moved. The result was that we could very clearly see where you were instead of just thinking our eyes were playing tricks on us. Do you want to try again?”

“May I?” Elena asked.

“Of course,” Gaenor told her. She became visible once more then handed Elena another amulet. Elena invoked it and tried once more with Cornellya’s coaching. Her performance improved, but not enough for Gaenor to want to risk bringing her into Tersa where magic was a killing offense. “I’m sorry, Elena, but I don’t dare let you take the risk. I probably shouldn’t have gotten your hopes up.”

“No, I know I’m not doing this well enough,” Elena admitted at last.

“Considering it’s the first experience you’ve had with actual magic it wasn’t a bad start.” Gaenor assured her. “You’ll get better and once we get out of the Southlands I promise I’ll find an excuse to let you try this sort of thing again, although maybe next time, we’ll try something that doesn’t take the high intensity maintenance. I forgot how much training I had before I tried the invisibility spell the first time. The practice does make a difference. Simpler spells help build up the mind control and while the ritual and incantation is most of the spell, keeping your mind on the results is important, especially on the more complex spells.”

However, it turned out that neither Cornellya nor Gaenor were really good enough to sneak off the riverboat. “And where do you two think you’re going?” Artur asked as they tried sneaking past him. They both paused, and then with a slight shove from behind from Gaenor, Cornellya tried walking on. “Oh no you don’t,” Artur told them and he took a few steps to stand between them and the gangplank. “I can see where you are,” he informed them, “but don’t drop the spell until you get back inside the cabin. You can be seen from the dock.”

“How did you see us?” Gaenor asked.

“How do you think? I saw the movement,” he replied acidly, “now both of you march right back to the cabin.” They did so and he followed them. “What the hell were you thinking?” he demanded as soon as he had closed the door behind himself.

“Someone had to go into town to bring back dinner at least,” Gaenor told him defensively.

“Someone did,” Artur informed her. “I paid one of the crewmen to fetch us meals while we stay in port. Evidently, it’s a rather common request. Now unless you intend to risk your life to buy a Karkominian rug, I suggest you stay on board here. It’s bad enough we’ll have to change boats in Onda, but from what I hear, the Ondan officials don’t bother to check passports in the river ports so we’ll be fairly safe

there unless you intend to put on a fireworks display as you get off the boat.”

“I’m sorry,” Gaenor told him. “I do think we could have managed it though.”

“Maybe,” Artur allowed, “but was it really worth the risk? It’s not like missing a meal or two would have killed any of us, but getting caught as an adept on what passes for Karkominian soil, swampy as it is, could have gotten you killed. At least you didn’t try sneaking Elena into town with you.” Gaenor wisely kept silent on that subject.

“You only caught us because you knew the signs,” Cornellya told her godfather heatedly. “None of these people know magic from a hole in their heads.”

“Shows what you know,” Artur retorted calmly. “There’s plenty of magic in the Southlands and the people here see it all the time. The difference is that it’s only practiced by the priests and they tell the people it’s a special gift from the gods and only priests and the damned are capable of it. You can bet what anyone who saw an outlander using magic would assume about them.”

“Maybe they would think I was a wandering saint,” Cornellya suggested.

“Right,” Artur sighed. He looked at the two of them, then just shook his head and left the cabin.

“He isn’t wrong,” Gaenor admitted, looking at the door. “I should have thought of paying someone to bring us our meals. It’s not like we’re getting cabin fever, you know.”

“I don’t like being told not to do something,” Cornellya commented darkly.

“I’ve noticed,” Gaenor told her. “That’s almost as silly as not thinking to send out for our food. You know that, don’t you?”

“Maybe I’ll grow out of it in a thousand years or so,” Cornellya sulked.

“Got caught?” Elena asked a moment later as she entered the cabin.

“It’s a sore subject at the moment, ‘Lena” Gaenor warned her. “It appears we were all being foolish. Artur hired one of the crewmen to bring us our meals.”

“Oh,” Elena replied. “Good thinking.”

“I thought so too after I got over the lecture,” Gaenor admitted. “Well, maybe it’s all for the best. We were planning to contact Kseniya soon and this seems to be as good a time as any. I’m glad you showed up. I want to introduce you to her anyway. I’ll just get my tools and ingredients out.”

“Is this the right time for that?” Elena asked. “You told me that in the past you called at night.”

“The first time we were confused about the timing,” Cornellya explained while Gaenor sorted out her tools, “We ended up contacting Kseniya very late at night; after midnight, in fact. We were lucky she was awake. The second time we were even further west, so we waited until it was late for us, so it would be around breakfast time in the Village. This time we’re almost due south of my home; a bit to the east actually, so if anything we’re a little ahead of the Village, although probably not a whole time zone as you humans reckon them.”

“Vieri don’t?” Elena asked.

“We measure the day differently. Traditionally, we divide it in two halves; night and day. Then each half is divided again; morning and afternoon, evening and night. And then in half once more; early and late morning and so forth. I guess you could call them eight hours. That’s how it was done traditionally and in day-to-day life that’s about as accurate as we need to be.

“We have sundials on the surface near the entrance to the Village and sand clocks inside,” she continued. “Our scholars do see the need for more accurate measurement of time, however, and since we are not entirely cut off from the human world – every so often one of us goes out and takes a look around – we have adopted the human system of hours, minutes and seconds for our deeper studies.”

“I’m ready,” Gaenor announced.

Cornellya took a quick look at the items Gaenor had chosen and asked, “What do you need all that stuff for. The calling spell can be accomplished with almost any object that can be pointed in the right general direction.”

“I think I’ve come up with a work-around for the power problem,” Gaenor told her. The spell she cast was much more complex than the one Cornellya had used in the past and Gaenor kept her extensive notes within sight as she worked in order to make sure she didn’t deviate from the necessary ritual by so much as an iota. “Kseniya,” she called in a normal tone of voice when she was finished and the room was filled with a rich blue light. On the far wall they could see an all blue image of Kseniya from behind in one of the Village’s rock-cut rooms.

“Hello, Gaenor,” Kseniya replied calmly, turning around. A moment later she jumped visibly. “What have you done?”

“Calmly, Kseniya,” Gaenor replied. “The visible image is a surprise to me too, I guess it was always potential in the calling spell, but I added a power amplification spell module to the calling. All I was trying to do was to avoid the drain Cornellya experienced.”

“You may be correct about the visual manifestation being potential in the calling,” Kseniya commented as she started to calm down. “I have seen examples in which a dim light manifested on both ends when a powerful adept cast the spell and the distance between the caller and his target was not great, although this is still quite amazing. It’s good to see you again, and you Cornellya. Who is your friend?”

“Kseniya,” Gaenor replied, “I present my student, Elena Carolena, late of Olaka in the Cilben Empire.”

“Pleased to meet you, Elena,” Kseniya replied politely. Elena, eyes wide at the sight of the elder vari, nodded and did half of a curtsy. “Gaenor, I am pleased to hear you have accepted a student. It is the most important responsibility of any adept to pass their knowledge on, not that you ever have failed to share what you knew, of course.”

They chatted on for another few minutes before Gaenor got down to the business of catching Kseniya up on what had been happening since they left Colch. As they spoke, Gaenor noticed that the spell stayed visually centered on Kseniya and followed her as she walked around the room and then eventually sat down. Finally they were out of small talk and Gaenor got down to the real reason she had called.

“Has the Council of the Wise come to any conclusions about the intent of the Ichtar spell?” she asked Kseniya.

“We have, yes,” Kseniya replied. “Actually we were fairly certain the moment you presented your hypothesis, but it is not our way to rush into such things. You were right, however, dear. The Ichtar spell was obviously designed with short, mid-range and long term destruction in mind. The Wise were able to see the short and mid-range, those being the abolishment of the desert condition in the Parch and the onset of a new ice age, respectively, but we did not see that ultimately the spell would deplete the world of all magic.”

“Who lives on Ichtar, Kseniya?” Elena asked.

Kseniya lost her composure and then regained it so quickly that Gaenor thought she must have imagined it. “Uh, I’m not really sure,” Kseniya replied just a moment too late.

“Kseniya?” Gaenor asked.

“Well you called them demons, dear,” Kseniya replied. “That assessment is accurate in the sense that they are malicious creatures who are long-lived and incredibly hard to kill. They are not immortal not are they indestructible, but they are evil and the only reason anyone would cast such a spell has to be to destroy the world as we know it. The ice age would destroy the human civilization and the depletion of magical resources would keep adepts from reversing the damage.”

“Would the magic be gone forever?” Elena asked.

“We are not certain of that,” Kseniya replied.

“Energy cannot truly be destroyed,” Gaenor remarked. “It can be converted into matter, although that is not what is happening here, but it can be used and converted into a form of energy that cannot be used in the same manner. Entropy increases, it always increases, so as the magical energy is used it goes from energy of high potential to energy of lesser potential. It’s still there, but eventually it will reach a state in which it can no longer be used in a spell. The demons of Ichtar have cast an open-ended spell that will continue to grow until it uses up all the magic in the world.

“I don’t think it will be permanent,” Gaenor continued. “The spell is working locally on this world not on the universe as a whole. Much like a fire that is left untended, it will eventually burn itself out, but magic flows through the universe and in time our depleted world will be renewed. However, I doubt any of us will be alive to see it.”

“I don’t understand,” Elena confessed. “Why would any magic user want to destroy all the magic in the world?”

“That is a matter still being discussed among the Wise, child,” Kseniya told her. “We cannot be sure we truly understand their motives, but some of us think they are trying to create a world in which only they can live.”

“And they can live without magic?”

“Apparently,” Kseniya replied. “Is there anything else we need to discuss now?”

“No, I think we covered it,” Gaenor told her. “Are you tired of our company so soon?”

“Not at all, dear,” Kseniya told her, “but I can see you are getting tired. You may have increased the

length of time we can communicate and added a visual image that is most pleasing, but even this spell will eventually wear you out.”

“I’m sure I can hold out a bit longer,” Gaenor protested.

“You’re starting to look tired Gaenor,” Cornellya told her. “Best to end the spell now, there will be a bit of backlash. Best to handle it before you’re exhausted.”

“You’re right,” Gaenor agreed finally. “We’ll call back in a few weeks, Kseniya. Be well.”

“And you dear. All of you,” Kseniya replied. “My love to Arturus as always.”

And with that Gaenor allowed the spell to end. The image of Kseniya stayed visible for several seconds as the spell faded, and then slowly grew smaller and smaller until it was a mere point of light hovering in the air. Finally it faded out and Gaenor felt a surge of weariness flow through her. “Whew!” she exclaimed. “Good thing I was sitting down.”

“Feel like a nap now?” Cornellya asked impishly.

“Maybe just a bit,” Gaenor yawned.

Two

Several days later the *Queen of the Nider* steamed into Onda, the capital city of Ond. Knowing it was a capital, Gaenor expected more of the city, but from the river it didn’t look any larger or more developed than Tera had. However, it was here they were forced to debark and wait for the next boat that would take them up the River Cosl to Tos.

Their information about Ondan customs, however, was accurate and there was no one around to ask to see their passports as they entered the city. Evidently no one really cared if they had anything to declare or what their business in the Holy Nation of Ond might be.

As soon as they were off the *Queen*, Artur went to the office of the local riverboat agent to discover that they had missed the last boat by less than two hours. “The *Cosl Star* should be here in three days,” the agent told them. “I have a list of local establishments that cater to transients if you like.”

“Maybe later,” Artur told him, “Could you direct us to the Cilben embassy?” The ticket agent gave them directions and a sketchy map of the city and they left the building.

“I thought you were avoiding your fellow Cilbens,” Vito commented as they walked uphill from the river.

“For the most part I am,” Artur agreed, “but I have an old friend here I want to see and I’m fairly certain we can depend on his discretion, since he’s the one who saved my life years ago by warning me the Emperor had decided to kill me.”

The City of Onda was as disappointing up close as it had been from a distance. Most buildings were of wood and many were in bad repair. Most streets weren’t paved at all and Gaenor could tell from the ruts that if the weather hadn’t been so frigid they would have been muddy quagmires as well. It seemed odd that only a few days earlier they had been walking the streets of a city so modern that Misha seemed

backward in comparison and now she was in a city, a capital city no less, that made quiet little Narmouth look like a modern wonder. At least all the streets in Narmouth proper were paved with cobble stones. Here the closest the city folk came to paving except on a few wide thoroughfares was to throw some gravel down on the muddy spots in the hopes they might dry out eventually.

The fastest mode of transportation in Onda appeared to be the horse and there were precious few of them in evidence. Instead, they saw many small carts drawn by domesticated onagers in the streets of Onda. The small, donkey-like creatures seemed sufficient to the task, but to Gaenor's eye they looked like something from the distant past.

Unlike Cilben embassies they had visited elsewhere, there had been no attempt to make the one in Onda look like anything more than a normal Ondan office building save that this was well maintained and obviously the sort owned by someone with more funds at hand than the average Ondan landlord. In fact the only buildings more impressive than the Cilben embassy were the temples and homes of the priests, including that of the Priest King of Ond, which they saw not too far away from the embassy building. The great doorway of the embassy was flanked on either side by tall flag poles bearing the standard of the Senate and People of Cilbe. There were no guards outside the door, however, so the entire party just walked in to the embassy's antechamber.

The interior of the building was very different from the external view. While pains had been taken to make the building fit in with the rest of the city, inside it was very much an enclave of Imperial Cilbe. The floors on the first level were covered with intricate and exquisite mosaics and the walls covered in murals of a variety of subjects, most of which seemed to deal with Cilben mythology or with gods helping various general and emperors in great victories. Gaenor guessed it might have been the Cilbens' attempt to show visiting Southlanders that they did not have an exclusive right to claim divine provenance.

As in Teliodena, there was a small office just to the right as they left the antechamber and several men and women were doing clerical work there. "Yes?" one woman asked. "May I help you?"

"Arturus Cornellian Marno to pay his respects to Ambassador Acelius Moritian Nillans. Is he available?"

"Your Serenity!" the woman gasped. Two of the others hastened to get to their feet.

"I'm not the emperor," Artur told them quietly, "and have no right to that title. Please remain seated." Those who had scrambled to their feet sat back down, but none of them went back to work.

"But we heard..." she tried again.

"I was, for a brief time, the dictator. Now that normalcy has been restored and we have a new emperor, I'm just a retired senator and one who doesn't even reside within the Empire."

"But protocol requires us to treat you as if you were emperor, doesn't it?" she asked.

"Not that I'm aware of. Perhaps the Ondans might feel that way, but in Cilbe I am just another private citizen. You had heard that Colchicus is now emperor, hadn't you?" Artur asked.

"We have, yes," she agreed, "but Ambassador Acelius told us that you were to be considered of imperial rank both for having ruled the empire and for having your son as emperor."

"I fear my old friend may have been in Ond a bit too long and their attitudes may have rubbed off a bit,"

Artur replied with a chuckle. "Or maybe it's just wishful thinking since the last time we saw one another neither of us had a very long life-expectancy. In any case is he in this morning?"

"No, Senator," she replied, "he is meeting with members of the Holy Council." She said that last phrase with about the same respect she might have said "cow patty."

"I see. Well, it appears I and my party are stranded here in Onda for a few days and we were hoping we might avail ourselves of his hospitality."

"I am sure the ambassador would extend that hospitality without hesitation," she assured Artur. "If you could wait a few minutes I will make the arrangements and also let the ambassador's wife know you are here." She ran off down the long hallway.

"I wasn't aware Acelius had even married," Artur noted to himself.

"I imagine all sorts of things have happened without your knowledge in the last couple decades," Gaenor commented dryly, "especially in places you didn't happen to be."

"You might be right," he conceded just as dryly. "I don't seem to have your penchant for writing either so I haven't managed to keep in touch with old friends the way you have, Gae."

"You were also trying to stay hidden as I recall," Gaenor pointed out. Sending dozens of letters out to old friends might have been counterproductive."

"True," Artur agreed.

Just then a woman came down the hall from the direction in which the other one had disappeared. Unlike the people in the office, who were obviously displaced Cilbens, she was short, slender and with the dark skin and curly black hair common in the Southlands. Gaenor was surprised to see, however that her eyes were light green. She was dressed in a long woolen robe of a sort Gaenor had already seen on the streets of Onda except that this one was far more colorful, with extensive embroidery along all the seams, hems, and collar. In spite of her lack of height, she held herself with calm serenity and grace. "Senator Arturus?" she asked in a soft and satiny voice as she drew near enough to speak in a normal tone. "I am Ruallie of Onda, Acelius' wife. I welcome you to our home," she concluded holding out both hands in welcome.

Artur grasped those hands lightly. "Lady Ruallie, I thank you for your most kind welcome. I present my intended, Lady Gaenor of Narmouth, my godchild, Cornellya Vasylya, Elena Carolena, Gaenor's student, Vitautis of Senne and Jimeleo of Laria."

"An honor to meet you all," Ruallie breathed. "I am having rooms prepared for you. May I offer you some refreshment? You are just in time for our morning qahwah and tea time."

"That would be lovely," Artur assured her.

"Why don't you leave your packs here? They will be delivered to your rooms," she suggested before leading them to a long narrow room with many dining nooks along the walls. The biggest was at the head of the room where a large, low table stood surrounded by classic Cilben couches. "I hope you'll forgive my lack of grace," she apologized as she sat down on the edge of one of the couches, "but I have never managed to get the knack of eating and drinking in a reclined position."

“Of our entire party,” Artur replied, sitting down in the same manner, “I am the only one who ever did so customarily and have not done so regularly in decades. I find it easier to drink hot liquids sitting up.”

An Ondan woman and man approached the table and left one pot each of tea and qahwah and also a large tray of pastries. “Thank you, Berrie, Manatt,” Ruallie told them warmly. The others murmured polite thanks as well. “So, Senator,” Ruallie asked, “Acelius has told me so much about you. What brings you to the Holy Kingdom of Ond?” The way she said that made the phrase “HolyKingdom” ironic.

Artur raised an eyebrow at that, but simply replied, “We’re just passing through on our way to Vohn.”

“Does the expression, ‘Jumping out of the pan and into the fire’ mean anything to you Senator? I hope you’ll pardon my prejudice in the matter, but I can’t honestly understand why anyone would want to live in one of the Holylands and I was born here.”

“Sounds like there’s an interesting story behind that remark,” Artur opined.

“Do you know anything about the religion of the so-called Holylands?” Ruallie asked.

“Not particularly, except that the priests are also the rulers,” Artur admitted.

“Technically that’s the governmental system, but in practice they’re related,” she told them. “According to the theology there are seven true gods; Ahn, Vohn, Nider, Taxo, Karko, Gar and Ond. I’m sure I don’t have to tell you what we are taught about the gods you grew up with. Anyway, each of the Holylands is the home of one of those gods. You can tell which is which from the names of each kingdom.

“We are taught that they created the world as a monument to their own glory and created people to serve their every need. The High Priests claim to have been chosen by the gods themselves. The high priests choose the members of their exalted inner circle of priests, who choose the members of the lower orders of the priesthood who have the job deciding each person’s lot in life. To question that decision is to commit heresy.

“Rich families can bribe their priest to assign them to lucrative occupations, generally to their own family business or to the priesthood itself. Less well-off people pay for whatever they can afford and the really poor take whatever they can get. Still the priest is not required to sell an occupation and they can reassign occupations whenever it suits them. I’ve heard that in some places the priests take an oath of celibacy,” Ruallie commented.

“Depends on the god they serve,” Gaenor replied. “Some priests have large families too.”

“The priests here have whatever they want and they are a greedy lot,” Ruallie told her. “Far from being celibate they have large harems. Well, maybe that’s not the right word. It implies they are married to those women. That’s what comes from trying to tell this story in Cilben, I guess. Actually they just pick any woman that strikes their fancy and assign them to the job of temple prostitute. I was one of those women. It isn’t a lifetime profession, however. They only keep the women as long as they stay young and beautiful and we got moved from one temple to another fairly regularly so the priests wouldn’t get bored with us.

“The lower priests are a pretty miserable lot,” Ruallie continued, “but they get worse the further up the ladder one goes. Some of those upper priests have some exotic preferences and what the archpriests like doesn’t bear mentioning. I had been trapped in that life for two years until one day I was told I was to go

to the High Temple of the Priest King. Very few women who were assigned there ever came out alive, but I had met one poor woman who had somehow survived the tortures she was subjected to in the High Temple. Trust me, you don't want to know and neither did I. We weren't really trusted to go meekly wherever we were sent and I and four others were sent out under guard, but I got lucky.

"In spite of the stupidity of the religion in Ond," Ruallie told them, "there are many devout people here and the more devout they are the more credible of the superstitious beliefs we are taught they are. The guards were very devout. We are taught that lightning is a tool of Ond with which to mete out punishment for sins. Every roll of thunder represents the death of a sinner and no devout person dares to be outside in a thunderstorm."

"But if they are very devout, why should they fear punishment for their sins?" Vito asked. "It doesn't make sense."

"I never said it did," Ruallie told him, "but it is true nonetheless. I was saved by a lightning bolt and a crash of thunder that struck so nearby that one of the guard thought he was the target. Stupid man. If he had been hit by lightning he probably would have been dead and what sort of god misses his target?"

"I have read of cases where people have been struck by lightning and survived," Gaenor told her. "It's not a common occurrence but it does happen."

"Perhaps," Ruallie replied. "I won't doubt your word, but I think I would have to see it for myself before I could truly believe it. It does not matter what I believe, however, but what they believed. The guards panicked at the thought of being outside while their god was angry. Perhaps they thought so long as they were out of sight, Ond would not think of them. I don't know. I never did understand the mind of the devout. When the lightning struck there was an odd smell in the air and the sound was so loud it drove all thought from the minds of the guards and the other women. I was frightened too. I don't mind admitting that, but I recovered first and I ran as fast as I could."

"I didn't know where I was running except that I wanted to get away from the guards to somehow avoid my fate in the High Temple. It did not occur to me that there might be no place to run to. It did not even occur to me that once well away from the guards I should have stopped running and tried to walk as though I had no care in the world. Instead I just kept running until I ran straight into Acelius here in front of the embassy. He saw the state I was in and took pity on me. He brought me inside the embassy and gave me a cup of qahwah to calm me down. I told him most of my story, leaving out only that I was trying to run away, but he figured that out for himself."

"He told me that the embassy is technically part of the Cilben Empire and so long as I claimed sanctuary I could stay here. It was a month or so before the priests found out I was here and demanded my return, but Acelius told them to do so was against imperial law. Was that true?"

"No," Artur replied. "Not really."

"I didn't think so, but I wasn't sure. Evidently neither was the High Priest and he eventually stopped demanding my return. I was here for two years, just doing whatever I could. I started out as a maid, but unlike a lot of the servants here I took the opportunity to learn how to read and write and started working as a filing clerk. And during that period Acelius always took the time to talk to me when we met. I think I fell in love with him the day we met although nothing in my life had given me any experience with love so I did not know what I was feeling. Finally, however, after two years Acelius invited me to dine with him and after dinner we talked all night. Some time toward dawn he told me he loved me and asked me to marry him. He told me he had been married before, but his wife had died from a fever not long

before he came to Ond.

“I told him, ‘No,’ at first, but he asked me again the next day and then the next. On the third time I told him I would marry him. Once married, I was officially a citizen of Cilbe and I could leave the embassy safely. Acelius once told me that he was trapped here in Ond just as I was trapped for those first two years in the embassy. I know why he came to Ond to replace his uncle who was the ambassador before him, which is why I knew of you, Senator, even before the news came of the fall of Emperor Lusius. Your Empire does not sound like paradise, but even so it is better than the Holylands. One thing, though, would it be possible for Acelius to retire safely now that Lusius is gone?”

“I believe so, is that what he wants?” Artur asked.

“With all his heart, I think. He will never ask it, but hardly a week goes by when he doesn’t tell me of what life was like in Cilbe.”

“After twenty-four or five years, he certainly deserves it,” Artur replied. “No one should have to hold such a post this long, but I’m sure Lusius was glad to see the back of him and so long as Acelius served the Empire as well as I’m sure he has, Lusius would have been content to let Acelius rot here. There was never the level of hatred that Lusius had for me. I’ll write a note to my son, suggesting that it was high time Acelius be called home with full honors and to resume his seat in the Senate.”

“Thank you, Senator,” Ruallie replied with a deep nod of her head that was almost a bow.

“In here, you say?” they heard a man’s voice in the hallway. “Arturus! It really is you! Jube! If anything you look even younger than you did in Maite!”

“Acelius, old friend! Just the man I came to see,” Artur replied. “We’re still having qahwah. Do you have time to join us?”

“I’d put everything on hold even if I didn’t, old friend,” Acelius replied. Ruallie quickly handled the introductions and then let the two old friends talk. “My gods! It’s good to see you again. I’ve already heard about your conquest of Cilbe at the head of an army of Temi. What else have you been up to all these years?”

“Don’t forget the Twelfth Legion,” Artur told him, “They were with me as well.”

“Of course they were,” Acelius laughed. “and how did you stumble across them just when you needed them?”

“Lusius sent them to me,” Artur replied dryly and explained how the former emperor had assigned Artur’s former command to intercept the approaching Ridec Clan.

“He didn’t!” Acelius laughed. “Now that is ironic! I’m surprised the Imperial Guard even dared to stand up to you when you reached the city.”

“The Guard had changed a bit since our time,” Artur remarked. “Lusius evidently saw fit to replace the cream of the Legions with a band of thugs. I don’t think they were smart enough to notice they were so badly outnumbered. From what I hear, the world is better off without them anyway. As to the rest of the time before that...” Artur went on to describe how he had been forced to flee into the Parch and how subsequently the Vieri had saved his life, incidentally giving him a new occupation.

“You? A wizard? Now that is amazing,” Acelius laughed. “It also explains why you never came to visit. If the bloody Priest Kings of the not-so Holylands caught wind of that you might have been happier in Lusius’ hands.”

“I doubt the Vieri really expected me to actually practice magic,” Artur told his old friend, “The spell they used that made me adept also allows me to unconsciously heal myself which is why they used it. I was rather close to death when they found me and they felt it was my only hope. Having initiated me, however, they also gave me some basic training in magic and in their philosophy of life, which they call the Way. It’s a pretty good philosophy as such things go and not at all incompatible with the way I’ve always lived.

“I stayed with the Vieri for two years before deciding it was time to move on. I was tempted to poke my head back into the Empire at least to let Clortius know I was still alive, but I decided that everyone I know would be better off if I remained ‘dead.’ So instead I made my way to Gostrina. For the next few years I sort of drifted around Gostrina and Wanlaria, making a living as an itinerant adept. I knew a few spells that no one else did and I was always able to make enough to keep eating and to save a little on the side as well, but I got tired of the nomadic life and eventually made my way to Mishanda. I went to Misha first, but my first day in that city I spotted the Cilben embassy and decided that I might be wiser to find a place where I was less likely to be spotted by someone who knew me, so I drifted on south until I came to a town called Narmouth. I had saved up enough to put a down payment on a house just outside of town and in my wanderings I had made sufficient contacts to set up a business in potions and amulets so that even if the local folks didn’t need my skills, I would be able to live comfortably.

“It turned out that my skills were not only desired but in demand,” Artur continued. “The Mishandans have the most accepting attitude toward magic of anywhere in the world and their adepts are, by far, the most advanced, but not as advanced as Gaenor here, but I’m getting ahead of myself. Business was so good that after a few years I found myself needing an assistant. Gae applied for the job. To make a long story short, I eventually hired her and started teaching her what I knew about magic. I had only hired her because I needed an extra pair of hands, but to my surprise she turned out to be a magical genius, so I started sending copies of her notes to the head of the Magic Department at the University of Misha. After several such letters he started writing to Gae directly and somehow convinced her to consolidate her work sufficiently to be called a thesis. He also invited her to Misha for her own initiation as an adept, but business was too good for either of us to take the time to go to Misha until one day the king decided to put me on the honors list.” He went on to describe everything that had happened since they left Narmouth. An hour later he finally concluded, “So when I found myself in Onda this morning, I just had to come find you. Where did everyone go?” he added looking around and noticing for the first time that only he and Acelius were still in the dining nook.

“They left about the time you boarded that ship for Firdan,” Acelius told him. “You know, old friend, I heard about a lot of your adventures from here although I didn’t know it was you involved. You seem to walk though the world with the feet of a giant. Wherever you go the ground trembles and history is made.”

“The legacy of a misspent youth, I assure you,” Artur replied. “It’s not all me. I was slipping around on padded feet for a long time until Gae and I started traveling. If you want to see a world shaker, however, take another look at Gae. Those giant feet you mentioned would have come to an abrupt halt several times if it hadn’t been for her. I may have ruled the empire for a while, but Gae is quietly changing the world on a far more profound level. The Magical Scholars of Misha granted her a Master’s degree, the eldest of the Vieri sat at her feet to learn magic from her because while she had only been studying a few

years she already knew deep secrets of the art and science of magic they never considered. She's a common-born girl from a country where rank is not something changed easily and yet she has befriended nobility and royalty and been elevated to the gentry for her accomplishments – the first woman in Mishanda to ever do so.

“And she isn't just making her mark in Magic. Just a few days ago she sat down with one of the most eminent mathematical geniuses in the world and they started collaborating on a series of papers that will join the two disciplines, I think. I really don't understand how she does it all. I'm not sure she does either, really, but then I don't think she realizes just how unusual she is.”

“She does sound like a remarkable woman,” Acelius commented, “but then to get you to notice her she would have to be. My friend, I must admit that I despaired you would ever truly be happy again after Jania died, but I am delighted to find I was wrong. You are happy, aren't you?”

Artur thought about that. To his embarrassment he realized that he had not thought of his first wife in months and then only because he had been reunited with his children. “Yes, I suppose I am,” he replied at last. “Even running for my life from the Temi I think I was happier with Gae than I was before I met her.”

Acelius laughed, “It must be love. So where to next?”

“Vohn and from there back to the Eastern Kingdoms and on to Ichtar.”

“Ichtar, huh? I never did believe in demons,” Acelius commented.

“I doubt they're really demons,” Artur replied, “Not immortal beings dedicated to all things evil anyway. They're probably just normal people with an ability for magic who don't like us very much. I just hope we can stop their spell and somehow keep them from casting another just like it or worse.”

“You know, Arturus, of all the men in this world only you could find something more important to do than be emperor, but I do think you've managed to do just that, although I may be the only Cilben to think so.”

“You probably are,” Artur agreed. “My children think I'm getting senile and don't understand how I could walk away from the oak wreath.”

“Why in the Seven Hells would you ever want to be emperor?” Acelius laughed.

“Seven Hells? I don't recall that from my earlier religious studies,” Artur remarked.

“Oh you've heard of them,” Acelius assured his old friend, “Pahn, Sorvohn, Ond, Karkominia...”

“I get it,” Artur nodded.

“Of course why anyone would want to be here is beyond me too,” Acelius added.

“Do you want to go home?” Artur asked Acelius.

“Oh yes, and ever since the word came about Lusius I've been hoping to be recalled, but so far all I've received from your son was a letter commending me for my service to the Empire and a request that I continue.”

“I’m sure he meant well,” Artur remarked. “He probably meant to assure you he wasn’t planning to purge all of Lusius’ old appointees. If you like I could write him a letter letting him know that you’d like to retire but that pride prevents you from actually quitting after that letter of commendation.”

“I’d appreciate that,” Acelius replied. “I was beginning to think I would die in Ond.”

“It won’t be the first time I’ve made recommendations concerning an ambassador. That’s why old Flacco is now ambassador to Maxform.”

“Flacco? Are you mad?” Acelius asked.

“Girdecus died of a heart attack when he heard I had entered Cilbe with two armies,” Artur informed Acelius. “Flacco decided that he had served the Girdecans long enough and offered his services to me and then my son. He’s not a bad man, really. He was just competing in politics the only way a plebian could and he did a damned good job of it. Had he been my man instead of Girdecus’ I dare say it might have been Girdecus Lusius would have chased out of the Empire.”

“Flacco is competent, I’ll give him that, and as long as Colchicus knows enough to keep an eye on him...”

“He does. That may be why he sent Flacco when I described the situation in Maxform. Gaius Tellarian Horran wasn’t a bad man, but he wasn’t the right man for that post. Anyway if I can help you along by giving you an honorable way to leave Ond, it’s the least I can do for an old friend.

“And I can do something for you as well. From what you tell me you and your party are known sorcerers in the Holylands. Ond doesn’t check passports along the river, neither does Pongaria, but Sorvohn does. We don’t have an embassy there because the High Priest King would not grant us the usual diplomatic rights. They check everybody entering the kingdom and search through their packs for contraband as well.”

“Contraband?” Artur asked.

“Tobacco, smuggled gemstones, stuff like that. They’re legal to enter the kingdom with, but you have to declare them.”

“We have a few spell tools that may be seen in those terms,” Artur noted.

“Just let the customs agents know before they actually find them. They may levy a charge, but it’s better than the fine if they think you’re smuggling. However, if the people in Nider knew you then you can bet they will in Sorvohn as well and Sorvohn will do more than merely expel you. So my recommendation is that you not go there.”

“We have to,” Artur insisted. “There’s an adept in Vohn we need to recruit for our expedition to Ichtar.”

“And so you will,” Acelius agreed, “but perhaps I wasn’t being clear. You cannot go as Arturus Cornellian Marno nor can you enter Sorvohn as Artur the Southlander. Odds are the same applies to the rest of your party, although a girl as young as Gaenor’s student might not be on their proscribed list. However, there’s no need to take chances. So I’ll just simply issue you a new set of passports and you can all enter Sorvohn as private albeit previously unheard of citizens of the Empire.”

“One look at us and the customs people will know we are not all Cilbens,” Artur pointed out.

“Nonsense!” Acelius laughed. “Cilbens come in all shapes and skin colors. Besides given the people the Sorvohnians choose to guard their borders, so long as you don’t look like people of Sorvohn they’d believe you if you told them you were all from Arberoa.”

Sorvohn

One

After hearing Lady Ruallie’s description of her life in Ond, Gaenor had very little desire to see more of the city. From the top floor of the embassy she could clearly see the temples that were also the houses of the priests and it was clear that only the priests of Ond lived in any sort of luxury and even those Ruallie had called the “Rich” lived in poorly maintained buildings and the rest of the populations lived in such squalor as would never have been permitted in Narmouth. In Narmouth if anyone had been reduced to such a state the townsfolk would band together to help get them back on their feet, but in Onda hardly anyone had enough to help others. The situation sickened her and she was more than happy to stay in the embassy working on Elena’s education and consulting with the other adepts on various spells. Except for the knowledge of the living conditions just outside the embassy, it was an idyllic few days for her.

Vito and Jimeleo, following advice from Artur went out and bought themselves swords. “You’ll need a way to defend yourselves in Sorvohn and we certainly can’t use magic,” he told them. He also bought a pair of light crossbows for Elena and Cornellya to use and then gave everyone some basic training while still in the embassy.

Finally, however, the *Cosl Star* arrived in Onda and it was time for them to continue on their journey. Gaenor looked at her new passport and hoped she would remember to respond to the name Glorianna Drusilliana Tarro and also remember the assumed names of the rest of their party. Then she slipped the passport into her purse and finished packing. Artur had packed the evening before and was already downstairs enjoying a cup of qahwah in the dining room when she finished lugging her pack to the entry chamber.

When it appeared Cornellya and Elena were not finished packing yet she went back upstairs to help. “What’s taking so long,” she asked Elena. “I thought you didn’t have all that much to pack.”

“I slept late,” Elena admitted sheepishly. “I’d have been beaten for it in Olaka, you know.”

“I didn’t,” Gaenor replied, “but it doesn’t surprise me. I rarely have that luxury myself. You know, I used to think the nobility just lazed about and let their servants do all the work until I met Ibbet. I slept in the first day after we arrived in Ander and she chided me for it. Evidently she’d been working since before the sun had risen. Anyway if you slept that long, you probably needed to. Sometimes the body knows better than the head. Enjoy it while you can, because once we get to Sorvohn we’ll be rising with the sun every morning so as to make the best time. What’s this box?”

“I packed up the books I’ve already read,” Elena told her. “Ruallie promised to have them shipped to your home in Narmouth for me.”

“You don’t think you’ll need them?” Gaenor asked.

“I’ve already read them,” Elena replied simply.

“Even with perfect memory you’ll still want to reread some texts, you know,” Gaenor advised her. Reading isn’t quite the same as remembering.”

“It isn’t,” Elena agreed, “but these are pretty basic texts and some of them are fiction, so it’s probably best to send them on while I can and travel light.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Gaenor agreed. “Do you think you’ll be able to remember to respond to the name on your new passport?”

“Helena?” Elena asked. “It’s not too different from Elena even if the accent is on the first rather than second syllable. Calling you Glorianna will be harder. The name really does not suit you.”

“I only need it long enough to get past customs,” Gaenor shrugged.

“I’m tempted to just go invisible,” Cornellya said from the doorway. “What sort of name is Gracha? Ugh!”

“We could call you Tollia,” Gaenor suggested. “It is as common for Cilbens to be addressed by their nomens as by their cognomens. I understand there was once a rule about it, but these days it’s just a matter of choice.”

“Tollia is marginally preferable,” Cornellya admitted, “but don’t be surprised if I’m not there when you go through customs.”

“I’ll warn Artur,” Gaenor commented, “though I don’t think he’ll like it. You nearly killed yourself with that spell by the time we got to Aston you know.”

“I won’t be using it for anywhere near that long this time, and I’m not sure I could lie about my name.”

“Try,” Gaenor suggested. “We’ll help you practice on the boat. In fact it might be a good idea if we get used to addressing each other by our aliases until we get into Sorvohn.”

“I’ll try,” Cornellya agreed. “Is there still time for breakfast?”

“I think so,” Gaenor replied. “The *Cosl Star* doesn’t leave for another three hours.”

The *Cosl Star* was a smaller and less sophisticated looking boat than the *Queen of the Nider* had been. The *Star* looked more like a simple platform with a bit of superstructure, where the cabins and bridge were, piled on top. Instead of side wheel paddles, she had a single wheel to propel her upriver. However, in spite of the smaller size and less advanced appearance, the accommodations within were just as luxurious as they had been on the *Queen* and the food served was just as good.

She was not as fast a boat as the *Queen*, however, and they were on the rivers for a week and a half before reaching Tos, the Sorvohnian terminus of the riverboat line. Along the way they made several whistle stops, including one that lasted a full day in Olinas at the confluence of the Nider and Cosl Rivers when the boat’s engineer decided he was hearing odd noises from the one of the wheel’s bearings. A

closer inspection revealed that the bearing was indeed showing wear, but he decided it could wait until the boat returned to Onda, which the captain told Gaenor was just as well since the company's mechanics could replace the bearing during a normal layover, but anywhere else could easily keep the boat and her passengers stranded for a week or more.

They left Olinas just in time to get away from the dock as the *Queen of the Nider* on her way back downriver came in for a stop of her own. Gaenor and Elena joined the other passengers to wave at the people on the other boat as they passed.

The Cosl was a much smaller river than the Nider, explaining why the *Star* was so much smaller than the *Queen*. The river was also noticeably shallower with shifting sandbars and submerged logs that the riverboat men needed to keep a constant watch for and its course had many twists and turns as they headed upstream on the Ond-Nider border. After the first day, the men on watch constantly measured the depth of the river and the boat moved slowly toward Sorvohn and the calls of the boatmen that indicated the depth were the first sounds Gaenor heard in the mornings as she woke and the last at night before she fell asleep.

While Gaenor found such sounds relaxing, Cornellya became very nervous once she discovered the river dangers the men were seeking to avoid. "They do this all the time," Elena pointed out to her, "I would be more worried if they weren't keeping an eye on the river. What bothers you so much anyway?"

"I can't swim," Cornellya told her.

"Neither can I," Elena told her. "And if that's what bothers you, why didn't you have a problem when we were on the *Iris* or the *Thistle*? Seems to me that the ocean and the Minue River were both a lot more dangerous than this river."

"The *Iris* and the *Thistle* were much larger than this boat," Cornellya replied.

"The Ocean of Sorrows is much bigger than the Cosl River," Elena retorted.

Cornellya looked at the Cilben girl for a minute or more before finally saying, "You know I'm finally starting to understand why Arturus says I was more adorable when I didn't use to argue with him all the time."

Elena just grinned and asked, "Want a game of Maelstrom? Maybe it will take your mind off the river."

"It's worth a try," Cornellya sighed.

When the boat finally reached Tos, however, Cornellya was vastly relieved and so happy to be on solid ground once again that she entirely forgot her plan to go invisible rather than lie about her name when asked by the customs agent.

Acelius was correct when he told Artur that the Sorvohnians would see nothing unusual about such a mixed party all claiming Cilben citizenship. After all their preparation and polishing of what they hoped was a plausible story explaining their presence, the agents merely asked their names and what they were carrying and then searched their packs to make sure it was true, then after collecting a sizable customs fee that Artur was sure the agent had invented on the spot, they were waved on their way.

Tos was even less of a city than Onda, with twisty little packed dirt streets. However most of the buildings had been faced with stone and covered with wooden roofs. There was a temple to Vohn in the

center of the small city that was only magnificent when compared to the rest of the city. It rose over the rest of the buildings, standing twice as high as the next tallest edifice in Tos. However, it too had been faced with stone and covered with a red painted wooden roof. They eventually found an inn on the north side of town and decided to stop there even though it was still early afternoon.

Instead of resting, Artur and Jimeleo left the rest of the party at the inn to look for some form of transportation and returned two hours later with an open cart with more than enough wooden benches for them all to sit on and a pair of all too lean horses. "They were the best we could find," Artur admitted to Gaenor late that evening as they prepared for sleep.

"We'll take it easy on them until they've had enough to eat for a few days or so," Gaenor told him. "At least we won't have to walk, right?"

"True enough," Artur chuckled. "We're going to have to be very careful in Sorvohn, you know," he added pointedly.

"Don't worry, dear," Gaenor sighed. "I learned my lesson on that count in Sandro. I don't want to see my face posted on every tree from here to Vohn."

"They wouldn't do that here," Artur told her. "Evidently Holy Vohn had commanded that pictorial images of humans are a particularly heinous form of vanity."

"And punishable by death?" Gaenor asked.

"I'm not at all sure Vohn is capable of understanding anything less than death as punishment," Artur remarked in a voice just barely above a whisper.

"What a sweet guy," Gaenor remarked acidly, although she did so as quietly as Artur had. "Cornellya is going to have to use magic, you know," she told him a few minutes later.

"Yes, her ears would attract too much attention even if she weren't adept. I doubt the Sorvohnians would know a vari if they saw one, but they'd only assume she was one of the worst demons of Hell and would do their best to send her back there. Still Sorvohn isn't all bad."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"They make good food and nowhere else has such high quality qahwah," he replied.

"There is that, although while I was perusing the Royal Library in Maxforn I learned there is fairly good qahwah grown in Wanlaria. And some enterprising farmers have started growing it in the Mallactines in Cilbe and Northern Nimbria. There's also been a small, but highly regarded, crop in Manawii these last few years."

"I'll have to keep an eye out for them," Artur commented. "It might be interesting to sample several crops at once sometime when we have company."

"You're ready for this to end too?" Gaenor asked.

"I was ready before it started," Artur told her. "I could have lived quite happily in Narmouth for the rest of my life if Mahk of Palernos had somehow managed to avoid that pothole in front of the house."

“Maybe,” Gaenor agreed, “but then who would have gone to Ichtar?”

Two

The seasons reversed from winter to autumn and finally summer as they headed north toward Vohn even though their path took them increasingly higher above sea level each day. After several days they started riding through scattered qahwah plantations although Jimeleo commented that most such were to the north and west of Vohn. However most of the time they rode up and down long switch-backed roads that crossed various high mountain passes.

There were small villages along the way and each had an inn where the locals would gather after their daily work. It was in these inns that Gaenor and the others got to know the common folk of Sorvohn. While she had no doubt they might turn on her if they knew she was capable of magic, these people, away from the larger cities, were a friendly and hospitable lot. She learned that once you had been accepted as a guest in their homes you were treated like family until you left and strangely that included their behavior toward inn guests as well.

Gaenor and Elena wisely kept the notebooks with their notes on magic well hidden away in their packs, but nothing could keep either of them from writing. Gaenor assigned Elena to write an essay on the people of Sorvohn, while Gaenor continued her habit of collecting recipes. Sorvohnian cuisine used several herbs and spices not generally available in Narmouth, but Gaenor made many careful notes on them and their sources in the hopes of being able to find some and substitute others.

They both discovered that very few people of Sorvohn were comfortable with the priests who ruled over Sorvohn more absolutely than any monarch of the northeast and were seen as cruel and arrogant as well, not that they admitted as much openly. Their conclusions were based on the fact that the people of backwoods Sorvohn avoided talking about the priests or the religion they represented at all and looked on anyone with suspicion until it was obvious they were not a priest or one of their spies. One particularly brave woman, the wife of an innkeeper, let slip that she was just as glad that her little village did not have a formal temple. Although by law her husband's inn did have an attached chapel, she admitted it was never used unless an outsider, usually a priest, expressed a desire for services. There were only a few prayers that could be said without the presence of a priest and most of those were supposedly said at home, so this was not viewed as unusual, but Gaenor got the impression that unless someone was watching, very few people actually made those observances. However it was in the one village in which two visiting priests were in attendance that Gaenor discovered why.

They stopped for lunch in a small town named Towhee and were met at the door by the landlord, a tall, swarthy man wearing a unbleached cloth apron and a worried look on his face. “Noble guests,” he greeted them. “Welcome to my humble establishment. It's such a lovely day, you would, perhaps, prefer to dine on the porch here.”

Artur looked around. The day had begun with a brilliant red sunrise and while the heavy rain had held off so far, they had been plagued by foggy mist and light on and off rains all morning. At the moment the water was dribbling off the edge of the narrow porch's roof. “You must be used to some pretty horrendous weather,” Artur replied dryly.

“Ah, yes, milord,” the man came back. He looked nervously over his shoulder and inside his inn. “Well, you see it's like this,” he whispered urgently, “We currently have some ecclesiastical guests inside, if you take my meaning.”

“Ah, yes, I see,” Artur whispered back. “Very well, I shall be guided by your wisdom.” Then in a normal voice, “The weather is invigorating this noon. It would be a shame to waste it by sitting in a stuffy taproom. Good enough?” he finished in another whisper.

“Thank you, milord. We’re serving a lamb sausage stew thisnoon with fresh brown bread and some steamed vegetables on the side.”

“Sounds good,” Gaenor opined, “although not at all like the Sorvohnian food we’ve had so far.”

“Taxonian, milady. I traveled a bit in my youth and this was served in almost every inn in Taxo.”

“Somehow we missed Taxo in our travels,” Vito remarked. “I’m sure this will make up for it.”

They sat down and a few minutes later the landlord returned with two helpers to serve them. Artur tried to order a beer or ale to go with the meal, but the landlord, once again looked very nervous and quietly tilted his head toward the taproom. So Artur merely ordered, “Whatever you feel is appropriate with this meal, sir.”

The man soon returned with large tankards of what he called sweet cider for the men and cups of tea for the women. The women did, indeed, have tea, but the Artur discovered that his cider tasted amazingly like stout.

From inside the inn, they heard two men shouting. At first it sounded as though they were arguing some theological point, but as they went on, it was obvious they were reciting a sort of two-man morality play.

“Good stew,” Artur commented, looking over his shoulder, toward the door to the taproom. “Too bad I cannot say as much for the dinner theater.”

“I think they could use one or two more players,” Gaenor added lightly. “Someone with acting talent at least. I could swear they are reading their lines off of crib sheets.”

“The least they could do is try to sound like they’ve rehearsed it once or twice,” Vito noted.

“What I cannot figure out,” Cornellya said thoughtfully, “is how beating the wrong hare will send one to Hell.”

“I thought he said, ‘eating the wrong beer,’” Elena replied.

“Breathing the wrong air,” Jimeleo corrected them both. “I’ve heard that particular play before. Some Nideran missionaries came to Tandra while I was still there. We may want to finish our meal and get the hell out of here just as soon as possible.”

“Why?” Gaenor asked.

“They’re building up to commit some form of violence,” Jimeleo replied. “Generally they pick someone in their, well it’s not really a congregation, is it?”

“The word will serve,” Artur told him. “What do they do then?”

“Beat him or her and they generally get the help of the rest of their congregation as well. It is not

uncommon for the victim to die of his wounds.”

“What?” Gaenor asked grimly.

“It isn’t unheard of for them to choose multiple victims,” Jimeleo continued. “It backfired in Nimbria, of course. The moment one of the priests started flailing his chosen victim the crowd witnessing the performance literally tore him to pieces.”

“Nothing less than he deserved,” Gaenor remarked harshly.

“True,” Jimeleo agreed. “I hear the other priest in that incident survived, though you couldn’t have proven it by me. In any case in a few minutes they’re going to pull out whips or paddles or clubs and start beating some poor soul in there and the rest of the congregation is so intimidated they’ll kill anyone who even tries to help them.”

“Not today,” Gaenor replied, steel in her voice.

“Gae,” Artur warned her softly. “That’s not a very good idea.”

“It’s a terrible idea,” she agreed, “but there are two men in there about to have a very bad day nevertheless.”

“You’ll only cause these people a lot of harm when those priests report back to their superiors,” Jimeleo added.

“I don’t think they’ll do that and stop looking at me like that. I wasn’t planning to do anything.”

“Where’s Cornellya?” Elena asked suddenly.

Artur said something in Cilben that caused Elena to gasp. Gaenor made a mental note to ask her later what the phrase meant. “Is there anything you can do to find her?” he asked Gaenor.

“I could cancel her invisibility spell if I guess right as to where she is, but that would also cancel her disguise spell and I imagine the sudden appearance of a vari in that room would lead to a killing frenzy that would make what’s about to happen look mild.”

“Jube’s sword!” Artur swore “We’ll just have to see how it plays out. Good thing the cart is right here, we may have to make a run for it. Better finish eating.”

“I don’t think I’m hungry anymore,” Jimeleo commented.

“I think I’ll skip the dessert,” Vito added dryly. “We probably ought to leave a big tip though. It sounds like the innkeeper is going to need it.”

In spite of herself Gaenor could not resist sneaking up to the doorway and looking in on the scene unfolding in the taproom. She arrived just as the older of the two priests lifted a club and was about to bring it down on an old man who had been sitting near the front of the crowd. The priest was unable to actually connect with his target, however. Instead he slipped and fell flat on his face. The younger priest was holding a whip and was about to flail it at the same old man, but when the first priest slipped and fell, the second accidentally stepped on the other’s leg and fell backward in his surprise.

The people inside the taproom, who had been mouthing the expected responses, gasped in shock when the first priest fell. When the second fell a sudden oppressive silence filled the room. The first priest tried to stand up, but his hand slipped as he tried to prop himself up and he fell right down again.

This time the old man who had been the priests' intended victim started to chuckle. The chuckle became a full fledged laugh when the younger priest got up angrily only to drop the whip in his rage. And the entire crowd joined in as the older priest bumped heads violently with the younger as the first tried to stand once more just as the second reached for his whip.

Both priests were dazed and embarrassed. Their erstwhile congregation continued to laugh and, after a minute or so, the priests finally made it to their feet. Then amidst the continued laughter, both priests raised their weapons again. This time, however, the people in the inn were not intimidated and the two priests disappeared within the crowd. By the time Gaenor saw them again they were dead, trampled on the floor of the inn.

"Won't that cause worse problems?" Artur asked the innkeeper as several men picked up the dead priests and carried them back into a barn.

"Getting the blood stains out of the floor will be hard work," the innkeeper confirmed.

"I meant the priests," Artur tried to clarify.

"What priests?" the innkeeper asked flatly.

"I see. Won't someone come looking for them?"

"Possibly," the innkeeper replied, apparently unconcerned. "It's such a shame they never arrived. We're just a bunch of poor sinners, badly in need of religious guidance."

"I'll say," Artur agreed. "If you'd done the job right you wouldn't have to sand those floor boards."

"Maybe we'll get it right someday."

"Does this happen a lot?" Gaenor asked.

"Never happened before," the man replied, "but I doubt there's a man worthy of the name who hasn't dreamed of something like it. Well, folks, I think you brought us good luck here today, so the meal was on the house. Safe travels."

They were on their way again before Artur started lecturing Cornellya. "What the hell did you think you were doing?"

"I was using the sanitary facilities," she replied, "such as they were. Why? What did you think I did?"

"You mean you didn't interfere with that ceremony?" he pressed.

"From the outhouse?" she countered.

He decided to let the matter pass. Maybe what happened really was as accidental as it appeared.

Three

The incident in Towhee continued to weigh on Gaenor's mind. Even in private Cornellya insisted she had not been inside the inn nor even within sight of the taproom when the priests started trying to beat the old man. To date Gaenor had not caught Cornellya nor any other vari in a lie. Until now she had not even considered it as a possibility. The Way as she understood it meant avoiding all falsehood. It was only now that Gaenor realized that was not the same as always telling the truth. Perhaps Cornellya was telling the truth, but the incident had opened Gaenor's eyes regarding the nature of her friends in the Parch.

She was deep in contemplation on that matter when an eerie moaning sound filled the air followed by unfamiliar high-pitched barks. "What's that?" she asked, coming out of her reverie.

"Southland trolls, I think," Vito told her.

"Lomorgs?"

"No," he replied, "Lomorgs live in Mishanda and Aston and sometimes wander into very northern Gostrina. The locals call these *damani* it means 'moaners' but they do a lot more than moan. They're a related species, but they're somewhat larger than lomorgs. Fortunately they rarely hunt in packs larger than three to five in number." The moaning and barking sounds filled the air again. "They're ahead of us," he told Artur. "Maybe we should stop here for a bit. If they haven't caught our scents, they may well pass on by."

"It's worth a try," Artur admitted as he reigned the horses in. "How do these damani compare to the trolls of the Malactine Mountains?"

"Their fangs and claws are longer," Vito explained, almost as if he was in a classroom. "There are actually three trollish species along the Malactines, you realize. In the far north they are short with white fur and are mostly solitary. In the tropics they are tall and thin and hunt in packs even larger than those of the lamorgs, although there aren't many of them left. I think your Cilbens have hunted them almost to extinction or maybe beyond. I haven't heard of any sightings of the tropical trolls in years. In Nimbria there's a dark brown-furred troll with sparse light brown stripes. They live in small family units and are sometimes hunted for their fur."

"I've seen the trollskin coats in Nimbria," Jimeleo mentioned nervously. "I don't see the attraction really. There are better furs that can be harvested far more safely. They're getting closer," he noted.

"Draw weapons," Artur advised, reaching for his sword. Gaenor, Vito and Jimeleo did likewise. Cornellya and Elena loaded their crossbows. On their first day on the road, Artur had stopped to make a pair of improvised cudgels from a tree branch for them as well and they made sure they were at hand in case they should need them.

A few minutes passed as the sounds came closer. Jimeleo's sword began to shake slightly in his hands and the rest were visibly sweating in the mild subtropical afternoon. Along with the moaning and barking sounds they could also hear the sounds of fairly large creatures crashing through the woods and then suddenly four semi-anthropomorphic shapes loped out of the woods and on to the road. They were at least seven feet tall each with long muzzles and curved fangs that reached several inches below their jaws. They had sparse, long black hair all over their bodies, very dark skin and silvery white claws on each of their fingers and toes. They did not, however have opposable thumbs. They were bipedal but their hands were just extended paws. They did not pause on leaving the forest, but attacked the cart immediately.

Elena and Cornellya shot their crossbows and both missed but before the damani could take more than a single step toward the cart an arrow flew from behind the cart and into the eye of the lead daman. The survivors took another two steps and another arrow shot forth, cutting down the next daman. Two more crossbow bolts missed, but a third arrow from the mystery bowman killed its target just as it reached the horses. Gaenor wondered who was shooting that bow, but did not dare take her eyes off their attackers. The horses panicked and started forward. Artur did his best to keep them in control, but he had to drop his sword to use both hands. As it happened, the final daman was closer to where Gaenor and Vito were waiting with their swords, but before the daman could get close enough for them to swing their swords at it, a red-clad figure jumped between them and the slaving troll.

“A Tem?” Gaenor wondered out loud.

“So it appears,” Vito agreed.

The Tem slashed and cut at the daman which in retaliation swung its massive clawed paws at the swordsman. Artur finally calmed down the horses just as the Tem managed to stab his long, curved sword through the beast's heart and then jump aside as the creature fell forward and drove the blade all the way through its body.

The Tem calmly rolled the daman partway over and retrieved his weapon. He started walking back away from the cart but Artur called out. “Wait a minute. Who the hell are you?”

“A moment please, my chief,” the Tem replied, “I need to clean my sword at least.” That was not what he did immediately, however. Instead, he picked up his bow and a leather pack then returned to the cart and climbed gracefully onboard. Then he opened his pack and pulled out a piece of oilcloth with which he started to clean his sword. Artur took a close look at the man and decided he was fairly young, no more than twenty years old. He spoke as he did so. “My name is Leracian, my chief and it is my double honor to serve as body guard to you and Chief Gaenor.”

“I appreciate your help just now, but who asked you to be my bodyguard?” Artur asked.

“Chief Leracus, of course, my chief. It is not honorable to ever let a Temi chief travel without a sufficient honor guard. By rights there should be several Temi with each of you, but Chief Leracus knew you would never countenance such an entourage following you around if asked, so he assigned the entire job to me.”

“What made him think I would countenance even one such guard if asked?” Artur countered.

“Did he ask, my chief?”

“A point,” Artur admitted, exasperatedly.

“Have you been wearing your battle togs since we left Cilbe?” Gaenor asked. “And how did you manage to follow us, especially when we were onboard ships and boats?”

“Not when the red garb would slow me down,” he replied. “I knew where you were headed before you left Cilbe, my chief,” Leracian replied, “So I rode overland on relays of horses so I could be in Tandra in hopes I would be in time to see you get off the boat. I did not make it for your landing, but I was able to follow you on the steam trains and then had to change horses frequently to catch up to you in Maxforn. I was on the same boats that you sailed to Nundro, although I nearly lost you in Nundro. I never

considered those land yachts until I saw you leave on one. Then I was unable to catch a ride until the next day. I missed your boat in Mentik, but was able to buy a ride to Taopolis in one of their machine-driven carriages and was able to get on board before the *Queen of the Nider* left.

“Since then I’ve never been too far behind you. If you think back you may even recall seeing me on the *Cosl Star* where I held a door open for you once.”

“I don’t know if the people of Sorvohn know what the red clothing means,” Artur told him, “but the color will attract a lot of attention. If you’re going to insist on traveling with us, it might be best if you wear less flashy clothing.”

“Gladly, my chief,” Leracian replied easily.

“Leracus is your father?” Artur asked.

“He is,” Leracian agreed.

“The name was a give-away,” Artur commented.

“You’re giving in with amazing ease,” Gaenor commented.

“I couldn’t stop Cornellya or Elena from following us,” Artur sighed, “and if I couldn’t stop them, it would be useless to even try to stop a Tem warrior. If you really feel the need to follow us around, Leracian, it’s on your head.”

They traveled on for another week through weather that alternated between heavy and light rain until, at last, they arrived in the mountain city of Vohn .

When Gaenor had first heard the phrase “mountain city” she had thought the city had been built on top of a mountain or maybe across several nearby peaks. However, what made Vohn one of the wonders of the world was the fact it was built inside of a mountain. Its prehistoric founders had found the mountain riddled with caves and built their crude shelters inside those caves. As the millennia passed, more substantial structures were constructed including the “Holiest Temple of Vohn” at the center of the mountain city with a tower that had been carved upward through to the peak. Many “streets” or galleries had been man-made, linking natural caves and those that had been excavated in a vast series of warrens. And everywhere on the ceilings of the caves and tunnels was artwork glorifying the god Vohn and his works although on closer inspection Gaenor saw that these artworks were designed to disguise the incredibly complex system of supports the city dwellers had been forced to install to make sure their “sky” literally did not fall on them. It was also one of the few exceptions of the prohibition in Southlander art against depicting the human form.

The population of Vohn, however, had long since outgrown even the spacious caverns of the “HolyCity” and over half of them lived and worked in buildings that stood at the foot of the mountain. By law no one could build anything but a temple on the side of the mountain itself.

Their first sight of the city was the huge cupola that had been built at the top of the peak where the top of the “Holiest Temple’s” tower emerged. The square-shaped cupola, faced with pure white marble had a tall, round dome covered in gold leaf. They never visited the temple while in Vohn, but they did learn that there was a wide walkway around the cupola’s dome and the finials at the corners of the square cupola were reputed to be solid gold. It was the flash of sunlight from that expanse of gold that first caught their eyes.

There were a number of temples on the Vohn Mountain side and all had smaller gold leaf-covered domes making the mountain seem to sparkle as they approached.

“They must really love gold here,” Leracian commented disgustedly as they approached the mountain city, “to cover their roofs with it.”

“Those are all temples,” Vito told him. “They’re where the priests live here.”

“That explains it,” Leracian commented knowingly. “Priests always seem to love gold.”

“Not all of them,” Artur told him, “but I imagine most of your experience has been with Cilben priests and they do seem to be rather concerned with worldly goods.”

“It’s only natural for them,” Leracian replied, “considering so many of their sermons seem to involve the blessings of being able to make money and then give it to the temple of your choice. You say some priests have other preferences? What sort? Silver, perhaps?”

“Most of the Mishandan priests and priestesses give all their possessions to their gods.”

“Their gods?” Leracian asked, obviously amused. “And do their gods actually show up and tell them ‘thank you?’”

“Actually they are generally sold and the proceeds go to the cults they belong to. They are supported in turn by those cults and by the congregations they serve,” Artur explained.

“It still sounds like an easy life,” Leracian opined.

“Not hardly,” Gaenor cut in. “Most small towns can barely manage the upkeep on their temples, never mind keeping their priests in a style anything like luxurious. Priests in the larger cities do better, but much of their excess is sent to help out the poorer congregations. No Mishandan enters the priesthood out of desire for the rich life.”

“If you say so, my chief,” Leracian replied, unconvinced. “What is that dark haze that seems to be coming out of the mountain itself, though?” He received no answer.

Vohn was a very large city, but except for the temples, there was little centralization to it, so instead of a single business district, commercial concerns were often juxtaposed with residential units. The city government, however, was centralized inside the mountain so Artur decided they should at least start there in their search for Faber Gerhardsson.

“Are we going to ask for room in the Cilben embassy again?” Jimeleo asked as they rode through the large entrance to the internal city.

“I don’t think so,” Artur replied. “It would only slow us down. Besides Cilbe doesn’t really have a permanent embassy here. On the odd occasions an ambassador is sent to Sorvohn, a house is rented for the duration.”

The entrance had once been a natural cave mouth, but the Sorvohnians had enlarged it and decorated it with ornate carvings. Inside thousands of candles and oil and gas lamps illuminated the city, above most of them were small chimneys that drew the soot they produced up and out of the city, which finally gave

Leracian the answer to his question about the dark haze around the mountain.

Reading the signs, Artur found a small civically owned building dedicated to the tourist trade. It was in front of that building that he parked the cart. Then he and Gaenor went inside, leaving the rest to wait outside. Inside there were two clerks wearing bright blue robes and chatting with one another as they sorted and shelved various brochures. "Excuse me," Artur began to get their attention.

"Ah!" one of them, a short round man with an completely shaven head, said happily. "Welcome to theHolyCity ! How may I be of service?"

"Probably in a number of ways," Artur replied. "My friends and I are here looking for a colleague but aside from the fact that he is here, we do not know where. Do you have any suggestions on how we might find him?"

"That should not be too hard," the man replied. "All residents of Holy Vohn must register their addresses in the city administration center, which is just outside theHoliestTemple . It's quite a way from here. Are you walking?"

"We have a cart with two horses," Artur replied.

"Mmm. You won't be able to drive it into the holiest precinct. Do you have a place to stay yet?"

"My next question," Artur admitted. "You have any suggestions on that?"

"Several actually," he nodded. "Let me give you a map and I'll mark out a few hostels around the city where you will be able to stable your horses. Let's see, you'll need to know where the City Clerk's office is. I mean you could ask in the Revenue Department, but they're more concerned with raking it in than giving anything out. The Clerk's office may not know how much money your friend makes, but they will be able to tell you where he lives."

"That's all we need," Artur confirmed.

"He may also be listed in the Business Bureau," the man supplied, "and there's also the Commercial Association." He carefully marked off on the map where those offices were.

The next stop was the hostel closest to the Clerk'sOffice . Most of the inns they had visited in Sorvohn were small establishments where the local people relaxed after their day's work. The people were not as outgoing and friendly as most places Gaenor had visited, but they were not hostile and they could generally be won over if a newcomer cared to try and do so. The inns were warm and comfortable. In comparison the hostel they checked into was a cold, unfeeling sort of place. There were no local people there save the manager and his staff and the establishment offered neither food nor drink to its customers although for an additional fee, Artur was able to arrange for the care of their animals. The efficiency of the hostel was almost clinical in nature, but even with the efficiency, the clean rooms and comfortable beds, Gaenor knew she could never be entirely comfortable in such a place and was glad they would not be staying long.

The food that evening was not up to the standards that Gaenor had come to expect either in the local inns or in those restaurants run by Sorvohnian expatriates in Gostrina. There was something missing from the food they ate; flavor mostly. Looking around they saw men who were obviously priests of Vohn and Gaenor wondered if the flavors of the normally vibrant Sorvohnian cuisine were missing because the priesthood felt that too much spice was sinful. At least the strong, sweet qahwah lived up to expectations,

but Cornellya quietly pointed out that none of the priests were drinking it.

“Then I’m glad I developed a taste for it finally,” Gaenor whispered back to her. Elena giggled at the interchange, earning a glare from one of the priests. “Evidently levity is not approved of either,” Gaenor whispered to her.

“Gaenor, may I ask you a question?” Elena asked.

“Of course,” Gaenor replied easily. “Always.”

“It’s about some of the books I’ve been reading,” Elena admitted, “the philosophy ones?”

“What about them?” Gaenor asked.

“None of them agree with one another. In fact, if I accept some of them as true then others have to be false, but all the authors state their ideas as truths.”

“No kidding,” Gaenor laughed. “So what’s the problem?”

“Which one is true?”

“All of them,” Gaenor told her, “or some or none at all. The authors are presenting ways of thought that are true to them and those who think the way they do. But none of their truths are absolute. Have you read the Tindi one yet, by Master Wu Nao?”

“Not yet,” Elena admitted.

“Read it next, I think. He puts a lot of this airy thought and speculation in perspective by questioning everything including the evidence of his own eyes. After all that weighty stuff I think you’ll find his musings a breath of fresh air. Just try not to lose his message between your giggles,” Gaenor warned her. She noticed two priests watching them closely so she quickly changed the subject to various embroidery stitches. It was an art Elena had expressed an interest in, but so far had not had the time to learn.

The next day, Artur and Vito visited the City Clerk’s office while the others went to investigate the Business Bureau and the Commercial Association. The investigation turned out to not be as simple as they had hoped.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the City Clerk informed Artur, “but Master Gerhardsson is not currently listed on our rolls. Are you certain he is in Vohn?”

“When last heard from,” Artur responded, “yes.”

“Then he must not have chosen to set up residence in the city,” the clerk concluded and started to turn away to another bit of business.

“Wait,” Artur called. “You said he is not currently on your rolls.”

“That is correct.”

“Is there a way to see if he had been on your rolls in the past?” Artur requested.

“My apologies, sir. As an outlander you would not be accustomed to the phraseology used in Sorvohn offices. We believe that the past, present and future are all one and that any differences perceived are merely an illusion suffered by we mere mortals. Consequently, if I were to say he is not on our rolls, period, it would imply that he might never be on our rolls and how could I know that? It is not unlike the Gostrinan concept on justice in which a man is considered innocent until proved guilty in a court of law so that even if a murder is witnessed by a hundred others, the murderer must be called the ‘alleged’ or ‘accused’ murderer or else his rights would be violated. A silly way of doing things if you ask me, but there you are.”

“It has its place,” Artur replied, “but I take your meaning. Thank you, sir.”

“For nothing.”

Artur and Vito were too deep in conversation, discussing what they might do next, to notice a pair of men in Cilben clothing in a café. The men noticed Artur, however.

Jimeleo and Cornellya had a similar lack of success at the Business Bureau who told them flatly that not only had Faber Gerhadsson never established a business in Vohn, but neither had anyone from Aston to the best of their knowledge. It was Gaenor and Elena, however, who came closest to finding him.

“May I help you?” the clerk at the front desk of the Commercial Association asked them in the first truly cheerful voice they had heard since entering the mountain city.

“I hope so,” Gaenor replied, matching his tone. “We’re looking for a friend who was originally from Aston, but who we have since learned came to Vohn to establish a business. We were hoping you might be able to help us find him.”

“Not all businesses join the Association,” the man replied, “But I’ll be happy to help if I can. Do you know the name of his business?”

“No, but among Asts, it is common to use one’s own name in any business venture,” Gaenor replied. “Can you look up Faber Gerhardsson?”

“Of course,” the man agreed, writing the name down on a piece of scrap paper. “Gerhardsson, Faber. Do I have it spelled correctly?”

Gaenor looked at it. The name had been spelled out phonetically in the native tongue of Sorvohn. “I’m not sure,” she admitted. She gave him the spelling in Astish just in case and he ran off to check the association’s records.

He was gone for twenty minutes or more, leaving Gaenor and Elena nothing to do but read the brochures in the waiting area. At one point Leracian, who had chosen to guard Gaenor that day, poked his head in the door to make sure they were still there and all right, then wordlessly when back outside to wait in his calm and patient manner. When the clerk finally returned he reported, “I’m sorry, but I find no record of Faber Gerhardsson nor of any business with which he was involved. I tried a number of different spellings, but to no avail.”

“Well, you did say he might not have joined your association,” Gaenor shrugged.

“May I ask what his business was?” the clerk inquired. “I may be able to direct you to a colleague of his.”

“I doubt it,” Gaenor replied, grateful, at least, for the clerk’s willingness to help. “He had a special license to practice magic. I understand it was supposedly an exclusive from the priesthood.”

“Oh no,” the man replied sadly.

“What’s wrong?” Gaenor asked. A pit had suddenly formed in her belly.

“I’ve heard that story before,” he replied. “I won’t say Their Holinesses deliberately lure foreign magicians to Sorvohn for the purpose of having them arrested,” he began in a loud voice. “Such behavior is beneath them. Do you understand?” When Gaenor nodded, he added in a whisper, “but that’s exactly what they do.”

“Seems like a particularly petty way of behaving,” Gaenor commented quietly.

“That’s because you don’t know our priests,” he replied. “If it wasn’t a capital offense, I’d consider converting to a kindlier religion. Devil worship, perhaps. Anyway,” he raised his voice again, “I don’t know what you’re standing around here wasting our time for. I have work to do, don’t you know.” He smiled and winked with a slight tilt of his head toward his associate.

“I see,” Gaenor replied. “I’m sorry for wasting your time, sir. Thank you in any case.”

“He was amazingly forthcoming,” Elena noted as they left the building and rejoined Leracian, “especially since he wasn’t too sure how his co-worker felt.”

“I’m glad you noticed that,” Gaenor agreed. “If you had said the wrong thing in there we might have all been in trouble. To tell the truth, I nearly didn’t catch on myself.”

“I might have made a mistake, but I didn’t think it was my place to talk,” Elena explained, “and when you both behaved the way you did, I thought about why and came to that conclusion. What do we do now?”

“A good question,” Gaenor admitted. “First we’ll need to see what Artur and the others found out. It’s always possible the man at the Commercial Association was mistaken.”

Four

Gaenor and Artur were fast asleep when the door to their room was smashed open. Several men rushed into the room and quickly dragged them both out of their beds, then expertly turned them over and cuffed their hands behind their backs. Gaenor felt herself being dragged back to her feet and shoved against Artur in a corner of the room.

“What is the meaning of this?” Artur demanded.

“Shut up, you” came the response, rapidly followed with a rap to his head with a short club.

A moment later the rest of their party was dragged into the room. Gaenor saw their captors were all Sorvohnians in dark grey uniforms. Elena, looking scared out of her wits, huddled close to Gaenor. Cornellya on the other hand was looking at the Sorvohnians with plain and fancy murder in her eyes.

Gaenor couldn't think of anything the vari could do, bound as she was, but for all their sakes, she hoped Cornellya didn't know either. Vito and Jimeleo were thrown to the floor. They had been beaten and were not completely conscious.

"What about the women?" one of the Sorvohnian men asked another.

"What about them?" one of the others replied.

"Our orders only included the men," the first one replied. "Sarge don't like it when we start thinking for ourselves."

"If we leave them here, we'll probably just have to come back and get them later."

"You afraid of a little exercise?" one of the others laughed.

"Leave them here, mates," another said. "We were told to arrest the men. That's enough for now. The women aren't going anywhere."

The Sorvohnians pushed Gaenor, Elena and Cornellya onto the bed while dragging the men out of the room. Gaenor heard the sounds of a feeble struggle as the men were dragged down the stairs. Elena was whimpering nearby and Cornellya was making an entirely different sort of sound; one Gaenor had no word for but which the Vieri associated with extreme anger.

Gaenor managed to sit up on the bed and muttered, "At least those bastards could have uncuffed us."

"They're planning to come back," Cornellya growled. "Can you reach your tools?"

"Just the flint and steel," Gaenor replied. "I don't want to try melting them off. I'd like to keep my hands, if you don't mind. Where's Leracian? I noticed he wasn't brought in here."

"Lucky for those men," Elena commented. "If they had tried to treat him that way, he probably would have killed them all."

"They might have killed him," Gaenor noted worriedly. "We'd better go see if we can find him."

"Like this?" Cornellya asked.

"You have a better idea?" Gaenor countered.

"Not really." Together they got up and clumsily made their way out into the hallway and found Leracian just entering it from the far end.

"Jube! What happened, my chief?" he asked excitedly.

"We were attacked by some sort of Sorvohnian security squad, I think. They dragged the men out and left us in handcuffs."

"I'll kill them!" Leracian exclaimed angrily. "How dare they even think of attacking not one but two Temi chiefs?"

"Calmly, Leracian," Gaenor advised. "First we need to get out of these cuffs. Then it might be a good

idea to find another place to stay, just in case they come back.”

“Yes, my chief. Just let me get my lock picks and I’ll have you freed in moments.”

“What a useful talent,” Gaenor marveled a few minutes later after she had been freed. “Could you teach me how to do that?”

“Why would my chief need to pick locks?” Leracian asked, puzzled. He continued working on Elena’s cuffs.

“You can,” Gaenor pointed out, “and it’s a good thing too or we might have still been here when those men came back.”

“We still might,” Cornellya added, “if we don’t get out of here. We don’t know how far away they went.”

“TheHolyTemple,” Elena informed her. “One of the men said something about ‘His Holiness,’ before one of the others told him to shut up.” Just then Leracian undid one of her handcuffs. “Oh, thank you, Leracian! My arms were getting stiff back there. Why don’t you undo Cornellya’s before getting to the second one?” He nodded and moved to Corneyllya.

“That doesn’t make sense,” Gaenor commented. “Why would the High Priest want his involvement in an arrest kept secret? He rules all of Sorvohn absolutely. Are you sure he said ‘His Holiness?’”

“Well, one of the others laughed when he said it,” Elena recalled, “but some of the people in Olaka laughed when they beat me too.”

“I wonder if the laughter was the one being told to shut up,” Gaenor conjectured. “Well that doesn’t help us. We’d better start packing. Get the men’s stuff too.”

“That’s more than the four of us can carry comfortably,” Leracian pointed out as he finished with Cornellya and went back to finish working on Elena’s remaining shackle.

“Good point,” Gaenor admitted. “We’ll get all the money and spell tools and ingredients. If there’s still room in our packs after that we can worry about spare clothing. Good thing we’ve all been traveling light, but I’m afraid we’ll have to leave some of the books behind, ‘Lena.”

“I’ve read most of them already anyhow,” she replied.

Leracian entered Gaenor’s room while she was still discarding items from her pack. “You must take your battle togs, my chief,” he told her. “No Tem ever discards those.”

“I don’t have room for them if I’m to carry Artur’s things as well,” she pointed out.

“Chief Arturus’ pack is larger than mine and it is hardly full,” Leracian said practically. “In fact it has just enough room for my pack.” The resulting bundle was definitely over-stuffed, but it held together as Leracian swung it over his shoulders. “There. Now don’t forget the togs, my chief.”

“Of course,” Gaenor replied, bemused.

An hour later they were carrying their packs through the underground streets of Vohn. Because the city

was always lit artificially it was truly a city that never slept and the streets were never completely empty. There were normal “day-time” business hours, but many concerns were open at all hours and they had no trouble checking into another hostel.

“Too bad we had to leave the cart and horses behind,” Gaenor commented. “Where are you going?” she asked Leracian. He was headed for the door of the room they had all checked into.

“I’m going to find Chief Arturus and the others, my chief,” he replied. “You should get some sleep if you can.”

“If we can, yes,” Gaenor agreed. “Be careful out there.”

“My chief,” Leracian bowed out of the room, closing the door behind him.

“In spite of all his deference,” Cornellya observed, “I’m willing to bet he wouldn’t follow any of your orders unless they coincided with his plans.”

“No takers,” Gaenor replied. “I figured that out the day we met him. It makes it very hard to tell him he’s wrong too.”

“Is he?” Cornellya asked.

“Maybe not,” Gaenor admitted. “He’s just so darned sure of himself, though. I have a hard time trusting people with that sort of attitude.”

They hadn’t slept very much by the time Leracian returned several hours later with qahwah and pastry. “I sold the cart and horses,” he told them. “I didn’t get as much for them as we should have, though.”

“It will do, I’m sure,” Gaenor told him, accepting the coins he offered. “Any news about Artur and the others?”

“Yes, my chief,” Leracian told her somberly. “They were already out of the city before we checked in here. They are being transported to some sort of prison on the northern border of Sorvohn.”

“The northern border?” Gaenor asked. “There’s nothing there but the Parch.”

“Makes escapes difficult,” Leracian agreed.

“We’ll have to follow them,” Gaenor decided.

“You are being looked for. When I sold the cart and horses, those men came back to the hostel.”

“Good thing we didn’t tell anyone we were leaving,” Gaenor remarked.

“I followed them after they left. They weren’t in the High Priest’s employ, but were working for the Cilben legate.”

“But Artur is the father of the emperor,” Gaenor protested. “Who would do this?”

“An old enemy, of course,” Leracian replied. “He had Chief Arturus and the other two wizards turned over to TempleSecurity and they were simply shipped off to that holding prison in the north.”

“Not even a trial?” Gaenor asked.

“Maybe later. Asking around I learned that the prison is used mostly for political prisoners. They go there and rarely come back. They also never get to stand trial.”

“What a delightful place,” Gaenor muttered. “We should appeal.”

“And get arrested ourselves?” Leracian countered. “Well, actually, yourselves. The legate evidently doesn’t know about me. I suggest you disguise yourselves before going out again. I fear we will have to find a way to break Chief Arturus out of his jail.”

“He should be able to break himself out,” Gaenor replied. “An adept without his tools is not entirely helpless, after all.”

“He may be in that prison,” Leracian replied. “They have other wizards imprisoned there.”

“We’ll set off at once,” Gaenor replied.

“Disguise yourselves,” Leracian repeated stubbornly.

Gaenor shrugged and rooted through her tools and ingredients. The spell was not very different from the spell Cornellya used to hide her ears, but included not only her entire body but those of Cornellya and Elena. She wrote it down carefully and double checked her annotations before casting it. It was not a short, simple spell because the incantation had to fully describe all the changes Gaenor wanted in each of the women. Finally after a quarter of an hour, however, all three of them appeared to have darker skin and hair. She had also made their faces look different too, with the higher cheekbones common in Sorvohn and had taken pains to make sure Cornellya’s distinctive ears were well hidden as well.

“Good enough for you?” she asked Leracian challengingly.

“My chief,” he replied and slipped his bow over his shoulder before picking up his pack.

An hour later they were walking through the northern neighborhoods of Vohn when Cornellya demanded of Leracian, “Tell me again why it was necessary to sell the cart and walk all the way to the Parch.”

“You forget that you are being looked for. Those disguises are clever enough but it wouldn’t take a lot of intelligence on the part of the priests or the ambassador to consider arresting anyone found in the same cart you rode into the city. Also, by walking, we can leave the road when necessary and be even harder to find.”

“We’ll need to pace ourselves too,” Gaenor suggested. “I haven’t done this much walking in months. It will take a bit of getting used to.”

“Perhaps we should stop early today,” Leracian told them uncharacteristically.

“Are you feeling all right?” Cornellya asked him.

“We have a long way to go,” he replied, “and I do understand you’ll need a day or two to get used to walking that much. There will probably be an inn near the edge of town, there were several on the south

side.”

He was right and they checked in while there were still two hours of sunlight left. However an hour later, when Gaenor went to invite him to dinner all she found in his room was a hand-written note.

“My chief,” it began in formal Cilben. “I have some business back in the mountain, It will not take long and I should be able to catch up to you in a day or two.” It wasn’t signed, but there was no doubt who had written it.

Martius Girdecus Ralba had been having a bad year. Hiring the Temi to kill his father’s enemy in Firdan had seemed like a good idea at the time and they had never failed him before, and when their chief, Leracus was his name, returned and reported that Senator Arturus had disappeared into the Parch and after four days had been presumed dead, it seemed like money well spent even though Leracus had demanded a bonus for having lost so many warriors in the commission of the contract.

How the Temi chief had found him in Kandoe, Martius had never known. King Marnoric and Queen Ymanyha had ejected him from their kingdom the day after Arturus had left, running for his life. Even that had been a price worth paying. It meant returning to Cilbe in disgrace, but at least he had killed the man his father despised. He was in no hurry to head home however and he drifted northward through Gostrina for a couple of months.

Then he ran into Flacco at the Junction in Rolta. Emperor Lusius was furious. Martius’ bad judgment had not only caused Firdan to break diplomatic ties with Cilbe, but all the Eastern realms had ejected the Cilben embassies from their territories including Martius’ father who had been conducted to the border of Mishanda under guard. Further, all the kings and queens who attended the Firdani coronation were suing the Empire for damages because the Cilben ambassador to Firdan, Martius, had put their lives in danger.

All that saved Martius’ life was Lusius’ debt to Sinius Girdecus Ralba and Flacco’s fast thinking, not that Martius was particularly grateful for either. Rather than demanding Martius’ return to Cilbe, He knew Lusius was posting him to Sorvohn. It was as much an exile as sending him to the Johian Islands might have been. Still Martius attempted to make the best of it and he left even before the official papers arrived. Unlike most of the members of the Cilben legation to Sorvohn, however, he despised qahwah and all manner of Sorvohnian cooking. At least Barian tobacco was easier to come by here.

He had to endure numerous insulting letters from Emperor Lusius until that happy day the word came of the emperor’s death. The other shoe did not drop until the next morning when the other half of the news arrived. Lusius had been killed by Arturus Cornellian Marno of all people. The same man that Leracus had assured Martius was dead. It was unthinkable. It was unbearable. Nobody ever survived a Temi contract. Martius attempted to comfort himself by believing the Temi would soon hunt Arturus down and kill him. Not only had that not happened, but Arturus installed his own son on the throne of Cilbe before disappearing from the Empire once more.

Martius had spent the intervening months wondering when Emperor Colchicus was going to replace him as legate, but it seemed as though the emperor did not have a clue as to who was representing him in Sorvohn. The Sorvohn post was not particularly demanding. Sorvohn had few resources Imperial Cilbe wanted and Sorvohn asked little of Cilbe in return.

Then just yesterday, two of Martius' aides spotted Senator Arturus on one of the streets of Vohn. They followed him back to his hostel and then ran to report to Martius. This time he knew what to do. Arturus, in his first absence from the Empire, had learned how to cast magic spells and had been making a living by doing so. Furthermore, the reason he was in Firdan had been to cast a special blessing spell on the King at his coronation. Martius knew that wizards were banned from all the so-called Holylands on pain of death and had wasted no time hiring thugs to capture Artur and his fellows and deliver them to the High Priest. It surprised Martius to hear the High Priest order Arturus and the other men to be imprisoned rather than killed, but the High Priest had assured Martius that Sorvohn was not entirely ignorant of how to deal with those who trucked with demons. Arturus and his friends would be worked to death in a prison that no adept had ever been able to escape alive.

Tonight was the first night in a long while that Martius could relax enough to go right to sleep on lying down in bed, but several hours later a feeling of unease caused him to open his eyes. He sat up in bed and looked around the room. The lamp he left on habitually was turned way down and shuttered so that he could barely see the lamp itself, but he reached over and opened the lamp's shutters and turned the lamp up. The sudden light was too bright, but he looked around the room through tightly squinted eyes until he spotted a bright red clad figure sitting silently in a leather armchair. There was a longbow standing against the wall next to a large leather pack and the curved sheath of a Temi sword. The sword itself was in front of the tem.

"Who the hell are you?" Martius demanded. "I could have used you yesterday, but you're too late now."

"Do you really not remember me, Ambassador?" the tem asked.

Martius looked at him more closely. All these Temi looked alike to him but there was something about the shape of his eyes and his chin. "You were with Leracus in Firdan, weren't you?"

"I was," he confirmed calmly. "I am Leracian."

"Leracus' son? What are you doing here now? Leracus said he would have nothing more to do with me. Have you started free-lancing?" The idea of a personal Temi guard appealed to Martius.

"In a sense," Leracian agreed, "but right now I'm here to collect the remainder of your debt to my clan."

"Nonsense!" Martius spat. "I paid the bill in full in Kandoe."

"This is only related to that contract in a tangential manner," Leracian assured him.

"Then what?"

"You and your agents have attacked two Temi chiefs," Leracian explained. "No honorable tem ever lets such an indignity pass."

"Honorable? Don't make me laugh," Martius scoffed. "You Temi know nothing of honor. You kill people for money."

"That is not quite true, Martius Girdecus Ralba," Leracian replied calmly, getting to his feet. "Sometimes we kill for free."

The prison camp must have had a name. Somewhere in some dusty file deep in the administrative offices of the Great and Holy Temple of Vohn there almost had to be the copy of some document proclaiming that the compound was dedicated to the blessed memory of some long-forgotten Vohnian saint. Nobody had bothered to inform the inmates, however, as to the name of their place of incarceration. They merely referred to it by such descriptions as “This place,” with or without profane modifiers.

The priesthood of Sorvohn had more experience dealing with foreign adepts than Artur would have previously believed. One of the lessons they had learned was that an adept had to be conscious to cast a spell. Consequently, after a thorough beating, Artur, Vito and Jimeleo were thrown, unconscious, into a locked and reinforced wagon. Whenever they woke up they were given food and drink, but it became apparent that either the food or drink was drugged since they fell asleep soon after eating. They were not allowed to speak or hold anything in their hands save the food they ate or the rough water cups they drank from. They were allowed no privacy on sanitary breaks and thinking was difficult in any case as whatever drug they were being forced to take left them groggy even while awake. Artur was dimly aware that Gaenor could probably have devised a spell to get them out of this predicament had she been here, but for the life of him, he could not figure out what it might be. So the journey to the prison camp seemed to pass in a series of short nearly identical episodes. Artur was not completely certain how long it took except that he was certain it was at least a week since none of his fading bruises were painful by the time he finally woke up after his arrival.

“Where am I?” was his first coherent question.

“Here,” a man on his left replied. Artur looked at him. Unlike the Southlanders, this man was fair haired and skinned. His wavy blond hair was dirty and in bad need of a trim and his beard had the look of one which had grown for lack of a razor, rather than by preference. His clothing, a rough and ragged shirt and baggy trousers, were made from the same orange and green stripped material. When Artur noticed he was dressed similarly, he concluded it was the prison uniform.

“And that is where?” Artur asked pointedly. He tried to sit up but the man held him down.

“Easy friend,” the man advised. “You’re still fairly weak. I doubt they fed you any better than they did the rest of us on the trip out.”

“I’m a bit thirsty,” Artur admitted.”

“And hungry too, I’ll bet,” the man told him. “Better get used to that. They don’t really feed us very well.”

“You’re speaking Cilben,” Artur noted.

“You started it,” the blond man smiled.

“I’d really like to sit up,” Artur told him.

“It’s on your head, then.”

Artur sat up and after a momentary bit of dizziness, he felt fine except for the thirst and a touch of hunger. “Hmm, you are a healthy one, aren’t you?” the blond man commented. The man passed him a

cup of water. Artur drank deeply and held the cup out for a refill. "You'll do better to play sick for a few days. The guards expect it and if they think you've recovered they'll only put you to work in the pit."

"What sort of work?" Artur asked.

"They say we're looking for diamonds and I suppose we do find a few every now and then, but frankly they're just making us do the most back-breaking work they can imagine. It may be hard to believe but a century ago this was supposedly a mountain. Now it's just a big low spot between mountains."

"That doesn't seem likely," Artur commented. "How many of us are there?"

"Maybe one hundred."

"Then I'd say it's impossible. A work force of one hundred could not wear down a mountain in a mere century. Besides where would all the rock go?"

"You may be right," the other man replied. "It's probably just one of those stories that grew a bit too big for its own good. By the way, the name's Faber. What's yours?"

"Artur. Faber Gerhardsson? From Aston?"

"You've heard of me?" Faber asked, surprised.

"My colleagues and I were looking for you," Artur explained, after taking another drink. "Where are they?"

"Right behind you," Faber replied. "I didn't expect any of you to wake up for hours yet."

"I heal quickly," Artur told him. "That applies to other sorts of recoveries most of the time as well."

"Lucky you."

"So where are we anyway?" Artur repeated his initial question.

"It's a prison camp," Faber told him. "Mostly for political prisoners, but whenever His Not-so-holiness gets his paws on an adept he ends up here as well. There were two others when I first arrived, but they died in a cave-in down below a few months ago. I got lucky, it wasn't on my shift. In case you're wondering, we generally work for sixteen hours in two eight-hour shifts with four hours for sleep in between them, although it generally takes at least a quarter of an hour to get back to the dormitory so the best you'll be able to expect is three and a half hours of sleep, usually less."

"I'll look forward to my next vacation, then," Artur commented.

"The closest you'll come to that is if you get too sick to work or if you get assigned to infirmary duty like I did this time around. Then as soon as you or your patient's well again, back into the pit you go. Most of us recover once or twice, but eventually we just cannot take any more and that's it. I've lasted longer than most, but only because the guards think adepts are all capable of healing."

"Where did they get that idea?" Artur asked.

"I told them," Faber replied.

“I’ll try not to abuse them of that notion,” Artur promised dryly. “When are we fed?”

“When on shift, we’re fed a little during the quarter-hour breaks every two hours. Normal meal times here in the infirmary, though. Next one is due in an hour. I wouldn’t bother to tip the waiters, though.”

“I’ll be led by your shining example,” Artur replied.

“Why were you looking for me, and who told you I was in Sorvohn?” Faber asked.

“I think it was Master Fallendir at the new school in Mita,” Artur replied, “although I believe Doctor Haxmire said he knew you as well.”

“As well he might, since I was one of the leading troublemakers of my class when I was in Es,” Faber remembered with a smile. “I’m glad I told someone where I was going, though. At least my family will have a notion of what happened to me.”

“What did happen?” Artur asked. He already knew from Gaenor’s encounter at the Commercial Association, but was interested in Faber’s version of the story. If or when they got out of here it might be worth spreading around to other adepts.

“I applied for and received a royal patent to practice magic here,” Faber replied. “I should have done my research better. There are no royal patents here; they have documents of dispensation, but they are no more reliable than anything else you might get in writing from one of the priests. Not worth the paper they’re written on.”

“What made you think you could even apply for one?” Artur asked.

“There was an advertisement in the Daily newspaper in Es. It turned out to be a scam. I paid a special licensing fee for the permit which went to the conartist, who then turned me in to the priests for a reward as well. The other adepts who were here were lured in the same way. It doesn’t catch many of us but, between the fraudulent license fees and the rewards, the conmen make a living. I imagine they practice different deceptions on their own people. But you still haven’t told me why you’re here?”

“Well, that’s a very long story,” Artur replied.

“Neither of us has any pressing appointments, Artur,” Faber pointed out.

“Well, actually we do,” Artur remarked and proceeded to tell him about the spell that was causing rain in the Parch and about the extrapolations of damage Gaenor had projected concerning the spell. He told him about the suspected origin of the spell and of the counterspell Gaenor and the Vieri had crafted. It took a long time to tell it all and the meager meal a pair of guards brought in was ancient history before he finished telling it.

“Well, you’ve convinced me,” Faber told him. “Too bad we both seem to have an overriding commitment. If we can somehow get free of that, however, you can count me in. I’ve been wasting my life in Sorvohn all because I tried to get rich quick. It’s about time I did something worthwhile, don’t you think?”

“Sounds good,” Artur replied. “So what’s stopping us from just casting a few spells to, say, knock the walls down or put the guards to sleep.”

“Have you ever heard of thionase?” Faber asked.

“That’s a formidable fortress,” Gaenor opined, when she got her first good look at the prison camp. From on top of one of the surrounding mountains she could see the thick walls that rose over a hundred feet from their external base. The camp filled the entire space between two mountains and the outer perimeter walls ran well up the mountain sides to keep anyone from escaping on to the mountain side, although to Gaenor’s eye it looked more like the builders were more worried about holding off an invasion.

Within the walls were a collection of drab stone buildings. Most, the dormitories, were identical plain rectangular structures, but there were other sized and shaped buildings in the compound, the largest of which was separated from the others by a wire fence. Careful observation over the next day revealed that this was the administrative building for the prison. It was here that the warden and his guards lived and did whatever paperwork they did. Inside the fence another large building had a fire going all the time, leaving Gaenor and Leracian to conclude it was a mess hall. The other buildings they were not too sure of, but one building appeared to be where everyone went. Gaenor and the others were divided on what function it served, but that it obviously had something to do with whatever sort of work the prisoners were required to do since every four hours men entered and left the building.

“Where is their water source?” Cornellya wondered. As a desert-dweller that was of primary importance to her.

“Deep wells, I would imagine,” Gaenor replied. “Why?”

“I was thinking that if it was open and drained out of the compound we could use those drains to get inside if they are big enough.

“I don’t think they have that sort of drainage system,” Leracian commented. “But I could get inside.”

“So could we,” Gaenor retorted, “but could you get back out again? What concerns me is why Artur, Vito and Jimeleo haven’t just cast a few spells and strolled out of there? Something must be stopping them.”

“Keeping them under constant guard would do the trick,” Leracian commented, “or else they could be treated with Thionase. They obviously know about the properties of the lichen that produces it otherwise they would have built this prison elsewhere.”

“What do you mean?” Elena asked.

“They built the northern wall directly on the boundary with the Parch. This may well be the only pass through the mountains into the Parch for that matter. From the maps it looks like most of this border is a series of sheer cliffs that descend directly from mountain to flat desert. If the prisoners are going to try an escape tunnel from their dormitories, that is the only practical direction for them to tunnel. Once out in the desert, however, they’d have to travel for days before they could find a way back out of it again. I’m surprised they don’t just leave the gate to the Parch wide open.

“In any case,” Leracian continued. “You may note that the northern wall is partially over the line into the Parch. See the blue line that extends along the boundary to the northeast and southwest. That is the Thionase lichen.”

“What does it do?” Elena asked.

“Just grows along much of the boundary of the Parch,” Leracian replied dryly. “It’s a lichen, what did you expect?” It was his first attempt at humor since joining their party. Gaenor wondered if he was letting his true self show through or if he was picking up their bad habits.

“It also produces a natural substance that is proof against magic,” Gaenor told her student. If a person gets even a little into their blood it will destroy their ability to cast spells. In most people that wouldn’t matter, but in an adept, well he wouldn’t be adept any longer. That’s what happened to Artur last year.”

“Those walls do have an almost bluish cast to them,” Cornellya observed.

“It could be the stone,” Gaenor suggested, then changed her mind. “No, it seems more pronounced at the bottom and much more so along the north wall.”

“My guess,” Leracian told them, “is that the priests of Sorvohn have been encouraging the lichen to grow on those walls. They’ve only been partially successful, however. The north wall is almost definitely proof against magic, the south wall may not be.”

“How do you know that?” Elena asked.

“The Temi have experience with all forms of poison,” he replied. “It is a good thing there is no visible sign of the lichen inside the compound, however. It is possible Chief Arturus has not been exposed to the lichen. It will make an adept very sick in its raw form.”

“It’s not too healthy for a man his age in its refined form either,” Gaenor said acidly. “Why didn’t you use the raw form when you were trying to kill him?”

“Thionase is very volatile. The tem who stung him with a treated dart had to dip it just before firing it. A minute or so later and it would have just been a dart. The unrefined thionase in the lichen evaporates as it dries and it won’t live far from the Parch’s edge. That southern wall, in fact, is the farthest I’ve seen it grow from the edge.”

“It certainly isn’t happy there is it?” Elena observed.

“Happy?” Cornellya asked.

“It’s really only there in sparse patches,” Elena explained. “The east wall gets bluer at the northern edge. We can’t see much of the north wall from here, but I’ll bet it is solid blue.”

“It looks that way to me too,” Gaenor agreed, “but I see hardly any inside the walls, except on the north side. I’m not sure if the other walls are proof against magic at all, but the dust that would fill the air if I did something to them would be laced with thionase. Not good.”

“I can still slip into that camp,” Leracian insisted. “I think we need to know how Chief Arturus and the others are and where.”

“Security is high in there,” Gaenor pointed out. “How can you be sure you won’t be caught?”

“I’m not,” Leracian admitted, “not yet anyway. I think I’ve seen a hole in their security. There a section of wall near the southwest corner that looks like it is not visible from any of the guard posts. At night it should be easy to climb the wall and slip into the camp, but I haven’t finished working out the best path once I am inside. Give me another two days and I’ll be sure.”

“Take as much time as you need,” she told him. “We still don’t know how we’ll get anyone out of there, but it seem to me that Artur is likely to want to get everyone out too.”

“Yes, that sounds like him, my chief,” Leracian agreed wryly.

“That’s going to mean doing something precipitous,” Cornellya pointed out, “Like collapsing the walls.”

“And putting all that thionase into the air,” Gaenor told her.

“There might be a way to keep it contained,” Cornellya replied. “My people have even more experience with thionase and the lichen that produces it than the Temi.”

“What did you have in mind?” Gaenor asked.

“Another call to Ksenya,” Cornellya replied. “I suspect this is going to require a number of spells acting in concert. That’s the sort of work we expect of the Wise.”

“Good idea,” Gaenor agreed. “if we know what spells to cast, we can construct amulets to help us cast them.”

Six

Artur was unable to stay bedridden for more than a few days but, since Vito and Jimeleo were slower to recover, he and Faber were able to continue in the infirmary for another week before all four men were put to work in the mine beneath the prison camp. Work in the mine was back-breaking, highly dangerous work. The over-tired prisoners made many mistakes in the mine and the whips and clubs of their guard-taskmasters only exacerbated the problem. There were frequent injuries that required one or more of the adepts to work in the infirmary, which explained how Faber had managed to survive in the prison as long as he had. With four adepts in residence, however, there was rarely a need for more than two of them to be on infirmary duty. The head guard rotated infirmary duty between the adepts.

Artur learned very early on that not only were the walls and gates of the camp protected from hostile magic by the living thionase lichen, but that the guards were regularly dosed with thionase which made them proof against magic as well. The anti-magical substance had nearly killed Artur over a year earlier when it stripped him of the protection of the Vieri health spell and he rapidly progressed toward his natural age. But the substance was not actually poisonous to a human so dosing the guards meant they did not have to worry about magic users.

Talking was not allowed in the mine nor in the mess hall and inmates were usually too tired to talk during the few hours they were allowed to sleep so the only times Artur to talk to any of the others was in the infirmary. When he was on duty with Faber he asked about escape attempts.

“Never been a successful one,” Faber told him tiredly. It was his first day out of the mine in two weeks and, as always, after such a stint he was exhausted. “The main gate is too well guarded and we’re watched too closely. We also don’t have much time to spend planning or digging tunnels or whatever since they work the hell out of us in the mine.”

“We out-number the guards four to one,” Artur pointed out.

“How are you going to organize a revolt?” Faber asked. “Nevermind, I’ll tell you that I tried early on. Most of the political prisoners don’t dare. In spite of their opposition to the current government, they also believe the High Priest who sent them here speaks with Vohn’s voice. Silly, I know, but they refuse to revolt for fear of being sentenced to Hell. You see, this prison is only a punishment in this life. Even the High Priest doesn’t dare pass judgment on them in the afterlife.”

“So a revolt is out of the question as well,” Artur concluded. “Don’t they even want to leave?”

“I’m sure they do,” Faber replied, “but they also want to be pardoned. It’s not an attitude I can really understand.”

“I had hoped to devise a plan to free everyone,” Artur said at last, “but maybe I’d better think smaller and just get four of us out of here.”

“I’d love to know how you even have the energy to think of it,” Faber told him.

“It’s the spell the Vieri initiated me with,” Artur told him. “It was really intended as a general purpose medicinal procedure. The Vieri are born adept so the initiation was more of a side effect than any particular desire to make me adept. Unlike you, I didn’t begin to learn magic until after I had been initiated.”

“Wish I had been initiated by the Vieri then,” Faber replied. “Well, if you have any ideas on how to get us out of here, let me know, otherwise I’d better get some sleep before our patients wake up.”

“Go to sleep,” Artur told him. “I’ll watch these two.”

There were two men on cots who had collapsed in the mine just two hours before. Artur and Faber had been assigned to carry them back to the infirmary and see to their recovery if any. After several weeks in the prison camp Artur had decided the head guard just chose whichever adepts were on duty in the mine to act as healers. He rarely saw Vito and Jimeleo except in passing unless they happened to be in the infirmary with him, they were not even assigned to the same dormitories. Both men were dispirited; the beatings they had endured had left them in pain for two weeks counting the trip here from Vohn. After that, neither man was anxious to cause trouble.

Modest experimentation showed Artur that magic would work within the prison camp, but whether it was accidental or by design, he had nothing at hand with which he could devise a spell that would help him escape. He decided it was probably intentional since he knew the upperpriests were reputedly adept. He thought he might be able to devise a spell that would collapse part of the camp’s walls by softening the ground underneath, but it was a long and involved spell in every rendition he tried to imagine and would take at least half an hour to cast. The guards, who inspected the infirmary and the dormitories at random intervals, rarely gave him the time and privacy to cast such a spell.

He stared out the open infirmary door into the sporadically illuminated night. The prison used two lime-lights to watch the compound at night and had them mounted on swivels so the reflectors behind

them could direct the light in broad beams that swept through the camp, trying to catch prisoners where they shouldn't be. That did not bother Artur particularly. The sweeps of the lights were predictable and even if they were not, an attentive person could see them coming in plenty of time to avoid them. He turned back to look at the two infirmary patients. They seemed to be resting comfortably.

"Chief Arturus," the soft voice of Leracian whispered from behind him.

Startled, Artur spun around and instinctively went into one of the unarmed combat positions he had learned over fifty years earlier. In response, Leracian raised his hands, palms open and facing Artur. "My apologies, my chief," he told Artur softly. "I did not mean to startle you."

"What are you doing here, Leracian?" Artur asked, relaxing his guard.

"Looking for you, my chief," replied Leracian, "naturally. I've been looking for you for a fortnight, actually. Part of the problem is I can only enter safely at night. And some of the dormitories are not safe to enter."

"I've been working at night the last two weeks," Artur commented. "So has Vito, some shifts, anyway. Jimeleo is in one of the dorms that face the warden's house, if there is a warden."

"What do you mean?" Leracian asked.

"I've never seen him. No one has since before we arrived, maybe he's in Vohn at the moment," Artur speculated.

"I doubt it matters," Leracian shrugged, "he didn't bring the guards with him, did he?"

"No, I suppose not."

"Chief Gaenor was concerned that they may have treated you and the others with thionase," Leracian reported.

"No, they have a different way to use it here. They dose the guards instead, making them proof against magic, not that I have much to work magic with in here."

"I am to give you these," Leracian handed Artur pieces of flint and steel. "I don't suppose they treat the guards' uniforms, do they? It wouldn't work well anyway, the thionase would evaporate in a few minutes."

"It would?" Artur asked. Leracian nodded. "It's good to have these, thank you, but I doubt I'd get very far with fire and lights."

"Chief Gaenor wanted to make sure you could protect yourself in case the situation got hostile or chaotic," Leracian told him, looking back out the door nervously

"What is she planning?" Artur asked suspiciously.

"I'm not sure, my chief, she just told me to tell you to stay away from the walls for the next few days."

"None of us are allowed near the walls, but the mine below stretches off to the northeast and under the mountain on that side, some of us may be under that wall. Will that be a problem?"

“I do not know,” Leracian replied. “I’ll make sure Chief Gaenor knows. The sky is starting to lighten, I’d better get back out of the camp again.”

“Wait!” Artur called him back. “When?”

“Sometime in the next few days,” Leracian replied. “We’re waiting for allies to arrive.” With that he was gone.

Artur waited a long time, listening for the sound of an escape alarm. He wasn’t sure what it would sound like and he failed to learn on this occasion as well. A few minutes later two guards poked their heads into the infirmary, Artur ignored them, but did not fully relax until the skies had lightened enough that it was clear Leracian had left the prison compound safely.

The walls are covered with the blue lichen, Artur mused, *what does Gae think she can do about them?* Just then one of the exhausted men started groaning and Artur’s attention turned to doing what he could to help the man recover.

There was only one event that could cause the guards to empty the mine and let the prisoners return to their dormitories. Early in the evening four days later, the ground started shaking. It was a small tremor, but the men in the mine, guard and prisoner alike started scrambling for the exit. Artur was on his first shift back in the mine after infirmary duty and was tempted to run with the other men, but instead kept his head and, with those he could calm down, waited for the earth to stop shaking. The tremor only lasted a few seconds and as soon as it ended, Artur led the others determinedly toward the exit. There was a mass of men all shoving their way out the exit and the guards were using clubs to get the prisoners out of their way.

Artur shouted to get others’ attention and managed to relieve the press at the stairway up to the exit building. Many of the guards ran up the long curved ramp to the exit but a few stopped when they heard the note of command in Artur’s voice. For a brief time they were grateful that someone seemed to know what to do.

The earth shivered again and Artur called for calmness and got it. The men continued to file out of the mine in an orderly manner in spite of the creaks of the supports and the dust and pebbles that fell from the ceiling. This second tremor lasted longer than the first and the men started moving faster, but there was none of the panic that had gripped them during the first shock that rattled the mine. Suddenly an overhead support cracked and a shower of gravel and rocks fell where the wooden shoring had given way. Several men cried out in pain as the rocks fell on them, but Artur turned and pulled them through before the heaviest of the rocks fell down.

Five men were trapped on the far side of the cave as the second tremor stopped, but while the support was cracked, it had not given way completely and the rubble did not quite fill the tunnel at the bottom of the ramp. Artur and several others scrambled to clear the detritus away to leave enough room for the men to crawl through. By the time the ground shook again everyone was standing safely on the surface and away from the mine entrance. Several men had been hurt when rocks fell on them and they were being carefully carried to the infirmary.

The Guards started trying to herd the prisoners to their dormitories but when the ground shook again more violently this time many of the guards turned and ran toward the warden's house or maybe toward the main gate that lay directly beyond it. One of the dormitory roofs collapsed and Artur thanked Jube that no one had taken refuge inside any of the dormitories, and then he remembered the infirmary and rushed to make sure the injured men were not brought inside until the series of quakes were entirely over.

He need not have bothered. Faber was ahead of him and had already had some men drag the infirmary cots outside. Vito and Jimeleo arrived outside the infirmary a few moments after Artur.

"Be nice if the walls fell down," Vito commented as he approached.

"I suspect that's what this is all about," Artur told them. "Leracian sneaked in the other night and told me to stay away from the walls. He also said Gae was waiting for some allies."

"Did he say who?" Jimeleo asked. "I never heard of anyone causing an earthquake before."

"I suspect this is not quite a classic quake," Artur replied, "although it'll do until the real thing comes along."

Another rumbling sound could be heard, but this was different in nature and the vibrating ground did not shake quite so much. Suddenly great fountains of water spouted up out of the earth just outside the north and south walls of the compound and then just as everything and everyone in the compound was soaking-wet, the south wall started to sink into the ground.

They could hear the ripping and crumbling of the stone and mortar that made up the wall. It did not collapse all at once but instead it sank slowly in pretty much one piece. Then when it was about halfway down, the northern wall, which faced the Parch, did the same thing. When the southern wall had fully collapsed most of the prisoners stormed off in that direction, some of the guards tried to stop them and got trampled for their efforts. Artur held his fellow adepts back, however.

"I get the feeling, we're supposed to go that way," he told them pointing northward.

"Into the Parch?" Faber demanded. "Are you crazy?"

"Could be," Artur admitted, "but we're adepts and can cast spells that will allow us to survive out there. I doubt anyone will try to follow us and if they do, they won't follow for long."

The northern wall finished sinking into the moist sand to reveal a thousand or more Vieri standing just over the edge of the Parch. Calmly, the desert dwellers entered the prison compound. The remaining guards saw this as an invasion and started forward to attack the Vieri. But before they could close in, the Vieri started singing and the guards all suddenly stiffened up and fell to the ground as though paralyzed.

"How did they do that?" Vito asked. "I thought the guards were treated with Thionase. They should have been proof against magic."

"Who said the spell was cast on the guards?" Artur replied.

"What then?" Vito countered. "Their clothes?"

"Exactly," Artur answered.

“What do you m... oh yeah. Of course,” Vito admitted after a moment.

“Artur!” Gaenor called, running ahead of the singing Vieri. Leracian was close behind her. “Are you all right? I was so worried!”

“It’s not something I’d care to experience again, but I survived,” Artur replied. “I think we could all use a week of bed rest though.”

“Sorry, I don’t think you’re going to get it any time soon,” she told him, “but you can go to sleep early tonight if you like. First we need to get out of here, though. Kseniya says the spell on the guards’ uniforms will only last an hour or so.”

“Is she here?” Artur asked.

“Yes, Borrit too. Cornellya and Elena are with them,” Gaenor told him. “We’d better start moving.”

“Oh, I didn’t tell Leracian, but I found Faber Gerhardsson. Faber,” Artur said, turning halfway to face him, “my intended, Lady Gaenor of Narmouth.”

“An honor, my lady. Artur, I agree with your lady, we ought to put some distance between us and those guards,” Faber opined.

Artur nodded and together the adepts joined the Vieri and left Sorvohn by entering the Parch.

Here ends the third book of Gaenor’s Quest.

The fourth book concludes the story when the team of adepts assembled by Gaenor and Artur assault Ichtar, the dreaded domain of the demons!

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