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Gaenor's Quest

Book Four

The Cold, Clear Skies of Midnight

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

Author's Foreword

Finishing a novel is an accomplishment to be sure, but finishing a series is more like managing to complete a grand tour. In this case perhaps literally so since over its course, I took my characters on a

grand tour of the World and while they by no means managed to get everywhere of interest, they certainly hit the high points.

It was a long story and even I didn't know how it would end until just before I started writing. And, as there always are, there were surprises even when I knew how the story would end.

For now Gaenor's and Artur's story is a complete one. In this volume I reveal just who the demons of Ichtar are and why they are attacking the people of the mainland. But I'm disturbed to find I left several tantalizing loose ends and hints at what the future might bring. Certain aspects of the World have been left unexposed, not because I intentionally kept them hidden, but because it was not important to this particular story. Some of them involve the near future and some involve the past and I think they can definitely be used in a new story.

I have other stories to tell before I come back to Gaenor's World, so I doubt such a story will be written any time in the next couple of years. That's good since I don't yet have a clear notion of what the new story might be. However, for reasons that will be clearer by the end of this book, the next series, if I write it, will probably be called "Gaenor's Prophecy." At least that's my prediction...

As always, 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

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Prologue

The priest droned on about family virtues, but Arturus Cornellian Marno's mind was too preoccupied to listen to the sermon. Even if that were not the case, he would have realized he had heard it all before. These were values that had been drilled into him since he was old enough to speak coherent sentences.

His bride, Mara Jania Rolaro, stood beside him. He glanced at her, marveling once again that he had somehow won her affections. Jania, with her strawberry blonde hair and blue eyes, had the temperament more stereotypically associated with redheads. It had been a stormy relationship ever since they had first met in grammar school. By the time they graduated the Cilben public school system, Arturus to go to the Academe and Jania to the Women's College, the storm had passed and they began to spend the occasional quiet moment together.

Arturus was shaken from his reverie by the sound of his name attached to a question. "I will," he replied automatically, not taking his gaze from Jania's face. There was another question, but as it was not directed toward him, he paid no attention to it.

"I will," Jania affirmed warmly, her own eyes locked with Arturus'.

The priest started droning an ancient prayer for the occasion while Arturus and Jania saw only each other. Finally, they heard, "You may kiss your bride," and suited their actions to the words.

A loud cheer broke out as the attendees stood to voice their approval. Then Arturus and Jania walked to the back of the large garden to the area that had been set aside for the reception as their guests followed along. While it was traditional for the bride's father to pay for the wedding, both families had agreed to hold the ceremony on the Marno family estate in Maite.

There, on a high prominence, overlooking the Bay of Cilbe, they stood near the edge and formally received their guests. Behind them, in the distance the capital city of Cilbe could be seen across the bay. Arturus had always thought the city looked better from this distance than it did close up.

The feast was not served in the typical Cilben style, however. The Marnos kept no slaves, and the family retainers were too few to easily serve the guests who numbered over one thousand. Instead, Arturus' father had adopted a custom from far-off Mishanda and had the food served buffet style. Not only did this alleviate the need to hire additional servers, but the guests found it a delightfully novel experience.

"I really didn't think you two would ever get together," Arturus' best man, Acelius Moritian Nillans, confided somewhat later that afternoon. "The Gods know it wasn't love at first sight!"

"But it was love," Arturus replied, perhaps a bit stiffly. "And when will you and Vassilia finally make it official?"

"Not until next year," Acelius replied. "We decided to wait until I had leave from the Legion so we could enjoy a proper honeymoon, not like you. Really whatever possessed you two to hold the ceremony only two days before you had to report?"

"Joining before I left seemed like a good idea," Arturus admitted.

"Well you certainly wouldn't have wanted to give her another chance to look around, old man!" Acelius laughed.

Just then there was a disturbance at the far end of the garden. Looking in that direction, Arturus thought someone may have tripped and fallen. He and Acelius rushed to help out, but when they arrived they found Arturus' father curled up on the ground vomiting.

"Something he ate must have disagreed with him," the physician told Arturus and his mother some hours later. "He'll recover. He got most of it out of his system already, but he'll be weak for a while." He gave them some dietary instructions and promised to return the next day.

It wasn't much of a honeymoon, Arturus had to admit to himself a few days later as he rode alongside his century. As a centurion he was entitled to ride while the soldiers walked.

He had, in fact, gotten off the horse several times the first two days as they headed westward out of

Cilbe to walk with the men under his command, but Radicus, the senior decurion, advised him, “Get back up there, sonny, before the general spots you, or he’ll put us all on short rations until you learn better.”

Young and inexperienced though Arturus was, he felt he rated a “sir” rather than a “sonny” from the decurion, but kept his mouth shut, remembering stories from the Academe about who really ran the armies of Cilbe. He did not realize it at the time, but instinctively knowing who to listen to and when would be the hallmark of his military career.

It was common for young Cilben nobles to serve for a time in the Legions, but only a few ever rose above the rank of junior centurion. Arturus, however, showed his potential immediately and within two years was a senior centurion and obviously being groomed as the next general of the Twelfth Imperial Legion. It was shortly after that promotion that word came from Cilbe that his father was gravely ill and calling for him.

Arturus rushed back to the city as fast as a relay of horses could carry him from Minue Province. He arrived in the family home in Cilbe to find his father confined to his bed. During Arturus’ previous trip home, his father had fully recovered from the incident at the wedding and was once more the robust and healthy senator. Now, however, he looked worse than anytime Arturus could remember.

His skin appeared to be thicker and slightly darker than it had been, and yet this was not the healthy tan of a man who had spent time outdoors. His eyes and face were puffy and as Arturus clasped his father’s sweaty hand in his own, he could feel several small bumps or warts that had not been there before. His father was barely conscious and Arturus soon left to confer with the physician.

“What’s wrong with him?” Arturus asked concernedly as his mother went in to sit with her husband.

“I’m not really certain,” the doctor admitted. “Your father spent a fair amount of time in the tropics when he served as general, did he not?”

“He did,” Arturus confirmed.

“Then perhaps it’s one of those rare wasting diseases that fester in the swamps there. They often lie dormant for years. I’m going to prescribe quinine and see how that works.”

“Quinine?” Arturus echoed. “Even I know he doesn’t have malaria. It looks more like he’s being poisoned if you ask me.”

“Nonsense!” the physician scoffed. “Nobody poisons anyone these days.”

Fat lot you know! Arturus kept the thought silent and walked the doctor to the door. There were others who might recognize his father’s symptoms even if Arturus’ mother had been too distraught to think of looking for one. It took almost a week, but eventually he found a woman who had worked as a healer in Kenda.

“I wish you had called me in sooner,” she told Arturus after an extended examination of his father. The normally exuberant man had been depressed since Arturus’ return. He could barely move, had no appetite and what food he could be persuaded to eat would not stay down. “I probably could have saved Senator Marno’s life a month ago. As it is, I’m afraid it’s just a matter of time.”

“What does he have?” Arturus asked her anxiously.

“Arsenic poisoning,” she replied. “It’s almost definite. The symptoms are almost classic. It would have been best had he come to me when the headaches began or the tingling in his hands and feet.”

“Arsenic poisoning?” Arturus asked. “How?”

“Given his skin condition,” she replied gently, “my guess is that it was mixed into his food.”

“But no one else is sick here,” he replied. Then he realized, “That means someone was intentionally putting it into his food.”

“I suggest you investigate your slaves, sir,” the healer told him.

“We don’t keep slaves,” Arturus responded.

“Your cooks and other kitchen staff then. Your father is an important man. He obviously has powerful enemies as well, sir.”

Arturus wasted no time interrogating the kitchen staff, but he had only spoken to the head cook and her assistant before an ear-splitting wail from upstairs heralded his father’s death.

The next two weeks were excruciating for Arturus and his mother as they endured the extended mourning period expected of Cilben patricians. They were obliged to stay at home, save for the actual funeral and procession through the city. Cilbe became a study in black for that occasion. Black bunting was only required to be hung from the public buildings during a Senatorial funeral, but Senator Marno was so well respected in the city, nearly every house and place of business hung funereal banners above their doors.

While still confined to the house, Arturus learned one of the household’s maids, a woman who had been hired a year earlier, had disappeared. Her body was found a week later several miles east of the city.

Arturus was not at liberty to investigate his father’s murder, but his friend, Centurion Acelius was. “It was Sinius Girdecus Ralba,” he reported near the end of the official mourning period. “At least, I think it was.”

“What do you mean, you ‘think it was?’” Arturus asked.

“Well, he’s the only one it could have been really. That maid who turned up dead; she worked for him before she came here, didn’t she?”

“Did she?” Arturus asked. “I wasn’t around when she was hired.”

“She did,” Acelius nodded. “The problem is that I can find no direct proof that Girdecus was involved.”

“And with the woman dead,” Arturus added, “we can’t exactly go asking her, now can we?”

“Not unless you want to hold a séance,” Acelius told him.

“It won’t stop me from paying a quiet little visit with Girdecus one night,” Arturus muttered darkly.

“Better not, mate,” Acelius warned him. “The circumstances may not stop you but his bodyguards will.”

No need to throw your life away. Besides I could be wrong, you know.”

“I doubt it,” Arturus told his friend. “You’re right, however. Still if Girdecus deserves my revenge, he’ll get it in time.”

“What do you mean?” Acelius asked.

“Neither of us is going to stay in the Army forever,” Arturus reminded him. “We’re both of Senatorial rank and in time we’ll be obliged to serve in the Senate. When that happens, Girdecus will find us staring back at him from across the floor.”

Arturus was required to rejoin the Twelfth Legion immediately following the mourning period, but Jania had one more bit of news for him as he prepared to leave for the Minue. “Honey, I think we’re going to have a baby.”

The Parch

One

“Dear Arturus,” Kseniya Keshayu greeted him warmly, with her hands outstretched. “It is good to see you again, but someday I would prefer that we not meet simply because you need to be rescued.” The words might have been serious, but her tone was belied by the smile on her face. Kseniya was a vari; an elf-like person who made her home deep in the world’s absolute desert – the Parch. She stood only an inch or two over five feet tall and had straight black hair, deep brown eyes and slightly pointed ears that stuck a little way up and out of her hair.

“You have to admit, dear Kseniya,” Artur replied, sweeping her up into a hug that left her feet well off the ground, “that I’m getting better. At least this time I’m able to walk away from danger under my own power.” He put her back down on the desert floor. They were standing just inside the Parch. A few yards away stood those remains of the prison wall that had not disappeared into the freshly moistened sand a few minutes earlier.

The Parch’s edge was so sharp that one could determine where the border was to within a few fractions of an inch. On one side of that line it might be raining, on the other side it never rained, or at least it hadn’t until very recently. A year and a half earlier, clouds began to form over the Vieri’s Village and they soon started to produce rain. So far none of that rain managed to reach the ground before evaporating, but it was only a matter of time. Soon after that, the rain would spread out and water the entire Parch. However there was no sign of this impending disaster on the southern edge of the great desert. The center of the disturbance was too far away.

“Under your own power,” Gaenor mused.

“What was that, dear?” Artur asked.

“You just gave me an idea,” she replied thoughtfully. “Those motorized vehicles we saw in the deep

south. I think I could make a magical version of one.”

“That would certainly ease the next leg of our trip,” Artur admitted.

“Oh, I won’t be ready to try it for a while yet. It will be a very complex set of spells built to work together, but I just had a flash of insight on how it might work.”

“Too bad you don’t have time to write it all down just now, my chief,” Leracian told her, “but I think we really ought to get away from here. The prison guards may have been immobilized by our allies’ magic but they’ll be back in motion all too soon.”

“You don’t think they may find themselves somewhat outnumbered?” Vitautis of Senne asked the Temi warrior pointedly. He gestured toward the thousand or so Vieri who stood nearby. They had sung the spell that caused the wall to collapse gently into the sand, but now they were standing silently.

“I am more concerned with their being able to see and report which way we went, Vito,” Leracian replied calmly.

“We should move out of sight, at least,” a male vari agreed.

“You’re right, Borrit,” Artur nodded. “Strangely, I didn’t have this sort of trouble the last time I visited Sorvohn. Of course, I was not a known adept at the time, and I stayed in the coastal cities where the people have a slightly more cosmopolitan outlook. At the time I avoided Vohn because of the chance of running into the Cilben ambassador. I didn’t think that would be a problem this time. Oh well, any trouble you can overcome increases your wisdom, I suppose.” He turned to see if everyone was present and ready to walk through the blistering heat and lack of humidity of the Parch. It would not be a pleasant journey, but they could rest once they were beyond sight of the prison. After that they would travel only at night and find what shelter they could during the day.

Artur took inventory of his companions. First there was Gaenor of Narmouth, his fiancée. They had begun this journey together almost two years earlier when Artur had been placed on the royal honors list of the Kingdom of Mishanda. However, Artur was not merely the adept of a quiet city far from the capital. He had a past that included an illustrious career in the military of the army of Imperial Cilbe and a somewhat less successful political one in the Cilben Senate. He had made many friends, but had also made some powerful enemies and one of them, the Cilben ambassador to Mishanda, had recognized him.

One thing led to another and soon after receiving a knighthood from King Pawlen he was invited to Firdan to perform a particularly important part in the coronation ceremony of the new king and queen of that land. While there, he had been attacked by Temi assassins in the hire of his old enemy’s son. He decided his only chance for survival involved his reaching the Parch before a certain magic-inhibiting poison called thionase could complete its work within him. Gaenor refused to let him go alone and together they rushed toward the Parch and the Vieri Village.

Artur was a weak old man by the time they reached the Gostrina-Parch border and had survived several subsequent Temi attacks. By this time the Chief of the Temi Ridec Clan was forced by his own honor to challenge them to combat personally, but seeing that they were intent on entering the Parch, he gave them an alternative that he believed was less likely than their ability to defeat him in armed combat. They had to stay within the Parch for four or more days. If they did this and survived, he would consider his challenge met.

It was a near thing, but both Artur and Gaenor survived to reach the Village. There they learned of a great spell that had been cast by the demons of the island Ichtar. It was that spell that was causing the rain to fall on the Parch, but in time it would disrupt weather systems all over the world. While in the Village, Gaenor, who was already an accomplished theoretical adept, was initiated into Magic by the Vieri and could thereafter cast spells of her own. She and Artur promised to do what they could to disrupt the Ichtar spell, even though that would involve traveling to Ichtar with a spell of their own.

When they left the Village, Artur's Vari godchild, Cornellya Vasylyya, insisted on following them to Ichtar. Later, in the Kingdom of Aston, they met Vitautis of Senne, who was an expert on the troll-like lomorgs but was seeking out contact with the Vieri.

They did not meet their next companion, Elena Carolena, until they were forced to take refuge from a storm on the island of Olaka. Elena was an orphan and had been living on the dubious generosity of the people of her village. She practically worshipped Gaenor and stowed away on their ship in order to stay with her.

Jimelo of Laria jumped at the chance to have someone pay his way out of Boraedne, Nimbria. He was a nervous-seeming man who had been driven to near destitution by the lack of customers in a kingdom where magic was looked down on.

Leracian was the son of Leracus, the chief of the Ridec Clan whom Artur and Gaenor had first met in Fronor, Gostrina. On successfully surviving the rigors of the Parch, Artur and Gaenor had found themselves formally inducted into the Ridec Clan as chiefs. Leracus had promised the Temi would sing of Artur and Gaenor and made good on that promise. Because no Temi chief ever traveled without an honor guard, Leracus had assigned his son to fulfill that function for both Artur and Gaenor. Leracian had followed them stealthily until it became necessary to show himself while they were under attack in Sorvohn.

Finally, they had met Faber Gerhardsson, a displaced Ast from Jaritale, in the prison they had just left. Faber had been suckered into traveling to Sorvohn where he had been told he would receive a special license to practice magic. Instead he had been arrested and put to work on a life sentence passed on him without a trial. It did not take much for him to promise to accompany Artur to Ichtar should they ever manage to escape.

Seeing they were all there, Artur turned to Kseniya and Borrit. "We're going to need a lot of food and water."

"We have thought of that, Arturus," Kseniya assured him even as they started to walk. "You'll have no trouble raising water from beneath the desert, and we shall leave you with enough food to get you to the edge of the Parch."

"You aren't coming with us?" Artur asked.

"That won't be possible," Borrit informed him. "There are too many of us and not enough food to be able to walk to the edge of the desert and then back to our home. And remember, we're trying to remain a myth to your people."

"There is that," Artur noted.

"I'm surprised you were able to carry enough to get here and back home again," Gaenor commented.

“We weren’t, dear,” Kseniya replied. “That’s part of why we won’t be able to accompany you. You see, we left caches of food along the way for the return journey and those who stayed behind arranged for still more to be waiting for us. The logistics of this trek were fairly complex. We have not had to do anything like this in living memory. Already, you’ll note that many of us are heading directly back for the Village.”

Looking around Gaenor saw it was true. Most of the Vieri were heading northwest away from them while the adepts and a few dozen Vieri were following the escarpment line to the northeast.

Even with frequent stops for water, they were nearly ten miles away from the prison by sunset. It was then that the Kseniya and Borrit left them.

“Wait!” Cornellya told Kseniya. “I almost forgot.” She ran toward the departing Vieri and shrugged the pack off her back. From inside, she pulled out a heavy bag filled with tiny glass beads. “I bought these for you,” she told Kseniya. “I thought you might like to embroider with them.

“They’re gorgeous!” Kseniya exclaimed, peeking inside the bag. “And so small. I wonder how they made these. Thank you, Cornellya. Are you certain you do not want to come home now with us?”

“I am certain I do want to,” Cornellya responded instantly, “but this is something I really have to do.

“I understand, dear.”

The party of adepts rested for an hour after dark and then continued on their way. Traveling the Parch at night was only marginally easier than during daylight hours and to make matters worse Vito and Faber began having trouble breathing the extremely dry air of the Parch, necessitating stops every half hour or less to drink more water. Even the water did not help much with their breathing problems and Artur became concerned about their chances of reaching the Gostrinan border alive.

“Do the mountains on this edge of the desert continue all the way to Gostrina?” he asked Gaenor the next day while most of the others were trying to sleep.

“Not according to this map,” Gaenor replied a few minutes later. “They fall off near the border with Pahn.”

“We’re going to have to enter Pahn then,” Artur decided. “I thought we could reach Gostrina in six or seven days, but at this rate it is likely to take two or three weeks. We’ll starve before we get there if Vito and Faber don’t acclimate soon.”

“We’re likely to have the same problem in Pahn that we had in Sorvohn,” Gaenor pointed out. “If the other Southlands knew who we were, the Pahnites are liable to as well.”

“I realize that,” Artur replied, “but there’s no help for it. Maybe we’ll think of an alternative by the time we get there. But Vito and Faber need to breathe some normal air and the nearest source is about half a mile straight up those cliffs.”

“I’ll keep an eye out for a ramp,” Gaenor told him.

Toward the end of the night Elena started getting dizzy so they stopped moving as the skies were just starting to lighten.

“Have you been drinking your water?” Gaenor asked her.

“I’ve been trying to save it in case we need more later,” Elena replied.

“Lena, the one thing we have plenty of is water. We have spells that will draw it up from the water table below us. We may run out of food, but never water.”

“So I should eat less,” Elena concluded.

“No,” Gaenor corrected her. “You need your strength. We’ll figure out how to get more food.”

“Could we call Kseniyah for help again?” Elena asked.

“I don’t think so,” Gaenor told her. “You have to know where the person you’re calling is more or less. If we get desperate we might try, but the Vieri have already done all they can for us. Calling some of them back will only endanger their lives as well. Don’t worry. We have enough food to reach Pahn then maybe some of us can find a small town to buy more food in.”

After that Elena was fine, but Vito and Faber continued to get weaker. Gaenor and Cornellya started moving ahead of the others to make sure there was plenty of water waiting when the others stopped to rest.

“At least Kseniya left us some cloth shelters,” Cornellya remarked to Gaenor several days after they had left Sorvohn.

“We still have to carry them,” Gaenor reminded her. Once again they had ranged ahead of the others to set up the camp the party would take refuge in when the sun rose. The sky was already a dull pre-dawn grey but the others were still over a mile away.

“They’re not very heavy,” Cornellya pointed out. It was true. The Vieri-made cloth was light but opaque. And the poles only a few feet long so the erected shelters were only tall enough for the others to lie down under.

“True enough,” Gaenor agreed as they started in on the second shelter, “but we still have to carry them and we could be carrying food instead.”

“We need the shelters, Gaenor,” Cornellya pointed out. “Even I couldn’t survive out here without some sort of shelter. How did you reach the Village the first time?”

“We took what refuge we could from the sun by camping in the shade of the dunes and cliffs and once we found a cave,” Gaenor explained. “Otherwise we had a small canvas lean-to that was similar to these.”

“I don’t see any caves or dunes around here,” Cornellya noted, “and the cliffs only give us a bit of shade for the first hour of each morning. Speaking of the cliff, though, am I being optimistic or is the cliff a lot shorter here.”

“Both, I think,” Gaenor grinned at her. “We should be getting close to Pahn and according to the map the mountains also mark the boundary between Pahn and Sorvohn. So I suppose it’s only natural the escarpment might get shorter as we approach the border.”

The others did not reach Gaenor and Cornellya's advanced camp until the sun had already risen. As soon as Gaenor saw them, she realized why. Vito and Faber had collapsed again and Jimeleo and Artur had to help them walk. Elena was forced to carry a heavier load than usual and unnoticed by the men was straggling over a quarter of a mile behind. Gaenor and Cornellya rushed to help her reach the camp and everyone was exhausted and dehydrated by the time they crawled under the shelters.

Two

"I'm sorry," Gaenor told Artur a few hours later when they woke up for a meal that was mostly water.

"What for?" he asked.

"I made the camp too far ahead," she replied. "I should have realized you couldn't walk this far today."

"There was no way to predict how much worse it would be for Vito and Faber last night," Artur assured her.

"I won't push so far ahead tonight," she promised.

"You may not need to," Artur told her. "If my calculations are accurate we should reach the Pahnese border sometime tonight. Then we'll all be able to take a break."

"In Pahn?" Gaenor asked disbelievingly. "They may not call their land the Holiest Kingdom like the people of Sorvohn and Nider do, but Pahn is still one of the Southlands and they have the same religious mania against adepts and magic the rest of the Southlanders do."

"Correction," Artur stopped her. "Their priests have that mania. From what I could see, most of the people could not care less about adepts and magic. If anything, they would probably be all in favor of magic if it was used to get rid of the priests. Remember what happened in Towhee?"

"That's where we saw that morality play isn't it?"

"You got it. Now remember what happened to the priests there," Artur prompted.

It was evidently an all too common occurrence. A pair of priests would stop at a village tavern, or in a town square, and perform a sort of scripted debate concerning the religious beliefs of the Southlands. As the little play progressed the priest/actors would pick one or more people out of the crowd and accuse them of sin. Then they would commence whipping or beating those victims and through intimidation get the help of the crowd in killing them. In Towhee, however, something went terribly wrong for the priests. Just as one of them was about to beat an old man in the tavern where Artur, Gaenor and their companions had stopped for lunch, the priest slipped and fell. Then when the other priest tried to use a flail against that same victim, that priest slipped and fell as well. Both priests tried again, but by then everyone in the tavern had started laughing at them. Once they became objects of ridicule, even their weapons were not enough to cow the village folk and when the priests tried once more, the crowd trampled them to death.

Gaenor had never been sure exactly how it happened. Cornellya had been absent and later claimed she had been visiting the privy, but it seemed all too coincidental that the morality play would turn into a farce the one time the adepts were there to witness it. The townsfolk, however, did not hesitate once their awe

of the priesthood had been banished. They just set to and immediately started disposing of the bodies. The innkeeper had even nonchalantly noted that they would have to sand the floor boards where the priests' blood had been spilled. Artur had asked if this sort of thing happened often. The innkeeper had admitted it was a first, but that everyone had dreams of being able to do what they had that day.

"You're probably right," Gaenor admitted, "but no matter how the people may feel, they're still being ruled by the priests."

The next evening was the worst of all. Once again Gaenor and Cornellya walked ahead of the others, but by midnight they found the Pahnese border. They stepped carefully over the sharp line that marked the edge of the Parch to avoid contact with the blue lichen that grew to one extent or another all along the border of the Parch. That lichen was the source of the chemical thionase which had caused the adepts so much trouble.

From their vantage point it appeared there were no nearby settlements, although at night looks could be deceiving even with the light of the two moons, Tars and Miala, available to assist. They quickly set up the shelters and hurried back into the Parch to help the others reach the newly found haven.

The others were less than halfway to the border when Gaenor and Cornellya found them, but Cornellya helped Elena with her load and Gaenor helped Jimelo with Vito while Leracian helped Artur with Faber. That way they managed to get the party over the border just as the sun rose in the partly cloudy Pahnese sky.

It turned out they had pitched their shelters in an area of tall grass, which afforded a bit of padding while they slept and also helped to hide the shelters, not that there seemed to be anyone nearby to see them. However smoke on the distant southeastern horizon suggested they were not far from whatever passed for civilization in Pahn.

They stayed in their shelters for most of the day and the next night as well, but on the second day Gaenor realized they would have to start moving again soon. "I've been thinking about this quite a bit. We only have two days' worth of food left," she pointed out to the others, "so either we all have to go find a town or else one or two of us should go and bring some food back here. It seems to me that a party our size walking into a town might attract too much unwanted attention, but if I go alone..."

"No," Jimeleo stopped her. "If this were Mishanda or even Gostrina, I'd say you could go, but a single woman would never be allowed to travel alone in any of the Southlands, least of all Pahn. Women here are supposed to stay at home; cook and have babies and not a whole lot more. A single woman who does not have a family can be claimed as the property of whoever finds her first. It will be best if you stay here."

"I'll go," Artur told them.

"Then I can go with you," Gaenor replied.

"No," Artur vetoed the idea. "It wouldn't be as dangerous as you going by yourself, but if anything were to happen to me you would still be vulnerable to Pahn's peculiar institutions. It's better if we don't take the chance. This way even if everything goes wrong you can still escape into the Parch.

"I should have someone with me, however," Artur continued. "Faber, Vito, you've both recovered fairly well since we left the Parch, but I think it will be best if you continue to rest up. Jimeleo, you sound like you know Pahn fairly well."

“My father used to do business here,” Jimeleo replied. “Sometimes I would join him on his business trips. It did a lot toward making me appreciate Wanlaria. I’ll join you on your little shopping trip, but what are we going to use for money?”

“I shall accompany you as well, my chief,” Leracian spoke up.

“I would rather you stayed with Gae, Leracian,” Artur told him. “If this camp is discovered she’ll need you more than I will.”

“As my chief commands,” Leracian replied with a Cilben cross-the-chest salute.

Then without another word Artur and Jimeleo started walking toward the east. Once they were out of sight, Gaenor and Elena started preparing breakfast for the others. There was not much in the way of variety, just some hard flat bread, sausage and dried fruit, but there was enough to keep them from feeling hungry. Once they had eaten, Gaenor found one of her notebooks and began to write.

“What are you working on?” Cornellya asked, looking over Gaenor’s shoulder without being able to make heads or tails of the spell Gaenor was crafting. Elena, overhearing the conversation, drifted over to listen.

“It’s something I thought of a few days ago,” Gaenor replied distractedly. “Remember those steam-driven wagons we saw in Nimbria and the other southeast kingdoms?”

“Yes, and that other type in Corinia,” Cornellya nodded. “Is that what you’re making?”

“Well, eventually,” Gaenor nodded, still keeping her eyes on her notes. “It’s simple enough to design a propulsion spell, I suppose, but it needs to be long-lasting and of variable speed. A driver also needs to be able to steer and stop. Steering, I think, can be accomplished with a mechanical device similar to those we saw, but stopping is a bit more of a problem. If you turn off the propulsion spell it will have to be recast, so I need a way to put it on hold. I also need a way to regulate the speed at which the vehicle will travel. Merely installing a brake won’t work for long. It will wear out fairly rapidly if you use it all the time, so that’s what I’m working on right now – a governor spell. What I want it to do is regulate the rate at which the propulsive spell will push the wagon.

“The problem,” she continued, “is that this is an entirely new thing. We can put triggers on spells or design them to last a certain amount of time, but I’ve never heard of any spell that would regulate the power of another. I’m not even sure how to test it safely.”

“Do it with a light spell,” Cornellya suggested. “You can use this governor to increase or decrease the amount of light emitted.”

“That would be safer than trying it with a model of the wagon,” Gaenor nodded. “I’m still having trouble with crafting such a spell, however.”

“It sounds like it will be very useful in all sorts of applications,” Elena noted.

“Hmm? I suppose it will,” Gaenor agreed, “if I can figure out how to do it in the first place. I wonder if anyone has already solved this problem. It would save a lot of time.”

“So you’re going to write another letter?” Cornellya asked, half teasingly.

“Probably not,” Gaenor decided, not noticing she was being teased. Cornellya rolled her eyes for Elena to see. “I’m more likely to see the people I want to ask before such a letter can reach them. Still that shouldn’t stop me from working on this governor spell. Even if someone else has invented one already, odds are my solution will be different but if I can’t either invent or find a governor, the rest of the vehicle will be useless.”

“Gae?” Elena asked, “When you finish that, could you take a look and see how I did on some of the exercises you assigned?”

“I’ll do it now,” Gaenor told her immediately.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt you,” Elena responded apologetically. “You can do that first.”

“I’m likely to be working on that for some time to come, Elena. Let me see how you’re doing.” She reached for Elena’s notebook and started looking through it. “Wow! You got through everything I gave you already?”

“Well, we sent most of my textbooks on before leaving Ond and the rest we had to abandon in Vohn, so I really haven’t had much else to work on,” Elena explained.

“You’ve done fairly well,” Gaenor complimented her, “although you used obsidian here where you should have used smoky quartz. The obsidian is more reactive with the other tools and ingredients than the quartz, while the quartz is better suited toward the generation of protective power. You can interchange them but you would have to modify the incantation to make up for the differences. However, while it wasn’t the solution I was looking for, this would have worked. It just wouldn’t have been as effective as it might have been. This is really very good. I think you’ll be inventing short spells, at least within the year.”

“Really?” Elena asked. “That would be wonderful! But I’ll still have to wait to be initiated, won’t I?”

“You’ll have to wait until you’re of age at least,” Gaenor told her.

“I really don’t understand that,” Cornellya commented.

“That’s because you were born adept,” Gaenor told her. “Also all Vieri are adept so you were trained in the Way ever since you could talk. Very few humans have heard of the Way and I suspect our students are not as serious minded as you were.”

“Says who?” Cornellya demanded. “I used to get into trouble for playing tricks on some of the others, though I wasn’t the only one. We all used magic for fun sometimes if the adults weren’t anywhere near.”

“Would you have tried to hurt one of your classmates?” Gaenor asked her.

“Of course not!” Cornellya responded instantly.

“I don’t think I could say the same about human students if they were initiated before graduation. Also there are students who never graduate. A half-trained adept would be dangerous to himself and everyone around him.” Gaenor looked through the rest of Elena’s exercises. She had a few other minor errors similar to the first one, but in all Gaenor was impressed by her progress. They spent the rest of the morning discussing the tools and ingredients Elena had chosen along with possible alternatives.

Gaenor returned to her governor spell that afternoon after giving Elena some more exercises. Vito and Faber were up and decided to walk around the area they were in. Gaenor just nodded to them, but asked Leracian to keep an eye on them. "Don't let them wander too far. We seem to be in an uninhabited area, but we don't know how near the closest settlement is. Just keep them out of trouble, please."

"Of course, my chief," Leracian nodded and turned to follow Vito and Faber. They returned a little over an hour later arguing over whether or not Leracian should have shot a rabbit they had seen.

"Fresh meat would have been a welcome change," Faber grumbled.

"Unless you were planning to eat it raw, the fire to cook it would have attracted unwelcome attention," Leracian told him implacably.

"We don't need a fire," Gaenor noted. "I'm fairly sure I could have crafted a spell to cook the meat."

"I hadn't thought of that, my chief," Leracian replied deferentially. "I'm sorry."

"There's no reason you should have thought of it," Gaenor told him. "Magic is not part of your regular lifestyle."

"Perhaps," he replied, shaking his head, "but I know my chiefs and their capabilities. I should have taken that into account." With that he got to his feet soundlessly and ran away through the tall grass.

"What did I say?" Gaenor wondered out loud.

"Nothing I would have taken offense at," Vito told her.

"He's a very strange man," Faber commented.

"The Temi are a unique people," Gaenor explained. "Until recently their very existence within the Cilben Empire was quasi-legal at best. They are a nation unto themselves but they have no set territory aside from a small village that I gather is used mostly to store those possessions that are too large to carry with them as they travel. I believe they are also buried there when they die."

"A necropolis?" Faber asked.

"A what?" Elena asked in turn.

"Literally a 'city of the dead,'" Faber replied. "Generally the term is only used to describe a large cemetery, but sometimes there is a small community to prepare and maintain the graves."

"I hadn't thought of it like that," Gaenor admitted, "but you could call it that I suppose. I haven't been there, so there may be more to the settlement than that, but your description matches what I have been told."

Leracian was gone until the sun was low on the horizon, but when he returned, he was carrying a fair-sized deer over his shoulders. It still had its fur, but he had already removed the head and entrails. "I hope my chief will accept this in partial apology for my earlier thoughtlessness."

“Leracian, this is wonderful!” Gaenor exclaimed. “But it’s so large. We’ll have to dry whatever we don’t eat tonight or tomorrow, I think.”

“It’s a shame we cannot use a fire,” Leracian noted. “I would have used the smoke to cure the hide for you, my chief.”

“We can leave it out in the Parch,” Gaenor told him. “It will dry there without rotting and then maybe we can use it later.”

Leracian looked doubtful, but without another word, he drew a long belt knife and skinned the carcass. Then while Gaenor and Elena started cutting the meat into useable portions, he carried the skin a few yards out into the nearby desert.

“Too bad we don’t have much in the way of seasonings,” Gaenor noted as they worked, “but we do have the salt Kseniyah left us and that may be enough considering what else we have had to eat lately.”

They worked until it was completely dark, cutting up the meat, before Gaenor and Cornellya cast heat spells to cook or dry the venison. The next morning they finished the roasted venison, leaving the dried meat for eating later.

Leracian checked the hide he had spread out on the rocky sand of the parch then rolled the stiff skin into as tight a cylinder as he could. Gaenor split her time between training Elena and working on her governor spell. Cornellya and the other mages looked at what Gaenor was working on from time to time and make a few helpful comments, but for the most part the project was beyond any of their experience.

Cornellya was considered a promising student of the Way among her people, but the fact that Gaenor could devise a spell based only on a vision of what she wanted it to do gave the vari a new insight of her friend. No wonder the Council of the Wise had wanted Gaenor to teach them.

Artur and Jimeleo stayed away all that day and the others all began to worry that something might have happened to them. By the middle of the afternoon Gaenor finally agreed that Leracian should try and find them. When the sun set and Leracian failed to return, Gaenor began to worry even more.

Three

Gaenor slept only sporadically that night. The fourth time she woke up, however, she heard Elena sobbing nearby. When she leaned over to comfort the girl, Elena rolled over and held on to Gaenor for comfort and immediately stopped sobbing.

“What’s wrong, Lena ?” Gaenor whispered. But she was met only by a soft snore from Elena. Gaenor had been Elena’s emotional anchor since shortly after they had met on Olaka some months earlier. As Gaenor thought back, the girl had always resorted to hugging her whenever she was stressed or threatened. Gaenor wondered what was bothering Elena now, but decided that events had just piled up on the girl.

She woke up again an hour later and found she had fallen asleep still holding Elena, but when Gaenor tried to disengage, Elena’s arms wrapped around her ever so slightly tighter so Gaenor relented and went back to sleep again. The next time she opened her eyes the day had dawned on a partly cloudy sky. And Elena was up and helping Cornellya with breakfast.

A few minutes later Vito came over to Gaenor with a cup of something hot and liquid. "Mint tea," he told her. "I found a patch growing not too far from here and did my best to dry the leaves in the Parch. It's a bit raw tasting, but unless we can find a qahwah tree, it is likely the best we'll find for a while."

"Thank you, Vito," Gaenor replied. "It smells nice, at least." She took a sip. "Eew! What sort of mint was this?"

"I said it tasted raw," Vito reminded her defensively.

Gaenor chuckled. "That's not the word I would have used. Maybe you just used too much mint. It's a bit bitter, but it did wake me up. Thank you. What have I missed?"

"Not a thing," Vito assured her. "Elena asked us to let you sleep in. She didn't think you got very much sleep last night."

"How would she know?" Gaenor asked. "She slept fairly well, at least after I hugged her to sleep."

"Yes, I heard her last night, but I heard you too. You were talking in your sleep, I think. I couldn't make out what you said, but you sounded worried. I think that's what set Elena off. She seems to be fine so long as you don't let your own fears show. When you worry openly, she becomes scared. Keep that in mind."

"I'm not all that much older than she is," Gaenor pointed out. "Nine years, maybe."

"Nine rather crucial years, Gae."

Gaenor looked up at Vito. As far as she could recall, it was the first time he had called her by her nickname. "I guess it's time to grow up then," she concluded.

Vito laughed, "Grow up? You are one of the most mature people I have ever met. Grow up anymore and you'll have to sprout pointed ears and call yourself a vari. They're the only ones I know who might live long enough to grow up that much."

"I don't feel all that grown up," Gaenor confessed. She suddenly realized she had finished the mint tea.

"Who does?" Vito asked. "Would you like some more?"

"I'll help myself, but thanks," she told him warmly.

She carried the cup over to where Elena and Cornellya were working. "G'morning, Lena," she called lightly as she approached. "G'morning, Cornellya. Nice to see some clouds for a change, isn't it?"

Cornellya merely raised her eyebrows questioningly, but Elena beamed a smile back at Gaenor and returned the greeting. "It's a lovely morning," she added happily.

Gaenor found the pot of mint tea and poured some more of the now lukewarm liquid into her cup. It was even bitterer than the last, but it did at least leave a fresh aftertaste in her mouth.

They filled the morning with lessons until Faber spotted a wagon headed in their direction along the border with the Parch. After several tense minutes, they recognized Artur, Jimeleo and Leracian seated

on the driver's bench of the wagon.

It was not much of a vehicle. The back was little more than an open platform with low walls to help keep cargo from sliding off. It was drawn by a pair of onagers – tan, donkey-like animals with erect manes and broad, black stripes down their backs.

The odd-looking animals had evidently been well-trained. They pulled the wagon briskly and came to a halt easily when Artur pulled back on the reins. “Sorry we took so long,” Artur told Gaenor. “We had to go halfway to Gostrina before we found a village.”

“Halfway?” Gaenor asked. “Really?”

“No, but it felt like it. That smoke we saw was just an isolated farmstead. The farmer there wouldn't talk to us, so we had to wander on for a bit. The town we found is about thirty miles southeast of here.”

“Then why did you approach from the northeast?” Faber asked.

“We took a shortcut,” Jimeleo chuckled ironically, “otherwise we would have been back yesterday.”

“Is this the best you could find?” Faber asked a bit more seriously.

“It will do,” Artur replied. “These little beasts are strong and don't need as much water as horses. I hope to be able to remain out of the Parch, but if we have to make a run into the desert, these creatures will endure it better than any horses would. Let's strike the camp and get going though. I think we can use the cloth shelters to shade the back of the wagon.”

“What's all that in the back already?” Cornellya asked.

“I filled the back with hay. It should make the ride a bit more comfortable for those of us who ride back there and will serve as fodder for the donkeys, although I did buy a few bags of oats for them as well.” Artur replied. “There's only room for three on the front bench you will notice.”

It took both pieces of cloth, but they were able to rig one over the back of the wagon with four feet of clearance over the bed with the second over the hay, which went a fair way toward making it more comfortable, although Gaenor privately wondered just how many bugs might be living in that hay. If they had to run into the Parch, she decided, there would be far fewer after the first hour or two. Even insects were unable to survive long under those conditions.

Once underway, Gaenor noted, “This wagon doesn't move very fast, does it?” She sat next to Artur on the driver's bench and Leracian sat on Artur's other side. “We could probably walk faster if we tried.”

“True enough,” he agreed easily, “but these beasts can keep this pace up all day and so long as they can, it means we don't have to do the walking ourselves. It also means that if we have to reenter the Parch, we won't have to stop quite as often, nor for as long.”

“What's that ahead?” Elena asked. She was in the back of the wagon, just behind the bench so she could stay near Gaenor.

“Five riders,” Leracian noted, squinting in the direction Elena had indicated. “From the look of their clothes, I would say they are Holy Guardsmen of Pahn.”

“You can tell that from here?” Artur asked. “They must be nearly half a mile away.”

“Only the Guardsmen wear midnight blue here,” Leracian replied.

“Could be black, from what I can see,” Artur shook his head, “but since your eyes are younger than mine, I’ll take your word for it.” He pulled back on one set of the reins and guided the onagers directly into the Parch. They hesitated for just a moment at this unusual request and Artur decided they had evidently been taken out into the desert at least once before. Idly, he wondered when and why, but as he felt his skin start to dry out, he stopped wondering and kept his eyes on the dry terrain ahead.

“They’re having trouble getting their horses to cross into the Parch,” Faber reported from the back of the wagon. “One seems to have stayed behind.

“I hoped they might all follow us,” Artur replied. “Of course their horses’ reactions will only delay them for a few seconds, but if we can get deep enough into the desert, they will start to falter after an hour or so.”

“Will the desert really kill them that quickly?” Jimeleo asked.

“It will if those guardsmen try to ride the horses. I lost a good beast the first time I tried it. I was careful to lead it, rather than ride and gave it more water than I took for myself and it was still dead by the end of the first day. That’s why I bought the onagers this time around. They should hold up better in here, although I still won’t want to make them move more than an hour or so. Right now, however, we’ll have to take that chance. We need some distance between us and our pursuers.”

“I could shoot them with my bow if they get too close,” Leracian offered.

“I’d rather not. We would have to kill the horses too,” Artur declined. “Also they left one man behind. My guess is that he’ll report back to their temple and return with a much larger force. You’re pretty good with that bow, but I’ve noticed that you only have a dozen arrows in your quiver.”

“I also have a sword, my chief,” Leracian reminded him.

“And if they send fifty Holy Guardsmen after us, how many do you think you can handle?” Artur asked pointedly.

“If I can defeat, oh, thirty of them,” Leracian replied dead pan, “do you think that you and Chief Gaenor can handle the others?”

Gaenor turned to stare at the Tem then saw him flash her a big grin. “For a moment I thought you were serious,” she told him relieved.

“I’m beginning to think you Temi aren’t as serious a lot as you appear at first glance,” Faber noted from the back of the wagon.

“Of course not,” Leracian replied, serious once more. “The stern, menacing assassin is just the mask we wear in public. Among our own, I doubt you would notice any unusual behavior.”

“You don’t have constant seminars on how to be the best assassins you can be?” Faber asked.

“Once we are of age, it hardly ever comes up. We practice our specialties, of course, to maintain and

increase our prowess, but beyond that our time is our own. I probably spend more time writing poetry than I do shooting arrows, at least while not on a mission. Poetry would be distracting when I'm working."

"They're still getting closer," Jimeleo fretted half an hour later.

"It won't be much longer," Artur assured him. "If they don't turn back soon, their mounts might not make it. They're pushing them too hard. By now they should have stopped to water them."

"We're going to have to water our beasts too, you know," Jimeleo reminded him.

"Absolutely and as soon as they turn back these marvelous critters are going to be able to drink their fill," Artur replied.

It was another half hour before the guardsmen finally had to give up their pursuit. They were only a few dozen yards behind the adepts' wagon when one of the horses suddenly stumbled. The rider was thrown and his companions stopped to help.

Artur urged the onagers to continue onward, however, and a few minutes later, they saw the Holy Guardsmen leading their mounts back toward Pahn. Artur waited until the wagon had circled around to the back of a rocky hill before stopping. He and Cornellya cast water spells for the animals and then once more to fill their own canteens as well as a small barrel in the back of the wagon. The hill provided shade for most of the afternoon and once the sun was down they set off once again.

They headed back toward the Pahnese border that first night, but the sight of horsemen carrying torches just inside the border, prompted Artur to head back into the Parch until they were out of sight behind a large hill when the sun came up the next morning.

As Artur had predicted, the sturdy little onagers were able to withstand the rigors of the Parch far better than horses could so long as the party kept them fed and watered. Faber and Vito were still having trouble in the too dry climate, but staying all day in the shelter of the wagon kept them from the disability they had experienced when they first left Sorvohn. Also, Artur had provided them all with fruits and vegetables - foods with plenty of moisture - which also helped them to get through the arduous journey. However, even with magic to provide water, plenty of food and salt, they found they had to eat and drink on a more regular and frequent schedule than they had throughout the rest of their journey. Forgetting even the tiniest detail could be lethal in the Parch.

When they rested during the day, Leracian made a habit of climbing to the top of the nearest hill to keep an eye out for followers, so when he came running back to the wagon early on the third afternoon, Artur knew there was a problem.

"They're still looking for us, my chief," Leracian reported. "There's a party of twelve just the other side of this hill and it looks like they've been more careful of their mounts this time."

"We're only a half mile from the border," Artur noted, easing himself off the back of the wagon where he had been sleeping.

"Artur?" Gaenor asked sleepily. "What's happening?"

"Company's come to call, I'm afraid," he replied even as he and Leracian hoisted themselves up onto the driver's bench. "Good thing we left the onagers in harness."

The beasts had been sleeping as well, but the commotion woke them up. They got to their feet immediately and with a shrill bray were off. Artur regretted the noise one of the beasts had made as it tipped off the Holy Guardsmen to the adepts' presence, but once more after an hour's ride deeper into the Parch, they managed to lose their pursuers.

"I don't want to have to go through that many more times," Jimeleo breathed once they were out of danger. He then turned to cast a water spell for the animals.

"Another day or two and we should be in Gostrina," Artur assured him. Jimeleo cast the spell which turned out to be unusually effective. The water rose up from beneath the desert floor in such quantity that they were forced to move the wagon back nearly one hundred yards before it stopped rising. The resulting lake also lasted over two hours during which the onagers were allowed to move about on a tether so they could drink their fill while the water was still on the surface.

"Why don't you allow them to run free?" Vito asked Artur.

"I was warned not to let them do so," Artur replied. "These creatures are just barely tamed and not really domesticated like their cousins, the asses. They would be difficult to catch if allowed free and in the end would probably get away to die of dehydration in the desert. Better to keep them tied up like this, don't you think?"

"Well, yes," Vito nodded. "When you put it that way, it makes sense."

They reached the edge of the Parch near dawn of the next day. "Is that Gostrina or Pahn?" Gaenor asked as they neared the border.

"I don't see any Holy Guardsmen," Artur noted, looking around. "We may as well go in. I wonder where the nearest town is."

Gaenor consulted their map. "If we're on the Gostrina side of the border, there's a town called Sassri about three miles directly to the east. We may be able to see it when we get to the top of that hill."

Gostrina

One

The Parch ended as suddenly, as it did all along its border, with a thin line of blue lichen. When walking, the adepts had to be careful to avoid touching that lichen, but now the wagon simply rolled over the thionase lichen and kept heading uphill. The moist air flowed over everyone like a blanket of intense relief. Even the onagers seemed to have a little more spring in their step as they hauled the wagon to the top of the hill.

From the top they could see for miles all around. As the map had promised, Sassri was just ahead, but to the south, they could see the Pahnese border. There wasn't a wall or a fence, but on the Gostrinan side of the border someone had mowed and stacked the tall grass for hay, while in Pahn it still grew tall.

“I doubt the priests there want their people living that close to the border,” Jimeleo commented.

“It might give them ideas,” Faber added sourly.

“There is someone out there, however,” Cornellya noted, squinting her eyes.

“Holy Guardsmen,” Leracian identified them.

“Still looking for us?” Vito wondered. “Seems odd they would take us so seriously. Just what did you three do while you were buying this wagon, anyway?”

“It was probably my fault,” Jimeleo admitted.

“Anyone could have done it,” Artur told him.

“What did you do?” Vito demanded of Jimeleo.

“I laughed at one of the local priests,” Jimeleo replied.

“What?”

“He was lecturing several boys on what passes for morality in the not-so-Holylands, but when he got to the part where he claimed poverty was a virtue, I just couldn’t help it. He was wearing gold rings on each of his fingers and a great heavy gold and silver chain around his neck with what looked like an emerald pendant beneath it. When he started getting angry at me it only seemed funnier.”

“I can understand why he might have been upset,” Faber agreed, “but sending the Holy Guardsmen out after you in such force seems a bit excessive. It was obvious you were foreigners, after all.”

“Ah,” Artur interrupted. “That would have been my fault. You see I actually clarified for the priest just what it was that set Jimeleo off. Things went downhill shortly after that when the boys he was trying to lecture started laughing too.”

“That would have embarrassed him,” Vito agreed, “but chasing you out of town ought to have been enough to assuage his tender feelings.”

“Ah,” Leracian cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“You too?” Gaenor asked, surprised.

“I may have exacerbated the situation just a bit,” Leracian admitted softly.

“Tell me about it,” Gaenor requested sternly.

“It was because of that incident that I found Chief Arturus and Adept Jimeleo. When I heard the laughter, I investigated. After they left the priest he was muttering threats, so I calmly and politely explained to him what would happen if he actually went ahead and attempted to act on those destructive urges he had.”

“I don’t think threatening a priest of the Southlands was the wisest course of action, Leracian,” Gaenor commented.

“I did not actually threaten him,” Leracian replied, “but given the results, I have to agree with you, my chief.”

“Well, no help for that now, Artur shrugged. “Let’s just get into town and find a good breakfast and a place to sleep.”

“I don’t think our Pahnese friends want us to do that,” Leracian pointed out. “They’re crossing the border.”

“So it’s a race into town is it?” Artur sighed, giving the reins a shake and shouting a command to the animals. They sped up from a walk to a trot.

The ride, which had never been a smooth one, became a jarring experience as the wagon jumped and tilted alarmingly. The wheels hit every pebble and hole as the vehicle continued down the hill. Artur found himself pulling back on the rudimentary brake with all his strength until they reached the bottom of the hill. The bruising ride continued until they reached the deeply rutted dirt road that led out of Pahn to the town ahead. The guardsmen were still gaining on the adepts even as they approached a Gostrinan Customs Service station.

“Welcome to Gostrina, folks,” the senior Customs agent greeted them as they drew up to beside the station. “I see you had a guard of honor.”

“Not really,” Artur replied, looking back at the rapidly approaching horsemen.

“Those people are under arrest for crimes against Holy Pahn!” the lead guardsman declared as he came within hearing range.

“Good for them, Southlander,” the Customs agent replied calmly. “However, they aren’t in Pahn anymore and last I heard there still isn’t any extradition agreement between Royal Gostrina and that pigsty you call aHolyKingdom .”

The guardsman drew his saber and his companions did likewise. “Stand aside, unbeliever. We will take these blasphemers back to pay for their crimes.”

The Customs agent whistled and five men stepped around the side of the station building with loaded crossbows. “You and your men are on Royal Gostrinan soil now, but unless you care to leave Gostrina in a sack, you will turn around right now and hightail it back to your mud huts.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” the head guardsman blustered. “Kill us and you will start a war.”

“Good!” the agent replied with obvious satisfaction. “It’s about time we went down there and cleaned out that garbage heap of yours.” The guardsmen were looking increasingly less certain about themselves. “Get moving. You know as well as I do that you’ll only lie when you get home and claim you killed these people anyway. Oh and next time you dare to invade Gostrinan territory we will shoot first and worry about what you had on your minds later over drinks.”

“Infidel!” the guardsman grumbled, but he turned his horse around and led his men back to Pahn.

“Exciting,” the Customs agent remarked dryly. “So just what did you folks do over there? Steal the asses from some temple courtyard or something?”

“Worse,” Artur replied. “We laughed at a priest.”

“You scoundrels!” the agent laughed. “Anything to declare? Aside from being glad to be out of there, that is?”

“I don’t,” Artur shrugged. “Does anyone have anything on them that we may have to pay customs for?”

“Some of our spell tools are precious stones,” Cornellya pointed out.

“Adepts?” the agent asked. “No wonder they were after your blood. Well, we don’t bother adepts about their tools unless they’re planning to sell them within the kingdom. You aren’t here as merchants, are you? I didn’t think so. I’ll just stamp your passports, make a note of who you are and you’ll be able to go on your way.”

“I do not have a passport,” Leracian informed the guard.

“And mine was taken from me in Sorvohn,” Faber added.

“Sorvohn? I’m surprised you got out of there with your life,” the agent commented.

“It was a near thing,” Faber commented.

“I’ll bet,” the agent replied. “It’s not a problem. If you were coming in from Firdan, Mishanda or somewhere else in the civilized world it might have been an issue, but we have to deal with that sort of thing with people coming in from the Southlands all the time. Most of them are immigrants, mind you, but we do have a procedure. I’ll have to ask you to fill out some paper work, but then I’ll issue you a temporary visa.”

“Temporary?” Artur asked.

“Permission to enter the country for up to six months,” the agent explained. “It will give you time to obtain more permanent identification, or if you are just passing through, it will serve to identify you at your next border crossing.”

The paperwork took a while, but once they left, it was only a short ride into Sasri where they found an inn that was still serving breakfast. Bowls of hot porridge and smoked fish in an unusual sauce Gaenor could not identify made for a welcome change from the travel fare they had been forced to eat while in the Parch. Even the dried venison had started to pall after the second day.

Too keyed up to do more than lie in the bed with her eyes shut, Gaenor eventually gave up on sleeping and went downstairs to speak to the cook. She found the woman, the wife of the innkeeper, working on a chicken stew for the lunch trade.

“Can I help you,” she asked.

“I was curious about the sauce you served with the kippers this morning,” Gaenor replied. “It was very good, but I can’t even begin to imagine what was in it.”

“Ah,” the cook nodded. “We call it Wanlarian sauce. I’m not sure what they call it in Wanlaria, but it’s very popular here in southern Gostrina.”

“What’s in it?” Gaenor asked.

“The main ingredient is tomato,” the cook replied.

“I’m not acquainted with that,” Gaenor admitted.

“You’re from Mishanda, aren’t you? I recognize your accent. It’s a Wanlarian fruit. Here, I’ll show you one.” She reached into a bin under the counter and pulled out a round, red fruit. “We grow them in the garden year round,” the cook continued as she reached for a knife to slice the tomato with, “although if you were to grow them up north, I imagine you could only do so during the summer. Here in the tropics we have wet and dry seasons, but I use well water for the garden when there hasn’t been enough rain.” She handed Gaenor a slice.

“Nice,” Gaenor commented. “Sharp, but sweet.”

“Would you like the seeds?” the woman asked. Gaenor nodded. “We’ll have to dry them so they won’t rot on you.”

“Is it a pretty plant?” Gaenor asked.

“Not particularly,” the cook shrugged, “but the fruits are worth the effort, don’t you think?”

Gaenor agreed. They spoke for the next few hours, trading recipes as Gaenor started helping the woman, whose name was Erinne. As they worked Erinne explained how to best grow the tomatoes, whose seeds they were drying for Gaenor. After lunch had been served, however, their conversation turned to other topics.

“I must say, I envy you, Gae,” Erinne told her. “You own your own property and can travel the world at will.”

“You could travel, Erinne,” Gaenor replied, “although you seem to have a nice life here, so I’m not sure if it would be sensible.”

“You don’t understand, Gae,” Erinne insisted. “I could travel, yes, but only if I had a man to pay for whatever I needed. Women are not allowed to own property in Gostrina. Anything she inherits automatically belongs either to her husband or whatever male relative she is in the keeping of.”

“What about orphans with no known male relatives?” Gaenor asked.

“There are workhouses,” Erinne told her simply, with distaste in her voice. “Some few may find husbands, but without dowries, their prospects are slim. Poor women.”

“Poor women, indeed,” Gaenor replied. “I knew it was bad for us here in Gostrina, but not this bad.”

“What can you do?” Erinne shrugged. “It’s the way of the world.”

“Not everywhere in the world,” Gaenor replied. “Women rule on Kimn and in Baria. In Nundro, men supposedly own everything, but it’s the women who conduct the actual business.”

“I understand it is even worse in the Southlands,” Erinne commented.

“Very much so,” Gaenor replied. “There everyone is technically owned by the church. In Ond the priests actually choose one’s occupation and what a person is allowed to possess. The rich have to bribe the priests in order to stay rich and the poor have no chance at all. I don’t even like to think about what happens to attractive women there, although I’ve heard enough to give anyone nightmares.”

“So, it isn’t so bad here,” Erinne concluded.

“I’ve seen how people live in most parts of the world,” Gaenor admitted. “I don’t think any system is so good that it cannot be improved. I guess you just have to do what you can, when you can.”

When Cornellya and Elena came into the inn’s common room later that afternoon, Gaenor was busily working on her governor spell. “How is that going?” Cornellya asked, peeking over Gaenor’s shoulder.

“I’ve come up with any number of ways in which power can be released in a controlled manner,” Gaenor replied, “but I still cannot vary the rate of release without casting additional modification spells. I could add them in, I suppose, but the resulting complex of magic is ungainly. There has to be a simpler solution.”

“I’ve been working on the chemical to magical element comparison table you wanted,” Elena offered. “Do you have time to look at it and see what I’m missing?”

“Of course,” Gaenor nodded. “This is starting to depress me anyway.” She took Elena’s notes and started reading through them, failing to stifle a yawn as she did so.

“You haven’t slept at all, have you?” Cornellya asked challengingly.

“I wasn’t able to,” Gaenor replied with another yawn.

“You look like you’re half asleep right now,” Cornellya informed her, “and those bags under your eyes? Maybe you ought to at least try a nap for the rest of the afternoon.”

“I’ll wait until tonight,” Gaenor replied and then yawned again. “You know, I had almost forgotten this project. Do you think I’m trying to do too many things at once?”

“You tell us,” Cornellya responded. The way I see it, this new vehicle you’re working on is more of a hobby you can do while we travel. Your friend Relle knits, you invent new spells. The elemental concordance is going to take a lot longer, I think. For one thing this beginning we’ve all worked on is just what we can think of as we go, but eventually you’re going to have to consult one or more libraries.”

“Not to mention conduct hours of research,” Gaenor nodded. Then she blinked her eyes and took a closer look at Cornellya. “Have you stopped using that disguise spell?”

“No,” Cornellya replied. “Why?”

“Your ears are showing,” Gaenor told her.

“They are?”

“I thought it was intentional,” Elena commented, adding, “You really do look much better that way. Somehow the shape of your head is wrong without them.”

“But I used the spell as soon as I woke up this morning,” Cornellya protested. “Do you have a mirror?”

Gaenor reached into her purse and pulled out a small looking glass. Cornellya snatched it from her and studied her reflection. “Maybe I forgot,” she decided a moment later, calming slightly. “Or maybe I didn’t actually do it correctly.”

It had been months since Gaenor had enchanted a piece of clear quartz and a small golden coin to act as amulets for two parts of a spell that would disguise Cornellya’s inhumanly pointed ears. Cornellya was inordinately sensitive to the way people stared at her and believed it was because her ears marked her clearly as a vari, in spite of the fact that Gaenor and the others had assured her that it wasn’t her ears people were staring at. Cornellya was a rare beauty by any standard and even Gaenor was slightly jealous of the fact that Vieri had no need for makeup to maintain their appearance.

Cornellya had kept the stone and coin in a special pocket in her purse ever since and used the spell whenever she was in the company of strangers. She reached into the purse, pulled out the piece of crystal-clear quartz and carefully pressed it flat against her forehead. Instantaneously, the tips of her ears disappeared and her hair filled in to cover the obvious space where they had been. “There,” she proclaimed with satisfaction as she let the crystalline stone fall into her hand. The moment it left her forehead, however, the disguise spell dissipated and her ears reappeared. “Huh?” she grunted and pressed the stone back to her forehead. Her ears disappeared once more, but before she could remove the stone, they reappeared once more. “Oh no!” she wailed.

“Well, I warned you the spell would run out after a while,” Gaenor reminded her calmly. “You’re adept, just recharge the amulet.”

“Oh, yes, of course,” Cornellya nodded, calming visibly. “Do you have a copy of the spell handy?”

“I have it here,” Elena told her, pulling a small notebook from her purse. “Gae gave it to me to study as practice in spell notation.” She opened it to the page and laid it out in front of Cornellya.

The vari studied the spell and commented, “I’ll need my slate from up stairs. Do you have any chalk? I think I’m out.”

“In the small pack at the foot of my bed upstairs. Try not to wake Artur,” Gaenor warned her. Cornellya nodded and ran off.

“Why is it so important to her?” Elena asked Gaenor as soon as Cornellya had left the room.

“I think it’s because she’s all alone among us,” Gaenor replied.

“Alone?” Elena protested. “She’s not alone. We’re always with her.”

“She’s a vari, Lena and the only one of her kind ever since she left the Village, except for that brief period when the Vieri came to help us. It may be hard for you to understand because you hated Olaka, but she’s homesick. I think she truly wants to go home.”

“Then why didn’t she do so when Kseniya invited her?” Elena asked.

“She believes she has a necessary part to play on Ichtar,” Gaenor explained. “Maybe she does. I don’t know, although we do need as many adepts as we can recruit so while Artur tried to stop her from

joining us, he eventually had to relent. Here she comes again.”

Cornellya laid her tools and ingredients out on the table and performed the amulet spell on the coin and stone that charged them up with the disguise spell and its counter. Once that was done, Cornellya smiled as she picked up the piece of quartz and lifted it at once for to her forehead. “Well?” she asked.

“Nice ears,” Gaenor told her gently. “They really are your best feature.”

Cornellya used the looking glass and moaned, “No! Why didn’t it work? What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing,” Elena assured her. “I watched and you performed the spell letter-perfect.” Cornellya shook her head and looked appealingly toward Gaenor.

“Lena’s right,” she told Cornellya. “You did it perfectly.”

“Then why didn’t it work?” the vari demanded. “Gaenor, will you recast the spell?”

“It wouldn’t make any difference,” Gaenor shook her head.

“How can you tell?” Cornellya asked, frowning.

Gaenor picked up the piece of quartz and pressed it against Elena’s forehead. Immediately the girl looked like Cornellya’s twin sister, save for the pointed, vari ears. Elena took the mirror away from Cornellya and studied herself. “Pretty!” she smiled, “and grown up!”

“You’re already pretty,” Gaenor told her as she reached out and placed the coin on the Cilben girl’s forehead. Immediately she reverted to her natural appearance. “And fairly well grown up too.”

“Aw,” Elena sighed, “but that was fun.”

“If you want to play dress up, Lena, it would be safer to do it with clothing,” Gaenor told her. The words might have been harsh but her smile took the sting out of them.

“Why doesn’t it work for me anymore?” Cornellya asked.

“I’m not sure,” Gaenor admitted. “Let me see that spell again.” She reached for Elena’s notebook and studied the spell.

“Well?” Cornellya demanded.

“This is going to take a while,” Gaenor waved her off. “Lena, would you go upstairs and get my blue notebook?” Elena nodded and ran to comply. “I’ll bet this is it,” Gaenor commented pointing at part of the ritual portion of the spell, “but let’s wait until Lena returns.” The girl returned a few minutes later while Cornellya continued to fidget.

After Elena returned, Gaenor flipped through the notebook, pausing occasionally to make some additional notes next to the spell in Elena’s book. Finally she closed both books and turned to face Cornellya. “I was right, the spell has lost its effectiveness on you. What I didn’t realize is that with continuous usage, such as you have done, the spell has to use increasingly more power in order to work. What’s happened here is that it now needs so much power to maintain the disguise that it just doesn’t have the capability. That side effect will eventually wear off and you’ll be able to use the spell again, but

for now, you'll just have to get used to being the center of attention."

"No, I can go invisible," Cornellya corrected her.

"I doubt it," Gaenor replied. "I used that spell as the basis for this one. The invisibility is just a special sort of disguise and this is another, but except for the effect, they are essentially the same spell. You should know that. You've cast both spells"

"That can't be," Cornellya shook her head, unwilling to believe it. "Look." She shut her eyes for a moment, then opened them. "Nothing happened, did it?" she asked hopelessly.

"Sorry," Gaenor told her. "It would have happened eventually if you had continued to use the invisibility spell. If you'll think about it, it is probably better it happened now rather than in some tight spot when you were really trying to be invisible, and you'll only have to abstain from that spell for a few months."

"A few months?" Cornellya cried.

"A year at the outside," Gaenor told her. "But any use of that sort of spell before this after effect wears off will only extend that period."

"I'm going back to bed," Cornellya told them, deflated.

Two

They left Sasri the next morning feeling far more refreshed than they had in weeks. Faber, Vito, and Jimeleo were still recovering from the exhaustion they had endured in the Sorvohnian prison although Jimeleo was in much better shape, not having had a bad reaction to the conditions in the Parch. However, they all continued to improve as they made their way slowly to the port city of Castoe .

Now that they were no longer being chased by Holy Guardsmen and were in an environment that, while warm, was not searingly hot and dry, Artur only drove the wagon as far as they could get comfortably each day and let everyone sleep themselves out before continuing on the next day. Even with the delays and shortened travel times, they made much better progress on the roads of Gostrina than they had riding cross-country through the Parch. They reached the River Trina across from Castoe a mere seven days after leaving Sasri.

They drove the wagon through the streets of West Castoe on their way to the ferry, but when Artur found a livery stable near the ferry, he sold the onagers and the wagon.

"I'd hoped to get a little more for the beasts at least," he admitted as they approached the ferry dock, "but I figured we had gotten our money's worth from them and it would cost more to ferry them across the river than they were worth. We can purchase a better vehicle and animals to draw it in Castoe."

"Sir Artur, I was hoping we might book passage on a ship from here," Jimeleo told him.

"It might be better to travel overland to Mishanda from here," Gaenor replied. "We have to stop by Mita in any case to pick up copies of the spell."

"I know I would be more comfortable traveling by land," Faber added.

Gaenor glanced at Cornellya to see if she would add anything to the discussion. She had been less assertive since they had left Sasri, but Gaenor remembered how seasick the vari had been during the passage through the Ocean of Sorrows. However, Cornellya said nothing.

"I would like to travel by ship as well," Vito put in, "especially if we can make a stop in Senne. It's been a few years since I've seen my family and I'd like to assure them I'm still alive."

"For the same reasons," Jimeleo added, "I would like to see my family in Laria."

"Travel by sea would be easier than driving a cart or a coach all the way to Misha," Artur considered, "and it is only fair we give Vito and Jimeleo a chance to see their families, assuming we can book passage with stops in both Laria and Senne."

"That should not be too hard," Vito replied. "Most ships traveling around Wanlaria stop in both ports."

"All right," Artur nodded. "We should probably vote on this. Vito, Jimeleo and I are in favor. Faber?"

"I wouldn't mind stopping in Jeritalen to see my family," Faber replied, "but that isn't practical. I'd still rather travel overland, however."

"Leracian?" Artur asked.

"I go wherever my chiefs go," Leracian replied evenly. "I will not vote."

"Your choice," Artur nodded. "Gae?"

"I would still rather travel by land as well," Gaenor replied, "but if Vito and Jimeleo have a chance to see their families, it seems only fair. However, Cornellya gets seasick easily. She'll be better off if we travel by land. I'm still for going overland."

"Cornellya?" Artur asked.

"No," she replied quickly. "I'll be all right. It won't kill me."

"It nearly did last time," Gaenor reminded her.

"I'm going to have to get used to it if we're sailing to Ichtar, aren't I?" Cornellya shot back.

"Sounds like a yes," Artur noted. "Elena?"

"Senator?" Elena asked in return.

"How do you vote?"

"I can't vote," Elena replied uncertainly, "can I?"

"I don't see why not," Artur replied.

"Aren't I too young?" she countered.

“This isn’t Olaka,” Artur replied. “As far as I or anyone else is concerned, you’re part of this expedition. So how do you vote?”

“I’m with Gaenor,” Elena replied instantly.

“All right,” Artur noted. “We have three votes for traveling by land, four by sea and one abstention. “Does anyone wish to change his or her vote?”

“Um,” Gaenor cleared her throat, “Since Cornellya is in favor of traveling by ship, I’ll change my vote, not that it matters at this point.”

“So will I,” Elena added predictably.

“You don’t need to, Lena,” Gaenor told her. “We’re not splitting up the party, just deciding how we want to travel.”

“I still vote with you,” Elena maintained stoutly.

“Very well,” Artur nodded. “Anyone else? No? Then I guess we’ll find a ship, although first we need to get passage on the ferry.”

Castoe, being a major port of entry for Gostrina, was a large city when compared to most Gaenor had visited. Like all Gostrinan cities there was a large pyramid temple to Nauo, the chief god of Gostrina, in the center. This one looked to be nearly as large as the great Pyramid of Es and faced with gleaming white marble edged with gold leaf just as the Es pyramid was.

“It’s not solid,” Vito commented as they walked past the entrance to the maze in front of the temple. It was not as complex a maze as the one in Es; it was just a means by which visitors could not take a direct path into the temple.

“Excuse me?” Gaenor asked.

“The pyramid is not solid stone,” Vito clarified. “Very few of them were built by piling up huge blocks of stone. The one in Es was, and some of the small town temples are built that way too, but most were made by facing a steel structure with sheets of marble. At least the newer ones are. There are still a few old ones with wooden frames, but the steel beams are stronger and allow the builders to build grander and more glorious temples. They aren’t as susceptible to fire either.

“Inside, the all-stone temples are fairly simple in structure,” Vito continued. “They have one or two rooms on the ground level and then a holy of holies further up in the structure. The frame pyramids have as many rooms within them as will fit, with the holiest chamber at the top, of course.”

“Why do they need so many chambers in the temples?” Cornellya asked.

“I’ve no idea,” Vito replied. “Some of them are sanctuaries for the public to pray in. Only a priest of a certain rank may enter the Holy of Holies so maybe the others are for various other priests or maybe for some special rituals. Regardless, I’m sure they have uses of some sort for them. Otherwise they wouldn’t have built them.”

“Maybe they just need pyramids with plenty of closet space,” Artur remarked lightly. “Now where is this inn your friend in Sasri recommended?” he asked Gaenor.

“According to Erinne’s directions,” Gaenor replied, “her brother’s place should be just a few blocks ahead. You know we could have hired a cabriolet.”

“It would have taken two to transport all of us,” Artur replied, “but I would have gladly, had I realized how far we had to walk.”

“It’s not like we have full packs,” Cornellya pointed out. “We had to leave a lot of things behind in Vohn.”

“It was in a good cause,” Faber assured her. “Of course, none of it belonged to me.”

“No, your possessions were lost long before that,” Jimeleo commented. “But I didn’t have anything I can’t replace and at least the ladies salvaged my tools and ingredients.”

“We tried to take all the necessary items,” Gaenor explained. “I figured that we could always buy new clothes along the way, like we did in Sasri, although we still only have one change of clothing each.”

“We have time to do some shopping here,” Artur assured her. “Unless we’re very lucky, it should take a few days at least to find the right ship.”

The inn in Castoe had the picture of a green badger on its sign, although the legend proclaimed it to be “Kennet’s Inn on Soldier Street.” The interiors of most such establishments they had visited in Gostrina so far had been studies in dark brown wood, but Kennet’s Inn had white plastered walls with brightly painted columns and tables.

“Just like home,” Jimeleo commented as they entered.

“This close to Wanlaria, that’s not too surprising,” Artur replied.

“Yes, may I help you fine people?” the innkeeper asked, rushing over to greet them.

“Looking for rooms for the next few days, probably,” Artur informed him.

“Erinne of Sasri recommended you,” Gaenor added.

“My sister,” Kennet replied, nodding. “That was nice of her. We don’t get too many travelers from that corner of the kingdom.”

“We were taking as short a route across Pahn as we could,” Artur replied dryly.

“Wise move,” Kennet nodded. “I’ve never met anyone who actually wanted to stay there, not even the Pahnese who come to Castoe.”

“I don’t imagine you get many of their priests here,” Faber commented sourly. “They seem to have a pretty good deal down there. No one else has.”

“True enough, sir,” Kennet agreed readily. “You’re well away from there, although we’re offering a Sorvohnian menu these days for the most part. So many refugees coming up from the south and they bring their cooking style with them. It’s become quite the fashion these days. Fortunately they are more than happy to leave their religion behind. I understand quite a few have been entering our local

priesthoods, though.” The matter did not seem to concern Kennet in the least.

Artur arranged for rooms and the party sat down for a quiet late afternoon snack. It was the habit of the region not to serve dinner until after sunset which was some hours after what Gaenor considered normal, but she soon learned that nearly all the shops in Castoe closed for several hours each afternoon and then opened again in the evening and stayed open until quite late. For a city in the tropics, she decided, it was a sensible arrangement that afforded the population the chance to avoid having to work during the hottest part of the day. She wondered why she had not observed similar behavior in Es and other parts of subtropical Gostrina, but Jimeleo explained that it was a Wanlarian custom.

“Castoe seems more Wanlarian in nature to me than Laria itself,” he added, “but from what I understand, this was disputed territory a century ago and Castoe was part of Wanlaria as often as it was Gostrinan. It was only with the signing of the Treaty of Dana that Wanlaria and Gostrina finally drew up a permanent common border. Some of our northern towns are quite Gostrinan, in fact. Tooloe even has a pyramid where Naou is still worshipped although in the rest of Wanlaria we call Him Dao and do not build pyramids in his honor.”

Gaenor spent the rest of the afternoon with Cornellya and Elena, working on their elemental concordance although from time to time, her mind wandered and she would pause to make notes on her governor spell. Finally, as the smells of dinner filled the inn’s common room and local customers began to arrive, Gaenor looked at what they had done and declared, “Well, I think that’s as far as we’re going to be able to take this until we have more sources to work from.”

“Can we check out the local library?” Elena asked eagerly.

“We can see if they have a public library, although I don’t expect to find much here,” Gaenor replied, “and we do have a more immediate need for fresh clothing. We can go looking for bookshops as well. We need a new book on the chemical elements anyway to replace the one we had to leave behind in Vohn.”

“Maybe I should just stay here until we leave Castoe,” Cornellya commented.

“Ridiculous!” Gaenor exclaimed. “You can’t just hide away. I won’t hear of it.”

“Cornellya,” Elena put in, “I haven’t noticed anyone staring at you since we got out of the Parch. You didn’t even notice it yourself until you realized the disguise spell stopped working. I don’t think people even notice your ears until they’ve looked at you for a while anyway and most of them are too self-absorbed to notice even if you painted yourself bright green and paraded naked through the streets.”

“If I did that, the last thing they would notice would be my ears,” Cornellya laughed.

“Exactly,” Elena nodded.

After dinner they all went out and bought new clothing. On the way back, Gaenor spotted a beautiful brass, triple beam balance in the window of a shop and she went in to investigate. “You have an excellent eye, Miss,” the shop keeper, a middle aged man with boldly blue eyes and only a fringe of dark hair on his head, commended her. “This scale is the most accurate balance available. It is accurate to one hundredth of a gram.”

“Gram?” Gaenor asked “What is that in ounces?”

“Just under twenty-eight point four seven grams per ounce,” the seller quoted, “although, as I understand it, grams are a measurement of mass, not weight, so that formula is only accurate so long as gravity is a constant.”

“When is it not a constant?” Elena asked.

“When we’re not on the World, Lena,” Gaenor told her. “You haven’t progressed enough in your studies for that yet, but you’ll see a lot of that in some of Ellie Nyima’s papers when we get to studying Relativity.”

“If you’ll take no offense,” the shopkeeper commented, “you ladies seem uncommonly well-educated if you know of Doctor Nyima’s work.”

“I could say the same for you,” Gaenor replied. “I don’t normally expect shopkeepers to be acquainted with the cutting edge of scientific philosophy.”

“Nor do I,” the man laughed, “and yet here we are. Markir of Arcri, at your service.”

“Gaenor of Narmouth, at yours,” she replied then introduced Cornellya and Elena. “Arcri? I have met Doctor Julinir of Arcri in Misha.”

“My cousin,” Markir responded, “but then Arcri is a small town and almost everyone is related. How is the old boy? I haven’t heard from him in years.”

“He’s mostly retired,” Gaenor replied, “but he seemed feisty enough when I met him almost a year ago.”

“Sounds like him,” Markir laughed. “Anyway in answer to your implied question, I went to school at the University at Es and earned a masters degree in physics before meeting and marrying my wife. Her father offered me a place in his business and in time I bought him out, so now I merely sell scientific equipment. And how did you come to be acquainted with Nyima’s work?”

“I’m adept,” Gaenor replied. “My initial training was by my town’s master scholar, then in magic by my fiancé. I first became aware of Doctor Nyima’s work while visiting Doctor Haxmire in Mita.”

“Mita?” Markir asked, sounding amused. “I’d wondered where he ended up. I had a class with him once, just before Kendur of Misha blew himself and two of his students up. It’s what convinced me to stay out of magic, actually. It’s a shame they closed the department though. That never seemed fair to me.”

“There’s a new school in Mita now,” Gaenor informed him. “I lectured there last year. That’s when Haxmire showed me the papers on Nyima’s Special Relativity theory.”

“And we met her in Corinia not too long ago,” Elena added.

“Her?” Markir asked. “Doctor Nyima is a woman? Well, well. I knew my beloved Gostrina was a bit provincial about such things, but I hadn’t realized how prejudiced I was on the matter. So what do you need this balance for, if I’m not being too nosey, Mistress Gaenor?”

“Lady Gaenor,” Elena corrected him immediately. He nodded, but Gaenor shrugged that off as though it was a matter of no importance.

“We need an accurate balance in order to ascertain how much, if any, matter is converted into energy when spells are cast,” Gaenor replied.

“I fear you may need something more accurate than this,” Markir replied, “but at the moment this is the best I or anyone else has to offer, at least in Gostrina, my lady.”

“And Gostrinan scales are reputed to be the best,” Gaenor replied. “Ellie recommended I buy one here for that reason. Oh and never mind the titles, I was born common and I still don’t think of myself as gentle and I’m certainly not noble.”

Of course you are,” Cornellya corrected her. “You also rank as a chief among the Temi. I figure that ought to be the equivalent of princess at least.”

“I believe you’ll discover it difficult to find a herald who would agree with you,” Gaenor told her dryly. “Well, if this is the best,” she told Markir, “then it’s the one I must have. Can you have it shipped to Narmouth in Mishanda?”

“I can have it shipped to the Johian Islands if that suits you,” Markir told her expansively.

“Narmouth should be far enough,” Gaenor chuckled. They agreed to a price and Markir promised to have it sent by the next post.

Three

Artur found a ship bound for Laria the next morning, although it had just arrived and would not leave for another week. He reported, however, “The *Waverider* seems like a stout little ship and several men on the dock told me I wasn’t likely to find a faster ship in Castoe no matter how long I waited. It seemed like a good idea not to go out of my way to prove them wrong, so I arranged passage for all of us.”

Gaenor, Cornellya and Elena found they had bought everything they needed that first night and spent much of their remaining time in Castoe in the common room of the inn, although at Elena’s urging they did visit the public library only to be sent away again. “Women are not allowed here!” the old librarian told them sternly.

“I’m not surprised,” another woman who habitually came to the inn for afternoon tea told them. Her name was Karenie of Es and she was the wife of a gentleman merchant who worked out of Castoe. “The men can be so tiresome about women’s rights at times. What they don’t seem to realize is that there are women’s schools in Gostrina and many women do have a reasonably advanced education, at least compared to that which our grandmothers received.”

“Why haven’t I heard of these women’s schools?” Gaenor asked.

“Have you asked,” Karenie countered. “We do not make a big deal about them and most students attend for free. We teach each other often enough, although there are some men willing to instruct women. Others do not realize that we won’t remain subservient forever, not when we can look to women like you three for examples of what we all can be.”

“Us?” Elena asked, confused.

“Lady Gaenor here, especially” Karenie told her. “I was in Dana for the coronation. I know who you are, Lady Gaenor. It thrilled me when the newspaper from Misha arrived announcing your advancement. I hope you don’t mind, but I have used you as an example for my students.”

Gaenor was uncertain what she could say to that, but told Karenie, “Perhaps I can come visit your school sometime.”

“Would you?” Karenie asked, delighted. Her manner had been somewhat reserved until that moment, but the mask of reservation slipped off just then. “That would be wonderful!” They exchanged addresses and spent much of the afternoon discussing what sorts of education the girls of Gostrina were getting. It turned out they were learning everything possible within the means of their teachers. They had access to books on some very advanced subjects, indeed, but without experts to answer the questions reading them inspired, they were limited in what they could master. Even with such limitations, however, Karenie estimated that at least half of women of Gostrina had an educational level equivalent to male students on their matriculation at University. For women in a kingdom in which no woman was allowed to attend public school, it was an amazing accomplishment.

After that Karenie made a point of having breakfast with Gaenor, Elena and Cornellya each morning and always made a point of inviting them to have tea with her in the afternoons. She also asked Gaenor a multitude of questions on any number of subjects, many of which Gaenor was forced to admit ignorance, although to some of them, she was able to refer Karenie to others who might be able to help. Slowly, it came out that schools like the one Karenie admitted to operating, while not actually illegal, were frowned on by the church of Gostrina. Consequently, word of school sessions was usually only spread carefully by word of mouth. They were also held irregularly because it was not unheard of for some of the more fanatical priests to disrupt those sessions.

Karenie was also instrumental in convincing Cornellya that perhaps she wasn’t being stared at as much as she feared. It was three days after they had met before Karenie even noticed that Cornellya was not human and when she did, her major interest was in Vierian educational practices. Finally, Cornellya asked her why she found the existence of a supposedly mythical being so commonplace.

“I’ll admit that I always thought your people were just tales to tell our children,” Karenie replied easily, “but you’re here and your ears are obviously not human, although it did take some time to notice them, so if you claim to be a vari, who am I to say you aren’t?” Cornellya had to think about that for a while, but eventually stopped trying to hide in shadows at least while she was with friends.

“If women aren’t allowed to own property, why didn’t we have trouble doing our own shopping?” Elena asked.

“Two reasons come to mind,” Karenie replied. “First of all, it isn’t unusual for husbands to give their wives money to go shopping with and merchants will always assume that’s where the money came from, but also you are all obviously foreigners and merchants are the most likely people in town to have cosmopolitan attitudes. They regularly deal with women with their own money. Actually, for the most part it’s the priests who make the biggest deal about it.”

Gaenor took Elena with her to Karenie’s school two days later. The schoolhouse was in the attic of her husband’s carriage house. While the ladder up to the attic was cleverly constructed to appear rickety, Karenie assured them it was quite sturdy. Karenie had twenty students – girls of various ages and while they were all interested in what Gaenor had to tell them, it was Elena’s stories about life on Olaka and what she had done since leaving that made the biggest impression. Gaenor was a woman who had made

a place for herself in the world, but Elena was much closer to their age and she too had acted to improve her lot. For the rest of their stay in Castoe, the girls of Karenie's school would wave and say hello to Gaenor and Elena when they met around town.

On their last day in Castoe, Gaenor, Elena and Cornellya decided they ought to do a bit of window shopping. Leaving the men behind in the inn, they set out to browse the shops in the area once more. This time they found a bookstore that they had somehow missed the first time around, but the book seller specialized in fiction and only had some very old texts on subjects of interest to Gaenor and Elena. Cornellya, however, bought several cheap romance novels, not taking Gaenor's word that they would not be all that different from the ones she had purchased in Drombra. It was not until they were on their way back to the inn that they got into trouble.

They were waving to one of Karenie's students across the street, so they did not notice the two men in the alley until they had already raised their clubs and demanded their purses. Distantly, Gaenor was aware of a small shriek from the girl across the street, but her first thought was that in spite of local custom, she should have worn her sword when they were by themselves in the city.

Elena ducked under the first man's club and managed to trip him up, giving Gaenor and Cornellya time to act. Cornellya pulled pieces of flint and steel from her purse, but Gaenor yanked a small wooden amulet from her belt and threw it at one of the attackers. The man was suddenly enveloped in a sheath of fire. He screamed and ran back into the alley while Cornellya cast a different spell with her tools. The second man was struck by a bolt of energy that seemed half fire and half lightning. He was dead before he hit the ground. Back in the alley, the other man had crashed into a wall and fallen to the ground. He had, by luck, extinguished the blaze, but was still badly burnt as he lay there groaning in pain.

At the sound of a constable's whistle just then, all three women turned. Two constables were running in their direction. Gaenor helped Elena back to her feet, while Cornellya readied her flint and steel pieces for another use.

"My gods!" one of the men exclaimed. "What happened here?"

"We were attacked," Gaenor informed him coolly, expecting a repetition of what had happened on their first night in Nimbria. At his prompting she elaborated a bit while both men stared back and forth between the body of the man Cornellya had killed and the one who was still alive in the alley.

Elena huddled close to Gaenor. In Tandra she had been forcibly separated from her and the memory was still frightening. Gaenor put a protective arm around the girl's shoulders while the policemen considered the situation.

"We don't tolerate crime on our streets," the senior constable told her, finally, "and it served these two right for trying to attack adepts." All three women visibly relaxed. "I do need to have you come to our station, however, to make a formal statement. Would you come with us, please?"

Gaenor agreed and they followed the men several blocks to the neighborhood police station. It was a squat brick building that filled the corner of its block. The neighboring buildings dwarfed it by several floors, although a steel framework being built on the roof indicated that was about to change. Inside the building, the walls were painted a depressing grey, which Gaenor decided must have been to hide the effects of lampblack streaming off all the badly trimmed wicks of the lamps at each desk and on the walls.

When Elena protested at being separated from Gaenor, the men allowed them to stay together while

they gave their statement and all three were treated most respectfully, although since the procedure took nearly two hours it was quite an ordeal for them anyway. They were almost done, when Karenie came into the station and found them.

“Lady Gaenor!” she called anxiously, “are you all right?”

“We’re all fine,” Gaenor assured her.

“Eliese told me you were arrested,” Karenie explained. “So I rushed right down here as soon as she found me.”

“No,” Gaenor replied, shaking her head, “we were only asked to come make a statement. Paperwork is a universal constant, I’m afraid.”

“What happened?” Karenie asked.

Gaenor explained while, nearby, a visiting and curious priest also heard their story. Karenie’s reaction was a mixture of fear and satisfaction, but the priest was horrified. “A woman using magic?” he demanded. “Blasphemy!”

“Oh it is not,” Gaenor replied to him. “I have a degree from the University at Misha and I’m hardly the only female adept in the world.”

“It flies in the face of the laws of Man and Nature!” the priest shouted at her. “Sergeant, I demand you arrest these women.”

“On what charge, your piety?” the sergeant asked.

“Illegal and blasphemous use of magic,” the priest replied. “Women are not legally allowed to use magic in Gostrina.”

“Aren’t they, your piety?” the sergeant asked.

“That’s ridiculous!” Karenie joined in. “How do you figure that?”

“The only way to be able to use magic is through a legally sanctioned initiation by other adepts,” the priest maintained haughtily, “and the only way to be initiated is by attending the University at Es and earning a degree. Since women are not allowed at the University, any woman so initiated has been done so illegally.”

“Lady Gaenor’s degree comes from the University at Misha,” Karenie responded.

“It does not matter what Mishandans do or don’t do,” the priest told her, with disdain, “but within the borders of Gostrina they must behave according to our laws, is that not so, sergeant?”

“The Law is applied to all equally,” the sergeant noted, adding to the priest’s smugness. “but I’m not aware of any statutes against women practicing magic whether with a degree from university or not. It’s not something that has ever come up so far as I know. I’m sorry, Lady Gaenor, but I’ll have to hold you and your companions until I can get a ruling from a magistrate on this. That won’t be until tomorrow morning at least.”

“But I’ll miss my ship,” Gaenor protested. “We have passage booked on the *Waverider* and she leaves tomorrow morning as well.”

“I’m sorry,” the sergeant told her.

“May I, at least, send a message to the others I’m traveling with?” Gaenor requested.

“Of course,” the man nodded.

“Karenie?” Gaenor asked, but Karenie was nowhere to be seen. “Where did she go?”

Gaenor, Cornellya and Elena were forced to surrender their purses and anything else they were not actually wearing, but rather than being placed in a subterranean cell with iron bars as Gaenor expected, they were escorted to a small, comfortably furnished waiting room.

“I’m really sorry about this,” the sergeant told them, “but I have to handle this according to regulations.”

“I understand, sergeant,” Gaenor sighed. A moment later they heard the door being locked.

“You could unlock that door, couldn’t you, Gae?” Elena asked hopefully.

Gaenor was about to reply that she would have needed her tools which were still in her purse, but she looked around the room and spotted a small roll-top desk in the corner. “Probably,” Gaenor replied at last, “I can think of half a dozen ways to cast such a spell based on what we have on hand, but why don’t we wait and see how this plays out. I doubt we could run fast enough to be out of Gostrina before they caught us again and besides, Artur and the others should be here as soon as they get the message I sent.”

“But if you were trying to unlock the door,” Elena pressed, “how would you do it?”

Gaenor shrugged and thought *May as well make a lesson out of this*. “Better yet,” she answered, “why don’t you tell me. You know enough to be able to identify the tools I would need. Look around and figure out how you might do it.”

It took Elena half an hour to identify one way in which Gaenor might have unlocked the door, then Gaenor and Cornellya showed her three others before the sergeant came to open the door.

“Rest break?” Gaenor asked archly.

“If my lady wishes,” he replied, “but actually we appear to have a problem and I’d appreciate it if you could tell the others we are not harming or abusing you in any way.”

“What others?” Gaenor asked, but with the door open, she could hear angry chanting coming from outside the station.

When they arrived in the front office, Gaenor could see hundreds of women blocking the street and sidewalks, all shouting a slogan she could not quite make out. Eventually she realized they were shouting, “Equal rights!”

“I don’t understand,” Gaenor admitted. “What’s happening?”

“Your arrest has sparked a near riot out there,” the sergeant informed her.

“That’s hardly my fault,” Gaenor replied. “I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Well, I had to obey his piety, don’t you see?” the sergeant protested.

“I think you’re too close to the Southlands,” Gaenor told him harshly. “They let their priests tell them when to breathe.” The policeman winced and Gaenor knew she had struck a sensitive nerve.

“I’ve called for my captain,” the sergeant informed her. “He’ll know what to do. In the meantime, however, could you step outside and ask those women to go home?”

“I don’t think that would be a good idea,” Gaenor refused. “If I step outside, they’ll think you’re releasing me and when I have to come back in, they’ll only be angrier. Is that what you want?”

“Oh dear,” one of the men inside the station fretted. “There must be five hundred of them out there already and I can see more coming down the street. We can’t go arresting all those women. Where would we put them?”

“What makes you think they would come quietly?” the sergeant countered.

“I wish I’d just stayed in bed today,” another officer commented. “Crooks and drunken sailors I can handle. Even a normal riot is something we are trained for, but this? What are we supposed to do, go out and quell them with our nightsticks? They’d trample us without even noticing we were there.”

“Which is why we must find a way to defuse the situation,” the sergeant replied. “Maybe if we arrested their leaders?”

“Oh yes, that would work like a charm,” Cornellya laughed. “They’re already upset because you arrested us. Do you really think they’ll settle down if you arrest a few of them?”

“You would be lucky to still have a station house when it was over, I think,” Elena added quietly.

“Please, Lady Gaenor,” the sergeant begged her. “You have to do something.”

“You have a lot more confidence about that than I do. I can’t think of anything that will make them go away quietly,” Gaenor replied and then her eyes hardened, “and frankly, I don’t think I want to. I’m fairly certain I shouldn’t. You Gostrinans have been treating your women like possessions for far too long. Why should I do anything to help perpetuate that?”

Just then a great shout arose on the street and a carriage drove up to the door of the station. Looking out the partially open door, Gaenor saw Artur get out of the carriage with an elderly and very well-dressed priest and the captain of police and climb the steps to the station house doorway. “Sorry we took so long to get here,” Artur told her as he stepped through the door. He had to repeat it, nearly shouting, to be heard over the crowd of angry women. Someone closed the door and the noise from outside lessened by a degree. “I went to talk to the local high priest of Naou when Karenie explained what had happened.”

“What is going on here?” the high priest demanded of everyone. First the police officers started answering, but the high priest cut them off and turned to Gaenor, “I want to hear your story,” he told her. “Someone, bring us some tea,” he demanded of the police captain.

By the time she was finished, the chanting from outside was once more too loud for anyone to be heard inside the building unless they shouted, so the high priest just nodded when she finished and started walking toward the door. The building was vibrating in time with the chants and on a nearby table the high priest's tea cup rattled.

The sound that followed the opening of the door felt like hitting a brick wall. It pushed at all of them so that it felt like walking uphill just to step outside, but when the high priest raised his arms for silence, he got it instantly.

"Women of Castoe," he began in a voice that carried, "I want to assure you that Lady Gaenor of Narmouth is not, nor should she be under arrest." He waited for the cheers to die down.

While waiting, Gaenor commented to Artur, "Can he do that? I mean the police arrested me, but he just came to decide whether using magic was a crime for a woman."

"He's a high priest," Artur replied softly. The crowd was already starting to quiet down. "That means he's also a politician, at least within the church. Have you ever met a politician who wasn't eager to grab the credit?"

"Father Barros was mistaken when he thought it was illegal for a woman to use magic under any circumstances," the high priest continued.

"What does that mean?" Karenie demanded from the front row.

"It means that women are as free to use magic as any man, so long as they are not otherwise breaking the law when they do so," he explained. "As it happens, Lady Gaenor of Mishanda was legally initiated in the magical arts and was not breaking any laws while she defended herself and her companions."

"Don't I get any credit?" Cornellya asked. Artur shushed her, but she continued, "and Elena was accused as well and she isn't even initiated yet."

"What about other activities?" someone shouted.

"What about schools?" another added.

"How about the right to own property?" Karenie asked, as still other questions of that sort were asked.

"So long as you do not break the law, you are free to do what you want," the high priest told them.

"What about personal property?" Karenie repeated.

"As it is currently written," the high priest began carefully, "it is true that you do not have the right to own property." There was a low rumble of anger at that and he continued quickly, "but you do have the right of lawful assembly. So long as you break no other laws, you do have the right to protest and demonstrate for the right to own property."

The women of Castoe saw this as a victory and they began cheering loudly. It was not enough for Karenie, however.

"And our schools?" she asked pointedly. "Will we be allowed to teach our daughters their sums and how to read without churchly interference?"

“I am not aware that the church was interfering with the education of Gostrinan women,” the high priest replied.

“Then a fat lot you know!” Karenie shot back. Many others voiced their agreement.

“What do you mean?” the high priest asked, sounding genuinely puzzled.

“I mean your priests have been making it their business to invade our schools, disrupting classes, destroying books and other teaching materials and terrorizing our students and teachers.”

“Priests have been doing that?” the high priest asked. “Madame, if that is true, I swear to you that I shall see it stopped. Are you certain they were priests of Naou?”

“Some of them, at least,” Karenie replied. “I can give you a list of names; most woman teachers in this city can.”

“I have no direct control over other cults, you understand,” the high priest told her.

“You cannot deny that you do have influence, however,” Karenie pointed out. “You can also publicly denounce anyone who attacks one of our schools.”

“That’s sounds reasonable,” the high priest agreed. “Perhaps we should discuss this inside the station house.”

“All right,” Karenie nodded and started walking forward with the priest, adding, “I don’t suppose you might like to directly sponsor some of our schools?”

Wanlaria

One

The *Waverider*, a two-masted brigantine, was narrower in the beam than most ships her size that Gaenor had seen. Growing up in a fishing port, she had observed quite a few such vessels and when she asked, the captain replied, “She was built for sailing up rivers. The Trina is navigable halfway to Es, but if *Waverider* had a broad beam she would not fit in the channel much beyond Castoe. Not without blocking all other river traffic anyway. Don’t let her girth fool you though. She’s a fast little ship.”

She slipped out of Castoeport midmorning the very next day causing Gaenor to wonder why they hadn’t waited on the tide. “Don’t ships usually leave port as the tide is going out?” she asked.

“Yes, my lady,” Captain Leandri replied, “if they are leaving ports with a tide. But the Trina’s not an estuary this far upstream. No tides. We use the flow of the river itself to draw her away from her slip.”

“It’s been months since we traveled by sail,” Gaenor commented. “Our last trip was up the Nider in steamboats.”

“Yes?” Leandri asked. “I’ve heard of them, but from what I hear, they’re riverboats only. There’s nothing quite like sailing on salt water.”

“We’ve done a fair amount of that in the last year or two as well,” Gaenor admitted. “Our first trip was on the *HMS Dauntless* from Misha to Dana, then another trip down the Cilben coast and through the Ocean of Sorrows to Nimbria. And finally from Maxford to Nundro.”

“You have been round the world, haven’t you?” the captain laughed. “But if you were in Cilbe, why didn’t you just cross the Ocean Sea directly to Senne? I know there are only a few ships that make that crossing, but it would have been much faster.”

“We had a few business stops along the way,” Gaenor told him.

True to Captain Leandri’s word, the *Waverider* was a fast ship. She sliced her way down stream and into the Bay of Pahn smoothly and faster than on any ship Gaenor had sailed to date. However, once they were out on the open water of the bay she noticed that the crew had suddenly become tense. It was Artur who actually asked about it.

“Are we in trouble, Captain?” he opened the conversation.

“What makes you ask, sir,” Leandri countered. In reply, Artur just looked around pointedly at various crewmen until the captain got the message. “Ah well, perhaps it’s nothing.”

“A very dangerous nothing, I would guess,” Artur replied dryly.

“We’re in pirate waters,” the captain replied looking around nervously as though speaking of them might make them appear.

“That is serious,” Artur agreed. “Have there been many incidents?”

“It’s hard to say,” Leandri admitted candidly. “These waters have never been secure, but in the past decade no ship has survived attack and the few surviving sailors who have made their way to safety – and there haven’t been very many of them – have told some fairly horrific tales about magical attacks by ships flying the Pahnese colors. That last isn’t too likely, I don’t think. Those men had all been in the water a long time and were nearly dead from exposure.”

“Well, magic can be used offensively,” Artur admitted to the captain, “but the Southlands are not noted for adepts outside their priesthood. So I have a hard time believing any adept would be able to operate out of Pahn, even on a ship.”

“Well, I said it wasn’t too likely,” Leandri reminded him.

“Still, even if Pahnese pirates don’t have adepts sailing with them, you do. Regardless of their form of attack, I’ll make sure my fellow adepts are prepared to defend your ship.”

“I thank you,” the captain replied. “How soon can you be ready?”

“It only takes us a few minutes to prepare some spells, longer for others. Why? Are you expecting an attack imminently?” Artur asked.

“You see that three-master over yonder?” Leandri asked. “She’s only a mile and a half off our starboard

bow and on a collision course with us. She's flying the colors of Pahn and while it's possible she'll change her course to veer away from us, we need to be ready, just in case."

"I'll have my colleagues prepare immediately," Artur assured him.

Gaenor quickly pointed out that fire spells were probably their best offense, "If that ship is burning to her waterline," she told them, "her crew is likely to be more than a little distracted. Also fire spells are fairly easy to cast with simply a flint and steel and a fairly short incantation. Elena, I need to talk to you however."

"You want me to stay below where it's safe, don't you?" Elena replied.

"Actually, I wanted to know if you would rather be up on deck, helping us."

"May I?" Elena asked eagerly.

"Yes, but I'll need to perform an amulet spell on you. You remember what we did with the invisibility spell, don't you?" Gaenor asked. Elena nodded. "Well, this is the same thing, only this time you'll be casting fire spells. I'll load you up with as many as I can in the next few minutes and I'll show you how to invoke the spells."

Gaenor got out her tools while the others went up on deck. Then she started casting the spell. The first part was to make an amulet. While amulets were normally thought of as small objects that had been enchanted to hold a preset spell, Gaenor knew they were really small packets of magical potential that could be set up anywhere and that the key to triggering them could be anything. Through necessity, Gaenor and Artur had discovered that even a person could become an amulet. So Gaenor set up a packet within her student to contain ten charges of a powerful, but simple fire spell.

"There, that should do it," she told Elena a few minutes later, "All you need to do is snap you fingers and point. No! Not in here!"

"Oh, sorry," Elena apologized, holding her hands carefully together.

"It's okay," Gaenor quickly assured her. "It was a natural reaction. Don't worry you'll be able to try it out soon enough even if we aren't under attack. Let's go join the others on the foredeck."

By the time they reached the bow, the other adepts were warily watching the approaching ship, which was now less than half a mile away. The ship came closer and closer until she was approximately three hundred yards off the starboard bow, then she came about and faced the *Waverider* broadside to broadside. For a brief moment, everyone aboard the *Waverider* breathed a sigh of relief. Then, just as they thought the danger was over, three puffs of smoke could be seen billowing out from the other ship followed by a set of crashing booms.

They saw two splashes in the water between the two ships, while high above their heads there was a crack as the top section of the main mast was broken off as something hit it. Before they could react, two more puffs of smoke bloomed from the attacking ship and a moment later, thousands of small projectiles left most of the *Waverider*'s sails in tatters. Along the starboard gunwale, several men cried out or suddenly collapsed to the deck with monstrous wounds in the faces and chests.

"Return fire, people," Artur ordered crisply, reminding Gaenor that he had once been a highly decorated general in the Cilben Legions. All adepts and Elena cast fire spells back at the pirate ship. There was

another puff of smoke, but this one was that of an explosion and they could see several men being thrown up into the air before the boom reached their ears. However most of the fire spells had ignited the pirates' sails. Another quick volley by the adepts, however, had an effect entirely out of proportion to anything they might have expected.

The pirate ship exploded, flinging bits and pieces of herself for hundreds of yards all around. People on the *Waverider* had to duck for cover to avoid being hit by the ship fragments. The remainder of *Waverider*'s sails now had holes in them and some of those holes were smoking around their edges as her surviving sailors frantically scrambled to climb the rigging with buckets of water before any could burst into flame.

"What the hell was that?" Faber asked, surveying the wreckage of the pirate ship. "Did they have adepts on board too?"

"That wouldn't explain the explosions," Vito pointed out. "This was something new. It's going to be a far more interesting world when word of this secret weapon spreads and the Tinds have a proverb about interesting times. I, for one, am going to be looking back on the boring days of yore."

Just then the breeze carried some of the smoke from the pirate ship's remains and Artur and Gaenor instantly recognized what the hint of brimstone in the air meant. "Gae and I have encountered this before," Artur commented. "It was years ago in Nistor right after I had hired Gae as my assistant. There was this gentleman inventor who blew himself to Tars and Miala while experimenting with an obscure explosive substance from the Southlands. It's generally used for some sort of temple 'miracle' down there. I'm sure had we cared to visit any of their services, we would have seen it in use, but being sane and sensible people none of us had much desire to attend those particular religious observances.

"Apparently," Artur continued, "someone in Pahn has discovered an even less holy use for that substance. I predicted something like this when we first encountered the substance and I tried to make a similar device but after a few nearly fatal experiments of my own, Gae convinced me to put that particular investigation aside."

"What even gave you the idea it would work like that?" Jimeleo asked.

"Because," Artur replied grimly, "any explosive is also a propellant. Put that stuff in a tube with one end blocked off, roll a heavy ball of stone or iron in on top of it then find a way to light it off, and the force of the explosion, assuming that tube doesn't just blow up, will shove the ball at whatever you aim it at. Suddenly you have a weapon like no other in the world."

"What about that second volley, which ruined the sails and killed several men?" Vito asked.

"My guess is they loaded the weapon with hundreds or thousands of much smaller bits of metal or stone," Artur replied. "I'd have to experiment to figure out how that was done, but I'm sure it would come to me in time."

"Why would you want to?" Faber asked.

"Scientific curiosity," Artur shrugged. "Also, if the Southlanders have a weapon like this, it's only a matter of time before they realize that can use it to spread their own version of religion all over the world. It will probably be best if we understand it and know how to fight back."

"We know how to fight back," Faber told him. "We just did."

“By now you should realize that not everyone has adepts at their disposal and most of us, I imagine, would prefer not to be fighting on the front lines given a choice. Remember, the Southlanders have adepts. It’s just that they’re all priests as well. Using magic to fight back will make our adepts the first targets in any attack.”

“Do we really want to spread the word how this weapon was made?” wondered Jimeleo. “I seem to recall an old fable about letting an evil spirit out of a bottle because he promised to grant wishes.”

“That particular spirit is already out of its bottle,” Artur disagreed, “And just like in your fable, we won’t be able to get him back in. The best we can do for the rest of the world is to give them a way to defend themselves and hope we don’t make matters far worse in the process. For now, however, we ought to be helping with the wounded. The ladies, you’ll notice, have been doing so all this time while we’ve been nattering.”

Two

“We’re going to have to put in at Trelonni for repairs,” Captain Leandri told Artur around dusk. “Out of all our sails, we’ve only two staysails still intact and those only because we didn’t have them unfurled.”

“We’re lucky we have those two,” Artur commented, “but I notice they aren’t pushing us along very well, are they?”

“I have men working on patching some of the other sails together,” Leandri explained. “I think we can tack some of the tatters together and hang them from the mast. Maybe we’ll get an extra knot or three.”

“Every bit helps, I suppose,” Artur agreed. “Did the hull take much damage?”

“Nothing worth talking about,” the captain responded. “We’ll need to replace the upper part of the main mast, but that will have to wait until we reach Lariaport. I’m just hoping I can buy a few sails in Trelonni so we can get to Laria faster than we might by walking.”

“Will we be in Trelonni for very long?” Artur asked.

The captain shrugged. “That all depends on what we find. There are a couple of small sail lofts in Trelonni, but mostly for the tourist trade.”

“Tourist trade?” Artur echoed.

“Oh yeah,” Leandri chuckled. “Seems the nobles and other rich folk have taken to visiting the ruins for the fun of it. Can’t see the attraction, really, but the poor sods who stayed behind in Trelonni after the quakes are finally getting rewarded for their patience. I imagine we’ll be in port long enough for you to see for yourself.”

“Want to visit the ruins?” Artur asked Gaenor after they made port late the next day.

“Ruins?” Gaenor asked. “Oh yes, you told me Trelonni used to be the capital of Wanlaria until about thirty years ago.”

“Right, the city was mostly destroyed by an earthquake,” Artur reminded her. “We’re going to be in port for a day or two at least and the captain tells me the ruins of the old capital have become a tourist attraction in recent years.”

“How eccentric,” Gaenor laughed.

“Well, the rich can afford to be eccentric,” Artur commented.

“We can’t,” Gaenor replied.

“Maybe we can,” Artur suggested. “We’re to get a share of the settlement between Mishanda and Cilbe because of the incident Martius caused in Dana, remember? That’s likely to be more than any two people can spend in one lifetime.”

“But, with the Vieri health spell on both of us, we may live a very long time as well,” Gaenor replied. “Still, I take your meaning and while I have no intention of spending that money like a drunken fisherman, I don’t suppose it will do any harm to be a tourist for a day.”

“We’ve been tourists for well over a year,” Artur pointed out, laughing.

“Artur, dear,” Gaenor told him fondly. “as far as I know, very few tourists make a habit of leading armies in conquest of an empire, conducting trade negotiations or arbitrating peace treaties while touring.”

“True,” Artur agreed with uncharacteristic whimsy, “which only shows what unique tourists we are.”

“Probably the very worst kind,” Gaenor chuckled. “Do you think we should have tried to buy the Jube Cathedral to bring home as a souvenir?”

“Hmm,” Artur pretended to consider the matter. “Strictly speaking the temple is supposed to be Jube’s home, but I suppose we might have politely invited Him to relocate to Narmouth.”

“Do you think He might have taken us up on the invitation?” Gaenor asked playfully. “I’m sure he would have liked Narmouth as a summer home at least.”

“I fear we’ll never know,” Artur told her with mock sadness, “unless we happen to revisit Cilbe.”

“Next time I have several months to spare then,” Gaenor sighed a bit more seriously. “I’ve either started or have made plans to start so many new projects it will take a lifetime just to catch up.”

“Good thing you’re young yet,” Artur told her.

“What’s so interesting about the ruins?” Gaenor asked, changing the subject back.

“I’m not sure,” Artur admitted. “Let’s find out.”

They decided to make an excursion of it. Cornellya expressed some mild curiosity about the ruins of a human city and Elena’s eyes sparkled at the thought of the unusual outing. Vito, Faber and Jimeleo, however, were far more interested in relaxing in a harbor-side tavern. “I’ve been here once before,” Jimeleo told them. “If you’ve seen one pile of bricks, you’ve seen them all.”

Predictably, Leracian followed Gaenor and Artur into town. Gaenor noted that the only time he had not

been nearby had been when he had been forced to choose between following her and Artur.

Trelonni, as it now stood, was a small port town geared almost entirely to a seasonal tourist trade. Two streets uphill, there were only a few blocks filled with hotels and restaurants, a few blocks to the north where the permanent residents of the town lived, a long street on which nearly every shop sold souvenirs, maps and other items of interest to tourists and then the ruins of what had been a very large city. Gaenor stopped to buy a book on the old city. It appeared to give a detailed history of Trelonni and then a description of the city as it was at the time of the great quake.

Artur also bought a map of the ruins to help them make their way through the tumbled city. He was quite amused to discover that it indicated places where one might dig in order to find treasure. "If it's on this map," he chuckled, "there's no treasure there even if there once was. Still, it will help to know what we're looking at."

"Hey, me lords and ladies," a high tenor voice hailed them as they passed an alley. "Need a guide? Hey, watch it!" he added as Gaenor and Artur drew their swords. They had been wearing them ever since their last night in Castoe. "I wasn't tryin' ta scare ya, just making me an honest livin'."

Only Leracian had failed to react to the teen-aged young man. Gaenor wondered why not. What had he seen in that moment that told him this was not a threat? She took a second look at the teenager. He was tall and thin with wavy dark brown hair and swarthy skin. His clothing wasn't quite ragged, but it had the look that garments get when they have been through the wash too many times.

"Sorry," Gaenor apologized, returning her long curved Temi blade to its sheath. "You startled us is all, I guess."

"You think?" he replied sarcastically. "So how about hirin' me as your guide? It's still early in the season. Folks is just startin' to arrive, so I'll only charge you three silver shillings."

"Three shillings?" Artur countered, not knowing if that was a good price or not, but suspecting it was at least slightly high. "Better keep your services for the nobility. We'll stick to the map." He held up the cheap map he had just purchased.

"Ya won't find anythin' with that map," the young man scoffed, "unless you're looking for broken bricks and frankly you don't need the map for that either. Tell ya what, two shillings, three pence; that's fair ain' it?"

"A whole tuppenny discount?" Artur laughed. "What a sport. Sorry, but we're not here to treasure hunt."

"Archaeologists, huh?" the teen asked. "I can show you where all the temples used to be. They've been pretty well picked over but there are some nicely preserved floors and partial murals worth taking a look at. I know where there's a complete fresco by Geraldo of Senne. You could look for weeks and still not find it."

"Your diction is improving rapidly, I see," Gaenor noted.

"Wha' ya say, lady?" he came back, slipping back to the sloppy pronunciation he had used earlier.

"You sound more knowledgeable when you don't try to hide it," Gaenor advised.

“Oh, heck! Just finished my freshman year at University in Laria,” he admitted. “Most of the tourists expect me to be some sort of yokel.”

“Why?” Elena asked.

“Who else would claim to know where to find treasure but not just dig it up himself?” he explained.

“Good point,” Cornellya laughed. “Godfather, I like him. How about two shillings?”

“Sure. Why not?” he shrugged. “It’s like I said. It’s still early in the season yet. Most tourists won’t be showing up for another week or two. A lot of them come for the treasure hunting and some for serious study of the old city, but most I think just come for the social season. Lots never leave the New Town district. By then I’ll be busy guiding treasure hunters and archaeologists every day so long as there’s enough light to tell a brick from a boulder. So what do you want to see?” he asked as Artur handed him a pair of silver coins.

“We just felt like walking through the old streets,” Artur told him.

“Not as easy as it sounds,” the teen, whose name turned out to be Fedalleo of Trelonni, replied. “Most of the old streets are blocked with rubble, but I can show you where some of the major buildings of the old capital used to be, and I really do know where that fresco is. If you’re really not interested in digging up your own souvenirs, we can get to the old City Hall, the palace and the concert hall as well as all the points of interest along the way, but that will take most of the day. You should have brought a picnic lunch. There’s a place just a couple blocks away, that sells a fairly decent boxed lunch and very cheap, I usually eat there myself when I’m working here. Interested?”

Once they had lunch in hand, Fedalleo really did give them a first-rate guided tour through the ruins. From time to time they saw others walking through the remains of the old capital of Wanlaria. They would wave at each other, but then move on.

The palace had been mostly cleaned up, so even though there were no walls remaining that were more than eight feet high, the marble and tile floors were fully visible and they could imagine what it must have been like before the earthquake.

“It must have been a truly horrendous quake,” Leracian observed around mid-afternoon as Fedalleo started leading them back toward the harbor through the winding paths of the ruins, “to so utterly destroy the old city. I’m surprised anyone stayed here.”

“Oh it didn’t knock down anywhere near as much as what you can see,” Fedalleo admitted. “A lot of the buildings were torn down afterward because we felt they were no longer safe for people to wander into, and still more were looted and vandalized by Pahnese raiders after most of the population moved away. Real bunch of greedy priests they must have over on that side of the bay; sending raiders over here like that. They killed a lot of good people before the king sent his army over there to teach them a lesson.”

“What makes you think it was the priests?” Gaenor asked. “It could have just been ordinary pirates, couldn’t it?”

“I seriously doubt it,” Fedalleo replied. “Their religion doesn’t exactly encourage free enterprise. The priests own everything.”

“It’s worse in some of the Southlands than others,” Gaenor pointed out, “and I found that the people who lived away from the cities and most of the priests were much more independent.”

“Well, that makes sense,” Fedalleo allowed, “but you have to understand that most people live in the cities and really are under the thumbs of the priests. From what I’ve heard, Pahn has to be the worst. They tax some ninety percent of all income. The priests call it a holy tithe, but it’s theft no matter how you pronounce it.”

“I can’t help wonder where you learned all this,” Artur commented.

“There are quite a few Pahnese immigrants in Laria,” Fedalleo replied, “and I eat in a Pahnese restaurant often enough to be known there. Nice food, and it’s generally cheaper than most Wanlarian-owned places. Pahnese folks are pretty nice once they get away from Pahn.”

“Sounds like,” Artur nodded. “It makes me wonder about the pirates on the Bay of Pahn. Are they tithing to the church too, or are they on their own?”

“Don’t know,” Fedalleo shrugged, “but I would guess they’re paying off their church just like everyone else.”

When they returned to the *Waverider*, the crew was busily attaching two new sails to the main mast. “They’re not much,” the captain admitted, but it’s all I could find. It will take us five or six days to make Laria, instead of the usual two or three, but we’ll get there. We’ll be ready to leave on the midnight tide.”

“Midnight?” Gaenor asked. “Do you often leave at night?”

“I can’t control the tides, my lady,” Captain Leandri. “We take what we can get. The next opportunity would be tomorrow afternoon and that would delay our arrival as well. I did get the impression you were in a hurry to reach Laria.”

“We are,” Gaenor acknowledged.

“Very well,” he nodded, “we leave at midnight.”

Three

Gaenor and the others were asleep when *Waverider*’s crew slipped her hawsers and started out of the harbor. However, Trelonni was still in sight several hours later when they woke up. Gaenor climbed up on deck as the crew was dropping the ship’s anchor in Trelonni’s outer harbor.

“A problem, Captain?” she asked.

“No wind this morning,” Leandri replied. “We had to drop our anchor or else the tide would have carried us right back into port. But don’t worry. If I’m reading these clouds right, we’ll have wind aplenty in an hour or two.”

The captain was correct. An hour later, the wind picked up again and *Waverider* was once more on her way. Another hour after that, however, the rain started falling and the ship found herself being tossed from wave to wave as she made her way down the coast.

Gaenor and Elena, stayed with Cornellya all that day and the next. The vari was seasick once again, but she had the foresight to purchase some ginger-flavored cookies before leaving Castoe. They were not as effective as those she had eaten aboard the *Iris* on their journey from Cilbe to Nundro, but she insisted they did help a bit. Even after the storm had passed, however, she continued to feel nauseous for the rest of the trip, so it was with great relief to her and her friends that they finally made port in the capital city of Laria a day earlier than expected.

Laria was a fairly modern city even when compared to those of the deep south. Her buildings did not reach as high as the skyscrapers of Nimbria, Baria or Drombra, but they were built along the same lines as the newer structures Gaenor had seen in Corinia. Laria was a much larger city than Taopolis, but the one thing that was decidedly missing was the presence of motorized vehicles. The streets were wide, straight and paved with grey cobblestone. On a hill overlooking the city was the royal palace and in the center of a wide park-like area within the city was a large round building faced with the same white marble that sheathed the palace.

“What’s that?” Elena asked when they first spotted the round building.

“That would be where the College of Lords meets,” Gaenor replied. “Wanlaria has an interesting history. It was only a century or so ago that Wanlaria was finally united under a single permanent monarch. Before that it was actually a collection of powerful city-states. Every so often the duke or count of a particularly powerful city would manage to claim the crown of Wanlaria. Sometimes, that only meant he controlled one or two of the other cities, but generally it was only recognized outside of Wanlaria if he had most of the country under his control.

“It was a terrible shame Trelonni was destroyed,” Gaenor continued. “Along with the loss of life and property the palace there had only been finished some ten years before the quake. The one up on the hill is supposedly an exact copy of the original.”

“We still need a place to stay while in town,” Artur pointed out. “Jimeleo, can you recommend an inn or hotel?”

“My family isn’t rich,” Jimeleo replied, “but we should have room enough for everyone so long as you don’t mind sharing rooms.”

“We have so far all trip,” Artur pointed out.

“So we have,” Jimeleo agreed, “although I suppose I really ought to ask before inviting you all to stay. It’s not like I’ve been here all along. Let’s continue on to my father’s house and, assuming I’m allowed to stay, I’ll ask for you all as well.”

“Why would you not be allowed to stay?” Cornellya asked.

“No reason I can think of really,” Jimeleo chuckled nervously, “but for all I know my family has moved. Let’s find out.”

To Gaenor’s and the others’ relief, Jimeleo’s family had not moved and even without asking, his sister, Saria, assumed the rest of the party would be staying. Jimeleo’s family might not have been rich by Wanlarian standards, but neither were they poor. They had two hired servants – a woman who served as cook and maid and her husband who filled the role of gardener, chauffeur and handyman.

“It’s a matter of status, I suppose,” Saria explained to Gaenor when she asked. “My father and brothers own a successful trading concern, and families of a certain income and rank are expected to have servants for certain functions within the household. If we were really rich we would have a dozen servants doing all the things Dearla and Narelleo do, and we would house them in a separate servants’ house. Dearla and Narelleo live in a three-room suite on the top floor of the house.”

“Is that good?” Gaenor asked, wondering why she had specified the number of rooms.

“It’s a larger living area than a lot of servants in town have. We may not be able to afford to hire additional help, but at least we can afford to keep the two we have fairly happy,” Saria replied proudly.

“Saria, is it safe for two or three ladies to wander around Laria by themselves?” Gaenor asked.

“Of course it is,” she replied. “Why?”

“I’d like to explore the city while we’re here. It’s so young, nobody has gotten around to filing off the sharp edges, if you know what I mean,” Gaenor replied.

“I think I do,” Saria grinned. “Daddy brought me with him to Senne once. I had never realized how different a city could be. I thought they were all like this one. Imagine my surprise.”

“I’ve seen a lot of cities this past year or so,” Gaenor told her, “but they were all quite different from each other. Tandro has amazingly tall buildings. Boraedne’s buildings aren’t as tall, but they’re larger so they don’t need to be as tall. Cilbe is immense and Es has the largest pyramid to Naou in the world.”

“Which was the most beautiful?” Saria asked eagerly.

“Mmm,” Gaenor considered her answer, “I’d have to say it was Sendmoot in the Barbarian Kingdoms. All the buildings were faced with marble like the royal palace here.”

“Ooh! That does sound beautiful,” Saria sighed. They heard the doorbell ring. “I wonder who that could be?” She started to go answer it, but stopped in mid-motion. “Ah, Dearla’s getting it.”

“Excuse me,” Dearla interrupted them a minute later, “but there is a herald at the door asking for a Sir Artur and a Lady Gaenor of Narmouth?”

“Who knows we’re here?” Gaenor wondered out loud.

“Lady Gaenor?” Saria squeaked.

“It’s of no moment, really,” Gaenor told her, “but I suppose I ought to see what the herald wants.”

For a brief moment, Gaenor wondered if she would find either her friend Sir Chasur Felso, or his uncle, Sir Winniam Mates at the door, but the herald was a stranger to her. He wore a formal tabard bearing the royal arms of Wanlaria over a conventional, modern business suit.

“I’m Gaenor of Narmouth,” she identified herself. “Artur is out at the moment. Can I help you?”

“A message from Their Majesties, my lady,” he replied politely, handing her a large vellum envelope. “They told me to wait for your reply.”

Gaenor studied the envelope, but nothing about the way her and Artur's names had been floridly calligraphed gave her any clue as to what was inside. It had been sealed with a bright blue sealing wax stamped with the queen's seal. Gaenor thought it might make a nice souvenir so she opened the envelope carefully so as not to break the wax. Finally she extracted the note within.

"They are inviting us to dinner?" Gaenor asked. "Just us?"

"I will advise Her Majesty how many are in your party," the herald assured her.

"There are eight of us all told," Gaenor replied after stopping to count silently. "And this is for tomorrow evening? Well, yes, I suppose that is safe enough. We haven't found a ship leaving for Misha yet. There is one major problem, however; none of us have anything suitable to wear in court. We've been traveling extensively and while our clothes are durable and clean, they are also quiet common."

"Their Majesties would never wish to embarrass or inconvenience you, my lady, the royal tailor and dressmaker will be at your convenience."

"Very well, do you need my acceptance in writing or is a verbal reply sufficient?" Gaenor asked.

They made arrangements for the tailor and dressmaker to meet with the party in Jimeleo's house later that evening and the herald went on with his business. Gaenor wondered how she was going to break the news to Artur that they had been found out yet again. She did not have long to wait, however.

"I found a ship," Artur told her immediately on his return. "The *Honace R. Mohgan* just docked this morning. She'll be here until a week from today."

"Good," Gaenor replied distractedly.

"Good?" Artur asked. "That's a fairly tepid response, don't you think?"

"Oh, it's just that we've been invited to dinner tomorrow night," Gaenor replied, watching for his reaction.

"Doesn't sound too bad," Artur shrugged. "Where?"

"The palace," Gaenor told him. "I don't know how but Their Majesties learned we were in town."

Artur thought about that for a few seconds. "Oh well," he sighed at last. "I suppose someone from the Cilben embassy must have seen and recognized me."

"I don't think so," Gaenor disagreed, "The invitation was addressed to Sir Artur and Lady Gaenor. Anyway, when I pointed out we had nothing to wear to court, their herald promised to have the royal tailor and dressmaker pay us a call."

"To bad they didn't just want a picnic," Artur commented dryly. "When are they coming?"

"You're taking this rather well. I thought you wanted to avoid this sort of attention," Gaenor remarked.

"There's no help for it and we are going to be stuck in Laria for a week," Artur replied. "I suppose we have to fill the time somehow."

Cornellya did not want to attend the royal dinner and no amount of coaxing could change her mind. On their first day in Laria, she had caught two men staring and pointing at her and she lapsed back into the sullen shyness she had displayed when she first discovered Gaenor's disguise spell had stopped working for her. The matter drove her, in fact, to try the disguise spell once more and then the invisibility spell, but neither had any effect to her dismay. "Now it's that much longer you're going to have to wait," Gaenor told her as gently as she could while the vari cried on her shoulder.

Jimeleo was also reticent about attending the royal court to Gaenor's surprise and only agreed to go at last because his mother and sister insisted it would be good for the family. The other adepts were quite happy about the situation, however, which after their earlier habits of just sitting back and relaxing whenever they were not actively traveling surprised Gaenor nearly as much as Jimeleo's reticence.

Leracian, as was his nature, took the matter in stride. As a people apart from all others, the Temi held themselves with pride as though they were all nobility and as the son of his clan's chief, Leracian, she reasoned, was a sort of noble's nobleman, although even as she thought of that, she realized that heredity was not the basis for advancement within the Ridec and Dectar clans.

It was Elena who was most mercurial about the whole affair, however. At first she resented the touching, poking and pulling that attended her fitting for an acceptable dress. "What's the matter?" she demanded of the dressmaker, a patient middle-aged woman who was dressed as well as any noble in Laria. "Would it really hurt the queen's eyes to see me in my usual dress?" Elena was actually quite happy with the clothing Gaenor had been providing for her ever since they had met. Each outfit had been new, not a hand-me-down, and so much nicer than the rags she had been constrained to wear on Olaka.

"I'm not sure either of Their Majesties would know what to make of honest clothing," the dressmaker chuckled. "That's not really true, of course," she continued after the ice had been broken. "One does not wear a ball gown when on the Hunt or when working in one's garden and Her Majesty does love to attend to her garden personally when her schedule allows."

"Are you making ball gowns for us?" Elena asked curiously.

"No, my dear, those would be as out of place at dinner as they would be on the high seas. This dress will be a much simpler design, but with all the frills and laces that are currently in fashion this season."

When their courtly garb arrived the next afternoon, Elena was ecstatic. It may not have been a ball gown by Wanlarian standards, but it was certainly frillier and more ornate than the dress she had worn at the ball in Nimbria. The top of the leaf green and tan dress fit her torso snugly, with a deep, plunging neckline from which several inches of stiff lace sprang outward to frame her face. The skirt fell loosely to just above the floor, but from well above her knees, it was actually a series of cloth strips edged in an oak leaf pattern.

Gaenor's outfit was similar although the dressmaker had chosen to use multiple shades of violet for hers and the frills were more jagged. Among the violet hues of the dress, there were also accents of bright red which Gaenor assumed had been chosen to match the ruby of her signet ring.

The men got off far easier with near identical black and white dinner suits in which the only variety of color occurred in the cummerbunds that wrapped around their middles.

The clothing was not the only convenience supplied by Their Majesties, however, and at precisely seven in the evening, as temple bells rang the hour, a large, shiny, black coach pulled up to the door of Jimeleo's family's home to transport them uphill to the palace.

Gaenor quickly decided that while the exterior of the new palace might have been an exact copy of the old, the decorations of the interior could not possibly have been. Too many of the murals depicted scenes too recent to have been on the walls of the old structure. She learned that the old walls had, in fact, been decorated with frescoes, murals which were produced by painting over freshly laid, still-wet plaster while the murals of the new palace had been painted on canvas.

“The subject matter differed as well,” an elderly duchess told her and Elena later. “The old murals were mostly scenes of ancient mythology. These new ones are of Wanlarian history. However, this palace feels the same as the old one, and who’s to say we might not have completely redone the old palace by now?”

On their arrival, Artur, Gaenor and the others were formally announced into the hall. Elena frowned slightly when Artur was announced as Sir Artur the Southlander and not Senator Arturus Cornellian Marno, but Gaenor explained, “They don’t know that and for now let’s leave it that way.” Elena nodded to show she would comply with Gaenor’s request, but even after traveling with him all this way, she honestly did not understand why the former leader of the Cilben Empire would choose to be known by a contraction of his name and a locative sobriquet that was utterly false.

Elena’s biggest shock however was at hearing herself called “Miss Elena Carolena of Olaka.” She had supplied the herald with her name, but this was the first time she had ever been addressed with any sort of title. “Everyone has a title, Lena,” Gaenor told her. “At the moment yours is Miss, or at least it is in the eastern kingdoms.”

“It seems much too grand,” Elena protested.

“Never seemed so to me,” Gaenor replied. “It just means you’re an unmarried free woman.”

“I never had even that on Olaka,” Elena noted.

“Yes you did,” Gaenor corrected her; a hint of anger in her voice that Elena understood was not directed at her, “The Olakans just weren’t polite enough to use it. And you’ll notice that Leracian is not complaining about being called Master Leracian of the Ridec.”

“The herald forgot to say ‘clan,’ I guess,” Elena commented.

“Or he felt his way sounded better, but what I meant was that he was addressed as ‘Master.’ It’s not a Temi title, but it’s the closest equivalent in Eastern ranking to his position. I suppose he might have been called ‘Goodman,’ although that title is a bit antiquated. A century ago the title, Master, would most likely have only been applied to a common man who had done something the noble found worthy of respect. Most often that would have been rising to high rank within a guild.”

Gaenor was seated on Queen Lauria of Wanlaria’s left side, with Elena directly on Gaenor’s left, while Artur was seated to the right of King Norberto. Leracian and the male adepts had been seated among the other guests, although among those of ducal or county rank rather than among the knights who sat furthest back in the hall. There were several other noblemen and women at the high board, but Gaenor did not have much time to speak with them as the Queen monopolized her time for most of the evening.

“We met in Dana, dear,” the queen reminded Gaenor. “I was really quite impressed that such a young woman had become a master adept at such a young age.” Queen Lauria was a grandmotherly woman in her late seventies, although she seemed hale and healthy enough that Gaenor expected her to easily live a full century.

“I wasn’t a master, Your Majesty,” Gaenor corrected her politely. “I did not receive my degree until after I returned to Misha.” She failed to mention that she was not even adept yet at the time because Lady Relle had convinced her that revealing that would have caused all manner of diplomatic embarrassment.

“Close enough, dear,” Lauria assured her. “You know, young Pawlen really did Firdan proud by supplying not one but two adepts for the ceremony. I don’t believe anyone has ever done that before.” That was news to Gaenor and she suddenly understood yet another ramification of why Relle had insisted on not revealing that Gaenor had not yet been initiated.

“It was very kind of you to invite us here tonight, Your Majesty,” Gaenor told her, trying to change the subject. “We are all quite honored.”

“Oh no, dear, it is you who honor all Wanlaria,” the queen insisted. “It is not everyday that we can play hosts to celebrities of the finest water.”

“Celebrity?” Gaenor asked. “Me?”

“Of course you, dear. How many adepts do you think there are who have cast the binding spell? There are only four kingdoms that practice that ritual. Such adepts are accorded rank just below that of the king and queen they bind.”

“Not in Mishanda,” Gaenor replied, “I’m sure someone would have mentioned it.”

“Perhaps not, dear,” Lauria added thoughtfully, “but that is the custom here and in Firdan. And in answer to my question there are only four or five adepts alive at the moment who have cast the binding spell and that includes you and Sir Artur. Since you didn’t know, that explains why you didn’t present yourselves in court on your arrival in Laria. You could have claimed the hospitality of the palace, you know.”

“We didn’t know, Your Majesty,” Gaenor told her. “We certainly did not mean to slight you, but we also would never have presumed to be able to demand your hospitality.”

“Your modesty becomes you, Lady Gaenor,” Lauria commended her, “but it would have deprived Norberto and I of your presence. Still we learned you were here in time so all is well”

“How did you know we were in Laria, Your Majesty?” Gaenor asked. “and how did you find us?”

“Lord Herry of Gostor, the ambassador from Mishanda, informed us. I imagine he peruses the list of entrees our Customs Service provides for the names of Mishandans entering Laria. All the ambassadors do likewise. As for how I found you, I was unaware that had been a problem. I merely asked my herald to deliver a letter.”

By the end of the evening Gaenor had been invited to tea by three ladies of the court. It was only the beginning of an intense, but brief social season. Four more invitations arrived the next morning and by the end of the day she and her female companions had three social commitments per day for the remainder of their stay in Laria.

“So much for the chance to explore the city,” Gaenor sighed to Artur.

“You can try shopping in the mornings and late evenings,” Artur suggested. “The shops are closed in the afternoons anyway, just as they were in Castoe.”

“It’s not the shopping,” Gaenor protested. “I’m not Relle. You know I don’t buy much that we don’t need. I was hoping to visit the library and the bookstore, however.”

“You may still find a spare moment to fit that in,” Artur replied.

“Fat chance,” Gaenor scoffed. “Any more invitations had better be to accompany me to the next party. There’s not much time left unless I want to give up sleeping as a bad job. Did you know we were ranked just short of royalty here?”

“Can’t say that I did,” Artur shrugged. “I was told in Dana that having performed the binding spell put us in a special situation, but the way it sounded, I just thought we could request some sort of special favor from Marnoric and Ymanya. As far as I was concerned that favor was used up when the assassination attempts began.”

“Evidently it is something more than that,” Gaenor concluded. “It will be good to get back to nice, sensible Mishanda.”

Artur smiled at that. Having been brought up Cilben there were still many facets of Mishandan life he found anything but sensible. “Your social season is the least of our troubles, however,” he told her.

“Why? What’s happened.”

“Jimeleo’s gotten cold feet,” Artur explained. “Now that we’re in Laria, he doesn’t want to go on.”

“But we had an agreement,” Gaenor pointed out. “We got him out of Nimbria and back to the East and he promised to join us on the expedition to Ichtar.”

“Evidently he’s changed his mind,” Artur shrugged. Gaenor knew him too well to think he was as blasé as he sounded about the situation, but she also understood that the angrier he got, the quieter about the matter he would be as well. Artur was being nearly silent. At Gaenor’s urging, however, he went on, “There was no binding contract. It was a verbal agreement only.”

“If you made a verbal agreement it would be more binding than one engraved in stone by anyone else,” Gaenor retorted.

“Well, Jimeleo has been through quite a lot, so I can understand. . .”

“No more so than any of us,” Gaenor countered.

“Look, Gae,” Artur told her quietly at last, “It’s best to just let it lie. We can’t force him to keep his promise. It wouldn’t be right and could easily be destructive to our mission even if we could.”

“I expect Vito will feel the same way,” Gaenor whispered, afraid to speak her fears out loud.

“He’s never made any bones about the fact he wouldn’t join us,” Artur pointed out, “and the *Mohgan* will be stopping in Senne. “We may as well plan on seeing him leave us there.”

For the rest of the week Gaenor and Elena went from party to party where it appeared every lady with

even a little status wanted to be able to say she had spent some time with Lady Gaenor the Adept. Elena was impressed, but after the second day Gaenor told her, “Don’t be. Not about this, anyway. It’s a meaningless sort of celebrity, if you ask me. I much prefer being able to discuss and debate my ideas with other knowledgeable people than attempting to be a social butterfly.”

The two women who were absolutely ecstatic, however, were Jimeleo’s mother and sister, who, although members of a prominent merchant family, had not previously drawn the interested attention of the upperclass. As they had hosted Gaenor and her companions, they too, were favored with social invitations and even after Gaenor had left Laria, their own calendars were filled for the foreseeable future.

During the latter half of the week, Cornellya had finally gotten bored enough to be drawn out of the house. Like Gaenor, she was uncomfortable among the ladies of Laria, but in her discomfort she overcompensated and instead of acting as shy as she felt, she became thoroughly outgoing and managed to charm their hosts. Eventually Gaenor decided to follow the vari’s example and the time passed a bit more pleasantly.

Four

The *Honace R. Mohgan* was a very new ship, boasting three masts with four courses of bark-rigging, and even more acreage of sail than the *HMS Dauntless* had. Gaenor wondered about the wisdom of having so much sail, but she also noted there were more stays and shrouds than on the *Dauntless*. She later learned that the *Dauntless* had been rerigged shortly after her return to Misha when it became apparent that Captain Trober had been overly cautious about her design. Unlike most ships Gaenor was acquainted with, the *Mohgan* was tar-black where her hull rested in the sea, but every part of her from the waterline on upward was white. Artur, Gaenor and the rest of their party arrived on board three hours before high tide and were already settled in and acquainting themselves with the ship and where everything was when Jimeleo came running down the wharf with a large canvas duffle slung over his shoulder.

“Thank Dao you’re still here,” he panted to Vito and Faber as he stumbled up the gang plank.

“I thought you weren’t joining us,” Faber replied.

“Um, yes, I did have some notions along those lines,” Jimeleo replied embarrassedly.

“And what changed your mind?” Vito asked.

“My father changed it for me,” Jimeleo confessed quietly, making certain no one else could hear him. “Said he would rather I died fighting demons than live a dishonorable life.”

“Didn’t have lot of choice in the matter then, did you?” Faber commented.

“It wasn’t a choice I should have made in the first place,” Jimeleo admitted. “My father was right. I gave my word and merely being afraid of what might lie ahead was no reason to break it.”

Artur, noticing Jimeleo had rejoined the party, welcomed him warmly, but made no mention of the Wanlarian adept’s previous decision. Jimeleo had been worried about what Artur’s reaction might be, but when he realized that Artur was acting as though nothing unusual had happened and would not force Jimeleo to apologize for his behavior, he relaxed and went on to beg the Cilben’s forgiveness.

“Think and say no more about it,” Artur told him kindly, “and neither will I. We all have moments of doubt.”

“Thank you, Artur,” Jimeleo replied simply, but after that there was never a moment of hesitation if Artur asked him to do something.

Gaenor realized as the *Mohgan* slipped out of Laria’s harbor that it was the first time she had been able to relax. “You’re looking much better,” Artur noticed.

“I have never seen as frenetic a city as Laria in all my life,” Gaenor told him, “and I hope I never do again. I could never spend so much of my time in worthless activities like those ladies. I barely had the time to work on any of my projects.”

“You need some time off from them too, you know,” Artur observed.

“A day, perhaps, but not a whole week,” Gaenor shot back. “I think I know now why some men go to sea and other folks build a house in the country. That sort of activity can wear you out in no time. Relle once said something about buying a home in Narmouth. I thought she was just kidding, but now...”

“I don’t think Relle kids about things like that,” Artur observed. “You were the one who noticed that beneath her flighty manner she’s actually a very serious-minded person and even she needs to get away from Misha from time to time.”

A few minutes later Gaenor, Elena and Cornellya were sitting on the deck near the bow. Elena was working on still more of the exercises Gaenor had assigned her, but Cornellya was reading one of her romances off and on, between peaking curiously over Elena’s or Gaenor’s shoulder to see what they were doing. Gaenor had decided to dive back into her idea for a governor spell.

The time off turned out to have one benefit at least, because now that she was applying herself to the problem once more, the details were starting to fall in place. By the time the tide had pulled the *Mohgan* far enough out into the harbor to set sail, she had the basic form of the spell finally blocked out. It took the rest of the trip to Senne, but when they arrived she had a fully functional governor spell. Her next project would be to write a paper about it.

The Captain of the *Mohgan* was not one to stick to the coastline of Wanlaria. Instead, once he had cleared the Bay of Pahn, he had his navigator plot a course that swung wide around the southern end of the Wanlarian peninsula. Until they rounded Cape Neloni, in fact, it was rare to be within sight of land.

“What are you looking at?” Gaenor asked Cornellya while they were still two days out from Senne.

The weather had been calm and while the breeze had been enough to propel the bark at a respectable rate, the seas were not rough and consequently Cornellya did not get seasick, so she had been spending more time on deck. At the moment she was leaning over the gunwale, intently studying something Gaenor could not see.

“I’m watching the fish,” Cornellya replied.

Gaenor leaned over and took a look for herself. “Those aren’t fish,” she told Cornellya. “They’re called porpoises. They’re mammals like you and I are. They breathe air. They also like to swim with boats and ships.”

“Why?” Cornellya asked.

“I don’t think anyone knows,” Gaenor replied. “Maybe they think ships are really big porpoises and they naturally accept them as pack leaders or something.”

“What are those exercises you’ve been giving Elena lately?” Cornellya asked a few minutes later when she finally tore her eyes from the sight of the porpoises.

“I’m having her use my notational system to predict ingredient interactions,” Gaenor replied. “It’s the sort of thing we’ll be doing a lot of as we continue work on the elemental concordance.”

“You never gave me those exercises when you were teaching me your system,” Cornellya pointed out.

“I just came up with them recently, while working with Lena,” Gaenor explained.

“Could I do them?” Cornellya asked.

“Sure, if you want. I’ll get the notebook they’re in so you can copy them. Why do you want to do them, though?”

“Well, the romance novels can only hold my interest for so long,” Cornellya replied, “and it seems to me that it might be a good idea to learn as much about magic from you as I can while we’re traveling together.”

“Cornellya, you’re already very knowledgeable about magic,” Gaenor told her. “You’ve been studying it practically since you were born.”

“But you know things even the Wise do not,” Cornellya pointed out.

“The Council of the Wise knows many things I don’t as well. They’ve been isolated from the world, however, so they haven’t had access to some of the ideas human adepts have come up with over the last few millennia.”

“I’ve noticed that a lot of your human adepts don’t know as much as you do either,” Cornellya pointed out.

“Hardly,” Gaenor replied. “You make it sound like I’m the foremost authority on magic. That just is not true. I’ve made contributions to the field, but there are a lot of things I don’t know. Nobody knows everything, Cornellya, especially not me.”

“Which is exactly why I want to know more,” Cornellya insisted. “If you don’t know everything, but you know more than I do, then the least I can do is try to learn as much from you as I can. If I knew more than you, it might be the other way around, but it isn’t. See?”

Gaenor thought about it, then told her, “I’ll get that notebook for you.”

They were all on deck the morning the port of Senne came into view. Senne’s harbor was a wide and open basin that was protected from the tides and storms of the open sea by two large jetties that projected outward from either side of the semi-circular harbor. On the south side of the entrance to the harbor, on the end of the jetty stood an incredibly large statue of a seated king and on the north side sat

his queen. The two colossi doubled as lighthouses with large fires burning within their crystalline crowns, which served as lenses to direct the lights for many miles outward.

“Who were these people?” Elena asked, fascinated by the enormous statues.

“King Torrenceo and his Queen Silivija,” Vito informed her. “There were the last monarchs of Wanlaria before the permanent unification in which the capital was moved to Trelonni.” Seeing an expectant look on Elena’s face, he continued, “I believe Gaenor has already told you how Wanlaria was once a collection of city-states and how from time to time, the ruling noble of one or another would gain ascendancy through conquest or treaty - more likely a combination of both. According to the history books the first king of the united Wanlaria was Petrus I, but we of Senne say that is because he founded the dynasty to which our current monarchs belong.

“Just prior to Petrus’ conquest of Wanlaria, Torrenceo and Silivija united the kingdom primarily by treaty,” Vito continued. “Torrenceo commanded the armies and may have been able to crush any armed resistance, but it was Silivija’s gentle diplomacy that truly united the kingdom. Without them, Petrus would have just been another temporary king.

“Frankly, I believe Torrenceo might well have defeated Petrus in the Battle of Mas, but it is well known that Torrenceo lost his desire to rule after Silivija died. Do you see that large white building over there with the translucent pale blue dome? That’s the Silivijanne, it’s the tomb of Silivija. Torrenceo built it for her after she died and is reputed to have visited her there every day until he was forced to leave Senne to meet Petrus at Mas.”

“I’d like to visit that tomb,” Elena told him, “and pay my respects. Is that permitted?”

“Of course, the Silivijanne is open to the public,” Vito assured her.

The *Mohgan* continued to plough through the harbor with no signs of slowing down. “Not another one,” Gaenor sighed resignedly.

“Gae?” Elena asked.

“The first time I sailed on a ship like this was the *HMS Dauntless* from Misha to Dana. That was a new ship too and the captain had a new trick to go with it,” Gaenor explained. “Well, actually Artur told me it wasn’t a new trick at all, but it was one that some captains have a certain fondness for when they are trying to impress their owners or passengers with their ability.

“What I’m afraid of is that this captain is going to sail the *Mohgan* into port and to our dock as fast as he can and then at the last minute have the anchor dropped so that we halt in the exact right spot. When the captain of the *Dauntless* attempted it, King Pawlen was on board and we missed the ship in front of us by only a few inches.”

“But did you finish up in the right spot?” Elena asked.

“Oh yes,” Gaenor laughed, “Although I don’t think Pawlen entirely appreciated the show. He was a bit pale by the time we stopped moving. I don’t know who that captain is trying to impress this time, but I hope he isn’t doing it on our accounts.”

Gaenor’s fears turned out to be unwarranted. The captain may have been in a hurry to reach dock, but not so much of a hurry that he would try to do so without the aid of a pilot. The *Mohgan* slowed down a

few moments later and came to rest two hundred yards away from the waiting docks.

It then took a few minutes for a pilot to row out to the ship and under his direction the *Honace R. Mohgan* was brought to an empty slip at a nearby wharf. "We are not delivering any cargo in this port," the captain told them once the harbormaster and his pilot had left the ship, "just taking on enough to fill our holds, so we'll only be in port for three days. According to the chart the harbormaster left, our tide will be mid-evening on that day. Do whatever you like while we're in town, but be back before that tide or we'll be leaving without you."

"I can think of worse places to get stranded," Vito remarked a few minutes later as they all went ashore, "but perhaps I'm a bit prejudiced. It's certainly better than Remarcsen or," he looked around at Jimeleo and added, "Boraledne."

"You were in Remarcsen?" Faber asked.

"Actually, no," Vito laughed. "I was in a small cabin on a mountainside some miles away from Remarcsen. You're not from there, are you?"

"No," Faber chuckled, "I grew up in Jaritale. But I served an apprenticeship in Daz before I went off to University. That's about half a day from Remarcsen. Believe me, compared to Daz, Remarcsen is a metropolis."

"I stopped in Daz once," Vito smiled, "and you're right. It is a good place to leave."

"I always thought so," Faber agreed.

At the end of the dock, Vito bid the others farewell as he went off to visit his sister, who evidently was his only living relative. This left the others to play tourist in the ancient city.

After modern Laria, Senne seemed quaint. Her streets were narrow and twisted and the buildings closely spaced together especially within the "OldCity" district around which the old defensive wall still stood in most places. They learned that the wall had once enclosed the entire city, protecting her from attacks by land while a massive chain could be drawn up to block off the entrance to the harbor. None of those would be effective as defensive measures now, but over a hundred years in the past they must have been formidable.

"I want to visit the Silivijanne," Elena announced and went on to explain about the royal tomb and its history. "Vito told me about it," she added.

"Sounds pleasant to me," Artur agreed, "but it's a bit late in the afternoon to start out right now. Why don't we visit tomorrow morning instead?"

The next morning, Vito had not yet returned from his sister's home and only Faber was uninterested in visiting the Silivijanne, but decided to tag along with the rest rather than sit around the *Mohgan* getting in the way of the stevedores.

They had to walk through the inner city and another mile out beyond the walls before reaching the spacious grounds that surrounded the royal tomb. The only entrance to the grounds was through a small gatehouse at which they could either hire a guide or purchase a brochure about the Silivijanne. Gaenor bought one of the brochures, but Artur, feeling expansive, hired one of the waiting guides, a woman in her early twenties who introduced herself as Collenea of Senne.

The Silivijanne, they discovered sat in the middle of a triangular shaped lot, surrounded by three gardens - one each of plants, stone and water. As they left the gatehouse and entered the plant garden, Collenea began her lecture.

“The three gardens are meant to symbolize life, land and the sea,” she told them. “It is perhaps significant that visitors both enter and leave through the area of life, for King Torrenceo’s intention was to commemorate Silivija’s life, not her death.”

“Are those monkeys up in the trees?” Elena asked.

“They are,” Collenea confirmed. “The monkey is considered a special animal in Wanlaria because of its similarity to humans. According to our teachings, Dao created the monkeys as practice before creating humans, so a small population is encouraged to live on the grounds of the Silivijanne.”

There were many species of trees and flowers, which Collenea informed them were maintained and added to every year. And there was a variety of orchid, deep among the trees, that she guided them to that only grew here on the grounds.

From the Garden of Life, Collenea guided them next to the Garden of the Earth. Here the groundskeepers worked with boulders, stones and gravel of various sorts and sizes in aesthetically pleasing displays. “The most difficult part of maintaining this part of the garden is to keep it weed free,” their guide admitted to them. “The Keepers inform me this is because so many of the plants from the Garden of Life and the Garden of the Sea try to spread their seeds here. You’ll notice there are cobble-paved paths between the gardens. They were not part of the original design of the Silivijanne, but were added later to help maintain the beauty and integrity of this memorial.”

Their tour next led them into the Garden of the Sea. “This garden is, perhaps, misnamed,” Collenea admitted, “as there was no sea water ever used here. The water in the pools and fountains is all fresh, which, of course is apparent from the nature of the fish and plants within the pools and the fact that the fountains are not as encrusted as they would have become had salt water been used in them.”

“The marble would have eroded badly as well,” Artur commented. An expression passed over Collenea’s face as though she was filing that datum away for future use.

From the water garden area, they finally made their way to the center where the large and ornate tomb stood. From the harbor it had appeared to be a single large white building with a round, translucent blue dome on top, but from the center of the complex, they could see that the dome capped only the central, tallest building. To either side stood temples to Dao and to Hin, the chief deities of Wanlaria. Collenea, led them directly to the central building, explaining, “The temples are open if you should feel the need to pray, but generally visitors only attend during the regular services.

“Technically,” Collenea continued, “this is a cenotaph. Queen Silivija is not actually buried here; nobody is anymore. King Torrenceo buried her here immediately after her death one hundred and twenty-seven years ago. However, the grief of the people of Senne brought them here to venerate her memory in such numbers that he became concerned about grave robbers. After the second attempt by thieves to rob her grave, Torrenceo had her moved to a secret location. We now know she lies next to Torrenceo in Senne’s main temple to Dao, but their worldly possessions are on display in the temple’s museum. That was done to discourage thieves from disturbing them in their rest.”

Inside the central building stood the cenotaph itself; a tall, round platform with an empty carved stone

sarcophagus seated on top. A pair of circular staircases wound their ways up to the top of the platform, but a short barrier of carved marble panels had been erected to keep the public from climbing them.

“The sarcophagus isn’t centered,” Gaenor noted, looking upward.

“No, it isn’t,” Collenea agreed. “It had been Torrenceo’s original plan to be entombed here with his beloved Silivija, so space had been left for him. When those plans changed, however, a second sarcophagus was never installed.”

They completed the tour and Artur tipped Collenea generously before they headed back toward town. “You were amazingly quiet, Leracian,” Gaenor noted as they walked, “even for you.”

“I’ve been here before,” Leracian replied, “a few years ago. All my questions were answered last time.”

“I did not realize the Temi were so wide ranging,” Gaenor told him.

“You should, my chief,” he replied, “Why else would we have been available so readily in Dana? Temi go wherever there are Cilbens, and there are Cilben embassies in every nation in the World.”

“I had not thought of that,” Gaenor admitted, “but surely Leracus cannot always be on hand in case as he was last year when Martius hired the Ridec clan to kill Artur.”

“That was fortuitous,” Leracian agreed. “Otherwise it might have been some months or even years before he found you for the final challenge. As it happens, my father was at the Junction in Rolta when we accepted the contract. When we failed to kill you in Dana, he journeyed southward to Es immediately. Actually, that was the first time an intended target had survived over two attempts in three centuries, so he had never been forced to issue a final challenge. He found it quite remarkable and admitted to me, that even had you not survived the Parch, he would have written songs about you.”

“That’s quite flattering,” Gaenor replied, uncertain what else she might have said.

“That reminds me,” Artur commented, “Someday when this is over, I ought to find out where Martius got himself to. I’m not so concerned about revenge as making sure he doesn’t come back to cause trouble for us or my family.”

“He won’t, my chief,” Leracian told him confidently.

Artur turned to look at the Tem warrior. “Would you care to explain that statement? How do you know that?”

“If Martius can return from where he is now, he will be the first mortal to do so, since Tarelleus,” Leracian replied.

“Tarelleus is a myth,” Artur stated flatly. “Are you saying you killed him?”

“I did, my chief,” Leracian admitted, but said no more.

“Please, Leracian,” Artur sighed, “don’t make me pull this out of you one word at a time. What happened?”

“I will tell you willingly, my chief,” Leracian responded easily, “but perhaps we should eat first.”

“I’ll meet you halfway,” Artur countered. “You can tell me while we eat.”

They found an open café-like restaurant just outside the city walls where Artur ordered a typical Sennite lunch for everyone. It consisted of a salad with cubes of raw tuna and a lemony and nutty tasting dressing. Once everyone had been served he looked at Leracian and demanded, “All right, we’re eating. Now go ahead.”

If Leracian had hoped Artur might forget he made no sign of it as he replied, “My Chief. Perhaps you were wondering how the Sorvohnians knew you were adept.”

“I assumed they know it in the same way it was known in Nider and Taxo,” Artur replied.

“Yes, your name was known in that way, but the Priest-king and his people had no notion you were in Vohn or anywhere in Sorvohn for that matter until Martius tipped them off.”

“And how did Martius know that?” Artur asked, quickly adding, “You’re making me drag this from you again.”

“Apologies, my chief,” Leracian replied. “Cilbe does not maintain a permanent embassy in Sorvohn, but we do send a legate to the Priest-king from time to time. Martius was the Cilben legate to Sorvohn.”

“How did I miss that little detail?” Artur mused.

“You, no doubt, had other more important matters on your mind when you were dictator, my chief,” Leracian explained.

“I get the impression I should have taken the time to look into that,” Artur admitted, “but continue, please.”

“One of Martius’ retainers saw and recognized you in Vohn and Martius made certain the priests knew of your presence. After I saw to it that Chief Gaenor, Cornellya and Elena were safely out of the city, I returned to find out what had gone wrong,” Leracian explained.

“Where you learned about Martius’s part in my arrest. Did you kill him?” Artur asked with deceptive mildness.

“Eventually, my chief,” Leracian admitted.

“I would rather have had him arrested and sent back to Cilbe,” Artur commented, “but I can’t say I pity the little weasel.”

“It would have been unbecoming of a chief of the Ridec clan to order the murder of such an unworthy,” Leracian told him.

“No, a Temi chief should have simply killed Martius himself,” Artur nodded.

“He did not deserve to feel the edge of your sword, my chief,” Leracian corrected him.

“The world is better off without him,” Artur replied, “but it would still have been better to submit him to the emperor’s justice. Martius offended him too, you know and Colchicus was looking forward to

dealing with Martius himself.”

“I thought he might have been,” Leracian nodded, “that is why I had Martius’ ring and sword sent to your son.”

“You thought of everything, didn’t you?” Artur commented dryly.

“I can but try,” Leracian replied in the same tone.

“How can you talk about murder so calmly?” Elena asked.

“Temi do not murder, Miss Elena,” Leracian responded in a gentle voice. “We serve our chief and our people. That service might involve ending the life of someone, of course. But we never do so without giving that person adequate warning to defend him or herself.”

“Sometimes,” Gaenor added to Leracian, “that warning may only be something along the lines of ‘Die, traitor,’ about half a second before attacking.”

“There is no need to hamper our activities too much,” Leracian shrugged. “Besides, Chief Arturus successfully defended himself, so we obviously gave him ample warning.”

Five

Artur, Faber and Jimeleo returned to the ship after lunch, but Gaenor wanted to explore the merchants’ center of Senne. She had failed to do so in Laria and did not want to miss the same opportunity in Senne.

“You don’t need to follow us around, Leracian,” she told the Tem for the third time.

Yes, my chief,” he replied, although he made no move to leave them.

“Better give it up, Gaenor,” Cornellya snickered. “Even I’ve learned not to try to change his mind once he’s decided on a matter of honor.

“Leracian,” Gaenor asked. “Does this have something to do with what happened in Castoe?”

“No, my chief,” Leracian assured her. “I can only follow either you or Chief Arturus when you are not together. It is my opinion that you are more at risk than he is at this time.”

“I doubt I’m at any risk at all,” Gaenor snapped back.

“Of course not, my chief,” Leracian agreed maddeningly.

“Did you treat your father this way?” Gaenor asked pointedly. Behind her, she heard a snicker but refused to turn around to see whether the sound had come from Cornellya or Elena.

“Of course not, my chief!” Leracian looked shocked at the concept.

“Then why are you treating me like a helpless calf?” Gaenor pressed

“I was not assigned to my father’s honor guard,” Leracian replied.

“Does anyone dare treat Leracus this way?” Gaenor asked, suddenly suspecting there was at least one aspect of Temi life of which she was not previously aware.

“His honor guard, of course,” Leracian replied. “There are four of them – two men and two women.”

“Why haven’t I seen them?” Gaenor asked curiously.

“You have, my chief,” Leracian told her. “You just haven’t noticed them. Honor guard members should remain as unobtrusive as possible.”

Gaenor thought back but could not think of anyone she might have seen acting as Leracus’ honor guard. Elena thought of something, however.

“Why does your chief need four bodyguards?” she asked Leracian.

“They’re not bodyguards, at least not the way you mean it,” Leracian replied. “No chief of the Temi needs a bodyguard. They and I are guards of honor. Anyone may formally challenge a clan chief for his or her position and once such a challenge has been issued we are honor bound to stand aside. Until then, however, it is our duty to keep anyone who is not worthy from making such a challenge.”

“Who are you to judge who is worthy to challenge Lady Gaenor?” Elena asked.

“Her honor guard,” Leracian replied calmly.

“Look, Gaenor!” Cornellya interrupted the conversation. She was staring into the window of a glassblower’s workshop. “Have you ever seen anything so beautiful?”

They went in and Cornellya purchased a vase she had seen in the window. Gaenor bought a paperweight for Elena because she admired the design the glassblower had built within, but found nothing for herself.

After that they wandered back in town and, after wandering through a few interesting shops, discovered the campus of the University at Senne. Asking a few passersby they quickly found the library, but just as quickly discovered that, as visitors, they could not roam through the stacks without the sponsorship of a faculty member.

“Do you have a Department of Magical Studies?” Gaenor asked the librarian.

“Oh? Are you here for the demonstration?” he asked.

“Demonstration?” Gaenor echoed.

“I guess not,” he replied and gave them directions.

As they left the library, they walked past two large groups of people who looked to be preparing for some sort of group activity. From the placards some were carrying, Gaenor decided there must be some sort of controversy involving the University’s curriculum, but the slogans, while they obviously meant something to the people carrying them, were not sufficiently specific for her to figure out what the issue might be.

“Department of Magical Studies” was, perhaps, too grandiose an appellation for the office shared by two bachelor adepts, lately from Misha. It was the latest experiment by a University known for its experimental approach to education. Two years earlier Honard of Thim and Rochard of Kont were hired, while the ink on their diplomas was still wet, to form the nucleus for a brand new school of magic. It was an offer they could not refuse on many levels. What they did not count on was the conservative faction of the University community.

“Hello,” Gaenor greeted them as she stuck her head in the door, “Is this the Department of Magical Studies?”

“All two of us,” Rochard, the taller, blond-haired adept replied. “May I help you, miss?”

“Gaenor of Narmouth,” Gaenor replied by way of introduction, “and yes, I was hoping...”

“Master Gaenor of Narmouth?” Honard, a short, stout man with brown hair, asked incredulously. “You’re not having us on, are you?”

“I think they’ve read your thesis, Gaenor,” Cornellya commented dryly.

“You’re a vari, aren’t you?” Rochard asked.

“Uh, maybe,” Cornellya replied with embarrassment, covering her ears.

“You are!” Rochard insisted, “Doctor Julinir showed us a picture he drew of one of your people once, although I was never sure if he was serious. This is perfect! Just what we needed.”

“Needed for what?” both Gaenor and Elena asked at once, “and who are you two?” Gaenor added.

Rochard quickly exchanged introductions and continued on excitedly, “This is wonderful. We’ve been having trouble gaining acceptance on campus and the visit by a renowned master and a vari would do wonders to promote our cause.”

“What cause?” Gaenor asked.

“The furtherance of magical studies, of course,” Honard replied. “Ever since we got here there has been a movement trying to get us thrown off campus. Fortunately the Dean is in favor of offering magic for the students so we’ve lasted here for two school years, but our contract is up for renewal soon and a lot of students and faculty members are in favor of abolishing the department in favor of more technological sciences.”

“Is that what the demonstrators were doing out there?” Elena asked.

“Yes, there’s a big rally today by our supporters,” Rochard nodded. “We were just about to go join them, in fact.”

“It looked like there were just as many preparing to protest against you as there were for, from what I could see,” Cornellya observed.

“I was afraid of that,” Honard fretted. “This was supposed to be a peaceful demonstration, but if they turn it into a riot we’ll likely be considered a disruptive influence.”

“That hardly seems fair,” Elena considered. “If the other side is causing the problem, why should you take the blame?”

“The University officials will decide that the problem can be solved by making the point of controversy go away,” Rochard explained. “We’re only two junior instructors of an experimental program, while many of our opponents are tenured members of long-time departments.”

“Do all the other departments resent magic in the curriculum?” Gaenor asked.

“Not at all,” Rochard replied. “Campus opinion is fairly evenly split, but given the nature of University politics, so long as their own departments don’t suffer, many of our supporters will be sorry to see us go, but they won’t make the trouble for our opposition that the opposition is making for us.”

“Well, we shouldn’t despair just yet,” Honard decided. “This isn’t played out. Master Gaenor, if we still have a department tomorrow afternoon, would you consent to giving an open lecture?”

“I won’t be able to stay too late,” Gaenor warned them. “My ship leaves in the evening.”

“That’s a shame,” Rochard remarked. “We’ll have to forego the post-lecture dinner.”

“Pack up a decent dinner of the local foods to go, and I’ll consider it my lecture fee,” Gaenor told them.

Gaenor and the others joined Honard and Rochard at the demonstration. It was held on the long steps in front of the dean’s office and at first, only the pro-magic people were in attendance, but soon after Honard started speaking to the assembled crowd, the anti-magic demonstrators marched toward the makeshift stage of the steps. They were chanting anti-magic slogans and Honard was unable to be heard. Elena and Cornellya were both fidgeting in their seats, obviously looking for a safe exit as angry shouts started being exchanged between the two sides. Gaenor spotted Leracian moving to a location directly in the center of the bottom step. Idly, she wondered whether he had somehow concealed a sword on his body, then immediately hoped not.

The shouting turned to jeers until something that looked like an over-ripe fruit was thrown by one of the anti-magic people. Gaenor bolted from her seat immediately, flint and steel in hand and with a hastily spoken incantation, brought the two objects together. There was a mighty roar and a thirty foot-tall wall of fire materialized between the two groups of protestors.

In the sudden silence, she looked out on the two groups and told them, “Play nicely, children.” Then she spoke another incantation and the wall of fire flickered out. “I’m sure I won’t have to do that again, will I?” she asked sweetly. “This is a university. It is a place where learned discourse is appropriate. I suggest you remember that. Please continue, Honard.” Then she returned to her seat.

“Students and faculty,” Honard spoke to the now quiet crowd, “I was about to introduce Master Gaenor of Narmouth, who wrote the book from which we have been teaching our first and second year students, but it appears she has introduced herself far more eloquently than I ever could.” There were a few chuckles on both sides. “She’ll be speaking in the auditorium tomorrow afternoon on Magic as a science and its place in a scientific world.”

“Nice to know I have a subject,” Gaenor whispered to Cornellya. On her other side she heard Rochard chuckle.

“Nice to know it’s one you already have a prepared lecture for,” Cornellya replied.

“Not hardly,” Gaenor told her. “I suspect I’ll be up late tonight.”

“Master Gaenor,” Rochard asked, “it turned out all right, but didn’t you take an awful chance using a wall of fire? If someone had panicked and inadvertently pushed another into the fire...”

“Nothing would have happened,” Gaenor assured him. “That wasn’t a fire spell I cast, but a light spell - an illusion.”

“A very good illusion,” Rochard commended her, “but if someone had seen through it...”

“We’d have been no worse off than we already were,” Gaenor shrugged. “Hey, sometimes you just have to take a chance.”

“What language did you use for the incantation? I’ve never heard anything like it.”

“It’s called the Old Tongue,” Gaenor explained. “It’s the Vieri native language.”

“Any chance of getting someone to teach it here?” Rochard asked.

“There aren’t very many humans who know more than a few words of it,” she replied. “You would probably have to hire a vari and they almost never leave their village.”

He looked across Gaenor to Cornellya, “How about you Miss Cornellya?”

“Maybe one day,” Cornellya replied, “but no time soon. To tell the truth, I really want to go home for a good long time.”

Six

“The Way is of life,” quoted Gaenor the next afternoon, “and life is of the Way. That is the first precept of Vieri beliefs. To the people of the Parch, the Way is both religion and a guide to behavior. You might wonder why I’m beginning this lecture with a quote from the philosophy of an obscure people whom most of you probably think are mythological. It is because they do not set as much store in one’s beliefs as they do in one’s actions.

“In a sense,” she continued, “our approach to science is the same as the Vieri approach to life in general. What we believe is the truth is not as important as what we can prove is true.

“I have met adepts who believe magic is an art. They believe that new magic is unpredictable. They use a limited number of spells and believe that the invention of new spells is an uncertain and highly dangerous activity. For them it is true because they have never considered the properties of the components of a spell. However, with modern diagnostic study we now understand in advance how these components will interact, removing much of the risk in composing new spells. Today the biggest risk is in sloppy research and handling.

“And that is just how it is in any scientific laboratory. If you work willy-nilly or if you are careless about mixing chemicals, for example you are likely to have a disaster on your hands. And yet I have never met

a chemist who refused to do new research simply because it might be dangerous. No, they take all possible precautions and continue on, advancing our field of knowledge.

“I learned just yesterday about how there were two lines of thought concerning magical studies on this campus and I see people from both sides of the argument here this afternoon, so I hope you will allow me to show where, in some ways, both factions are in error.

“Even as recently as one hundred years ago, Magic was taught in isolation. Those hold-outs who see Magic as an art, not a science, are a relic of those days. Students, or rather apprentices, learned directly from their masters, and more often than not, they learned their spells by rote, never daring to experiment because if you do not understand how it works, Magic is possibly the most dangerous thing there is. Certainly there are quite a few cautionary tales about young adepts who tried something new.

“It was not until the adept philosopher Menardin of Es developed what we now call Menardin’s Principal that anyone started to think about classifying magical tools and ingredients. ‘Similar substances behave similarly,’” she quoted. “On the surface it sounds rather simplistic and over the years there has been much debate over what constitutes similarity, but it really is not any different from the bases of all other sciences.

“Modern magic is a science and cannot be taught in a vacuum any longer,” she continued. “To do so is to intentionally halt all progress. Magic is a means by which we can manipulate the physical world. Physical technology is another. I recently visited those kingdoms south of the so-called Southlands and they have developed some technological marvels that make my head spin. They have tall buildings that seem to touch the sky and self-propelled vehicles both on land and on some of the rivers and they are just beginning to explore what they can do along those lines.

“Admittedly, they are doing it without magic. Why? Because adepts are few and far between in the deep south and the people there neither understand nor trust magic. Here in the eastern realms we are accustomed to magic and adepts, but are woefully behind when it comes to the technological sciences, but at least we’re better off than the Southlands, or the Holylands as the deep southerners refer to them. They have progressed along neither the magical nor technological paths.

“And yet, how much further could we all go, when we combine Magic with Technology?” Gaenor asked.

“Nonsense!” someone shouted from the audience.

“Really?” Gaenor countered. “How many here are acquainted with Doctor Nyima’s Theories of Special and General Relativity?” There was a sound from the people on one side of the auditorium that Gaenor decided was grudging admission that Eliyama Nyima had been heard of here. “Then it may be of some interest that she and I are collaborating on a series of papers in which Magic, Mathematics and Relativity are all key topics.”

“That was you?” a man in the front row blurted, holding up what looked like a periodical. There was a surprised murmur in the hall.

“Has one already come out?” Gaenor asked. “That was fast. May I see it, please?” she stepped to the edge of the stage and leaned over so the scholar could hand her the magazine.” Oh, I see,” she laughed. “They spelled my name phonetically in Corinian or as close as they could come. Well, I can certainly see why that may have been confusing.” She handed the periodical back to the man and returned to the podium. “Well, there you go. Proof positive of collaboration between Magic and Technology. If you

haven't yet read the article it's about the combination of the Laws of Conservation of Matter and of Energy. I put the new law into words and Ellie's mathematics proved it. We also used magic to help provide physical proofs. The spells we used are fairly simple ones that any adept can cast. You have two such here in the University so if you care to duplicate our efforts, you have the adepts available to do so."

"And when we prove you wrong?" someone asked with a snicker.

"Let me know," Gaenor replied immediately. "The whole point of any science is to deal with facts. A wrong fact is an oxymoron. If it is wrong, it's not a fact. So go ahead and prove us wrong. We welcome all corrections.

"The collaboration goes both ways, however. We are using Nyima's mass to energy conversion formula to determine the ultimate source of magical energy. Consequently we are also seeking to prove that magical energy is governed by the same laws all other known energy is. We believe it is, but what we expect to learn counts for nothing. What we actually learn is the prize.

"Gentlemen," she squinted out at the crowd and saw several women within the crowd aside from Elena and Cornellya, "and ladies, there is no such thing as an unsuccessful experiment. You might learn something you did not know, you might learn that everything you did know was wrong, but every experiment yields useful data. Every datum that is reproducible adds to our store of knowledge. Don't throw away the opportunity to add to that store just because you are unacquainted with the source.

"Adepts and adept candidates, you need to learn as much about the other sciences as you can, because we manipulate the physical world, but we need to understand it before we can start. Those of you who study the other disciplines, you'll find that magic is a convenient tool in your studies. Use it. That's what tools are for.

"The Way is of life and life is of the Way," she concluded. *I've been rambling* she thought to herself, realizing she had not really looked at the careful notes she had made the night before.

"I have some time for questions and answers before having to catch my ship," she told the audience; most were applauding politely. The questions came fast and furious, but the more argumentative they were, the more she welcomed them. Gaenor had told others many times that she preferred not to have what she said taken as absolute truths. She really did want others to question her results and, if possible, correct her own notions when they were wrong. She had trouble understanding why some scholars seemed to take offense when their work was questioned. That's what learned discourse was supposed to be all about, wasn't it?

All of Gaenor's companions had come to the lecture. Elena and Cornellya had rushed to sit in the front row, but Artur and the other men had held back and got seats at the rear of the hall except for Leracian who sat along the center aisle about one third of the way back.

As Gaenor answered questions, Vito noticed how even the more skeptical people in the crowd were being won over, when Gaenor not only met the most aggressive questions knowledgeably, but with diplomacy and respect for the questioner. As she gave the people she spoke to respect, they in turn, began to treat her the same way.

"She doesn't even realize what she's doing or how she's doing it, does she?" Vito commented to Artur.

"What do you mean?" Artur asked.

“Well, it’s fair to say we’re on a quest to save the World,” Vito explained, “but she’s also changing it as she goes along. Your friend in Ond said you walked through the world on the feet of a giant or something like that.”

“King Werlta in Colch said something similar just before he died,” Artur admitted uncomfortably. “It never seemed like that to me.”

“Nor does it to Gae,” Vito nodded, “but while you may have shook the world so that the people of Cilbe noticed, what she is doing is subtler and far more reaching. Look at what she’s doing right here. She’s talking to skeptics and winning them over so easily you would think she’s casting a spell on them.”

“Magic doesn’t work that way,” Artur commented. “You know that.”

“I do,” Vito agreed, “but there’s the magic of spell casting and then there’s what she’s doing here this afternoon. Oh, she’s not solving the problems of the local academic community. She probably isn’t even guaranteeing the long term existence of the Magic Department in Senne, but she is making these academics reconsider some of their most precious prejudices and if that isn’t some form of magic, I’m a blue-bummed baboon.”

“Just in case,” Faber chuckled, “I’ll get you a can of paint.”

“Funny,” Vito told him flatly. “I’m telling you, though, if I believed in spirits, I’d say she has one on her shoulder and it’s intent on adapting the world to suit her.”

“If that’s the case,” Jimeleo commented, “we’d best make sure we fit into this new world she’s creating.”

They made their way back to the harbor area with an hour to spare. Honard and Rochard had repaid Gaenor in the coin of her choice and with interest and delivered four large baskets filled with the foods of Senne. Some of them were fresh and had to be eaten immediately. Gaenor was especially happy to find a large bowl with a variation of the raw tuna salad she had enjoyed the day before. However, there were also some interesting preserved foods including candied ginger, which Cornellya instantly grabbed in case she needed it to stave off seasickness again.

“I thought you had boxes filled with ginger cookies from Laria,” Gaenor commented.

“You can never have too much ginger, Gaenor,” Cornellya told her seriously.

“It looks like they threw some local fruit in here as well,” Elena noted. “Do you want to hosey the limes too?”

“We can hold off in case we need them, can’t we?” Cornellya asked Gaenor.

“Sure, no problem,” Gaenor laughed. “There’s enough food here that needs to be eaten immediately. We ought to leave what we can for later.”

“Gae,” Elena gasped, opening the final basket, “The food in here is hot. Chicken and lamb? Or is this

beef? Something with mushrooms and green beans and fresh bread! Professors Honard and Rochard really did you proud!”

“They were more than generous,” Gaenor agreed. “Let’s invite the others over and start eating while the food is still hot.”

Just then they heard the sound of people shouting amidships by the gangplank. “Vito! This is madness,” a woman who turned out to be his sister cried. “You’re home. There’s no reason to go off again.”

“Belinsa,” Vito spoke sternly, obviously losing patience, “I’ve been telling you this for days. I have commitments that must be honored, places I must go yet.”

“To Ichtar?” Belinsa cried. “Are you sick in the head? Nobody goes to Ichtar. There’s nothing there but the demons. You promised me when you came back from Aston you would stay in Senne.”

“And so I had planned, sister,” Vito told her. “But there are bigger things in this world than my petty plans, and this is one of them.” It was confirmation to Gaenor and Artur that the once self-centered adept had matured in a sense, but his sister couldn’t accept it. She ran off into the gathering dusk, weeping as she went. “She doesn’t understand,” Vito told the others.

Dana

One

Their next port of call was Dana the capital of Firdan. The trip northwestward up the coast was amazingly smooth and fast as the *Honace R. Mohgan* was driven by favorable winds and a warm ocean current. Gaenor wondered if the captain was going to just sail into Danaport harbor in the same fashion he had entered Senne, but instead he ordered the sails furled and the anchor dropped outside the harbor just as the captain of *HMS Dauntless* had done, and hoisted a red and yellow checkered flag.

“What are they doing?” Elena asked just a second before Cornellya could.

“They’re signaling for permission to enter the harbor,” Gaenor explained. “The *Dauntless* did the same thing last time we were here, although at the time I wasn’t sure if it was because the harbor was especially busy because of the coronation or if it was some courtesy because our ship carried a foreign king. Evidently this is standard procedure in this port. That’s not surprising, since it’s not a large harbor and I heard several sailors commenting on how the channel is especially narrow here.”

“So what happens next?” Cornellya asked.

“A pilot will come out to meet us just like one did in Senne,” Gaenor informed her. “Then he will guide us into the harbor and to whatever wharf the harbormaster chooses for us.”

“I never realized it was so complicated to enter a port,” Elena told her. “On Olaka, there’s always space and ships and boats just sail in.”

“As was the case in all the Cilben and southern hemisphere ports we visited,” Gaenor agreed. “But I got

the impression that river and sea traffic in those parts of the world was not as heavy as it is here in the east. You'll notice the harbors are fuller and you see more ships at sea. We just move more people and goods by water, I guess."

It took close to an hour before the pilot arrived in his skiff. He climbed aboard and apologized for the delay, "Sorry, captain. We weren't sure where to put you and had to make arrangements to move two other vessels. As it is, you'll be at the end of a long wharf, but at least the stevedores will be able to start moving cargo tomorrow morning."

"Ah, well and good," the captain replied. "I know my men are looking forward to an evening of liberty, precious little they got in Laria and Senne and they'll have no more until we reach Mishaport."

The pilot nodded and began the business of guiding the ship through the busy harbor. Unlike their arrival at Senne, the captain did not attempt to approach the dock at speed, but instead brought her in gently, almost as if waiting for her to drift closer by happenstance. Finally, however, she was secured to the wharf's cleats and the gangplank was lowered to the cobblestone surface.

"We need to visit Marnoric and Ymanya, while we're here," Gaenor told Artur over dinner.

"They're the king and queen," Artur told her. "We can't just stroll up and ring the doorbell."

"No, I imagine we need to go through a herald," Gaenor replied.

"Gae, this isn't the couple down the street we're talking about. They're very busy people. You know that. We really ought not to disturb them."

"They're busy, yes, but that didn't stop you from stopping in to see King Werlta while we were in Colch and his entire family seemed to appreciate the courtesy," Gaenor argued. "Besides, Queen Lauria told me that as the adepts who cast the binding spell, we have a very special place in Firdan."

"So special that a native adept is not allowed to cast the spell," Artur pointed out.

"And we were told that was because no loyal subject of Firdan should ever cast a spell that binds the king or queen to do anything, but Queen Lauria says the real reason is that the honor also raises the adept in precedence to just beneath Their Majesties and by tradition they always have the ears of the king and queen. According to Lauria the real reason a foreigner is used is because they are eventually going to go home, and therefore it's less likely that they will become embarrassingly active in the local politics. Maybe that's the Wanlarian viewpoint only, but there's some truth to it anyway."

"It still sounds as though we should be polite enough to give them some space," Artur shook his head.

"Nonsense!" Gaenor laughed. "They would feel insulted if they learned we were here but did not pay our respects."

"And who would tell them we were here?" Artur pressed.

"Who told Queen Lauria we were in Laria?" Gaenor countered. "We can be recognized here just as easily as in Wanlaria or maybe more so and if the Mishandan ambassador in Laria keeps track of arriving Mishandans, why wouldn't the one here do likewise?"

"When did you become such a persuasive debater?" Artur asked her, feeling defeated yet again.

“I don’t know,” Gaenor admitted, suddenly mystified.

“Probably about the time you started having to lecture,” Cornellya suggested. “Your first talk at Mita was a bit shaky, although at the time I didn’t realize it until the next day when you started getting a bit more comfortable. I didn’t attend in Misha, of course, but the lecture at the Academy in Cilbe was before a fairly hostile audience just like in Senne. Face it, Gaenor, you’ve had to refine your lecturing skills in some fairly adverse situations.”

“But they weren’t all that bad,” Gaenor disagreed. “Oh, a few men tried to make trouble, but they listened in the end.”

“Gae,” Artur pointed out, “you hung a senior Academic in a tree when he tried making trouble. Naturally the rest of them listened.”

“No,” Cornellya disagreed, “Gaenor, won them over because she has an instinct for knowing exactly how to talk to people.

“Hardly,” Gaenor scoffed. “There are many people with whom I don’t get along and who don’t like me either.”

“Very few, Gae,” Artur told her. “Very, very few. Cornellya is right; you do it naturally. And now you’ve convinced me. We’ll pay a social call on Their Majesties in the morning.” He turned to the others at the table. “Is everyone joining us this time?”

“I’ll pass,” Vito told him. “Jimeleo and I have some old classmates we want to look up tomorrow. Who knows? Maybe we’ll manage to recruit one for our jaunt to Ichtar.”

“The more the merrier,” Artur replied lightly. “Faber? How about you?”

“I was planning to stroll about town for a bit then catch up on my reading. I’ve been out of circulation a long time, and Gaenor’s book is just the sort of thing I need to bring me up to speed. And to tell the truth, royal courts bore me.”

“You’ve spent time in a lot of them, have you? Artur pressed.

“Just the one in Aston,” Faber admitted, “but I don’t have enough patience with the idle rich to put up with them for long unless they are paying me handsomely, and even then there are limits.”

Cornellya, having met other kings and queens, was interested in meeting Marnoric and Ymanyia and Elena wanted to do anything Gaenor was doing. It was a foregone conclusion that Leracian would not allow both Artur and Gaenor to go off without his being there, and Artur did not bother to ask.

The City of Dana looked different to Gaenor without the celebratory bunting and streets filled with the souvenir stands that had been temporary businesses capitalizing on the Coronation festivities. Of course, it had been nearly a year and a half since the coronation, so naturally the city would have returned to normal since then. But she could not help but think the city looked emptier.

Clothing in Firdan had not become any less revealing in her absence either but after having traveled literally all over the world, Gaenor’s eyes had become more cosmopolitan and the short skirts and thin blouses no longer shocked her. In fact, she had bought similar clothing for herself, Cornellya and Elena

while in Senne now that she knew that such styles were not inappropriate in the court of Firdan. If anything the local skirts were even shorter than the ones from Wanlaria and the silk blouses had deeper-cut necks than the more sedate fashions from further south. However, she knew that even the Wanlarian clothing would be scandalous in Narmouth, Idly, she wondered what her younger sister, Marlie, had made of the Firdani clothing she had shipped home before leaving Dana the first time.

That made her realize she had not written to Marlie since before they had arrived in Senne and she made a mental note to correct that as soon as possible, since even though she was heading in the right direction, the closest she was liable to come to Narmouth on her way back to Misha would be to sight some of the fishing boats in the Gulf of Firdan.

The royal palace was a collection of buildings faced in white marble. Gaenor's friend, Lady Relle of Senda, had thought the grounds felt cold in spite of the tropical climate of the region, but between them she and Gaenor had decided the pure white stone had been chosen because the bright sunlight would make the brilliance of the palace all the more impressively glorious. No matter what the reason had been, however, Gaenor was thankful that the sky was overcast that day as they rode up the hill in a hired open-sided coach.

Artur stepped out of the coach to speak to the royal guards who stood at the gates to the palace compound and was quickly directed to the pursuivant on duty just inside the gatehouse.

"Yes, may I help you, sir?" the herald asked politely.

"Perhaps," Artur nodded. "We were in town and thought it might be polite to pay our respects to Their Majesties." Immediately having said it, Artur realized how silly and improbable such a request might sound.

"Yes, sir," the herald replied calmly, although there was a look in his eye that said, "Yeah right, buddy, you and my Aunt Fanny!" Then the herald continued, "And who is calling?"

"Sir Artur the Southlander, Lady Gaenor of Narmouth and a few others," Artur replied, steeling himself to accept the on-coming polite rejection.

"I thought you looked familiar, Sir Artur," the herald replied in an instant about-face of attitude, "but I just could not place your face. Of course, Their Majesties are always at your service and I am certain they will be thrilled to see you again."

Artur blinked twice to make sure he wasn't still sleeping then decided that if this was a dream it certainly wasn't his. "Oh, good," he said flatly, "so we should... just go in?"

"Of course," the herald assured him, "Sergeant!" he called to one of the guards, "Please open the gates for Sir Artur and Lady Gaenor."

"You know," Artur told the herald confidentially, "I really didn't expect you to just let us in like this."

"Heh," the pursuivant chuckled, "I got that impression. Just have your driver continue up to the main building, There will be someone on duty just inside who will see to it you are guided to wherever Their Majesties are."

Artur thanked the man and got back inside the coach. "That was even faster than I expected," Gaenor admitted as they rode into the palace compound.

“Evidently Queen Lauria was correct,” Artur remarked.

They all exited the coach and climbed the three steps to the wide double door of the largest building in the palace compound. Just inside, Artur decided, had a different meaning in Firdan than anywhere else he had traveled. They found themselves in the large reception room with nobody else in sight. As they wandered around the room, Artur and Gaenor noted that very little had changed since their last visit.

“Elena,” Gaenor called, pointing at the far wall, “see that mural? That’s the one I was telling you about back in Tindi. See the way the artist made the water look as though it is in motion?”

“Yes,” Elena replied, keeping her eyes glued to the painting, “now I see what you meant. It didn’t make sense until I could see it for myself, though. Thank you for bringing me here.”

A small, rotund man, attracted by the conversation, came down a long hall to the reception room. Unlike the pursuivant on duty at the gate, he recognized Artur and Gaenor instantly and asked them to follow him back down the hall.

He only led them halfway when he stuck his head in a small office and requested, “Hirnar, will you conduct these people to Their Majesties? I believe they are working in their usual fair weather location.”

“Yes, Sir Terrun,” Hirnar replied, “Immediately! This way, my lords and ladies.” As he led them through a maze of hallways, he asked their names so he would be able to announce them properly and then continued on until they reached an outside door which led to an open garden area. From there they followed a covered pathway that wound its way downslope to a hidden pavilion with marble columns and a slate roof. The pavilion was surrounded by the gardens on three sides with a view of the city below on the fourth. In the center of the stone pavilion Marnoric III and his queen, Ymanya were busily studying documents that had been spread out on a wide table and weighted down against the light breezes by crystal paperweights

“Your Majesties,” Hirnar began, “I have the honor to announce...” That was as far as he got.

“Lady Gaenor and Sir Artur!” Ymanya called, rising from her seat and stepping quickly around the table to greet them. “What a surprise!”

“And a delightful one at that,” Marnoric agreed. “please come in and sit with us. Master Hirnar, would you be so kind as to arrange for refreshments for our guests.” Hirnar bowed his acknowledgement and left hastily to comply.

“I was so relieved to get the letter you sent me from that town in Cilbe.Wilton was it?” Ymanya asked as Hirnar hurried out of sight.

“Wahton,” Gaenor corrected her.

“Oh yes, I must admit I was so afraid something horrible had happened to both of you until it arrived. And who are your companions?” Ymanya asked Gaenor.

Gaenor introduced the others who bowed and curtsied as their names were given. “Ridec Clan?” Marnoric asked, sounding confused when Leracian was introduced. Isn’t that the same group of assassins that tried to kill Sir Artur last year?”

“A year is a very long time, Your Majesty,” Leracian replied with an extra bow. “Now I serve as honor guard to my chiefs, Arturus and Gaenor.”

“Arturus?” Marnoric echoed once more. “I hadn’t noticed the similarity of names before, but there has been word of the recent political changes within the Ciben Empire.”

“And no doubt, Your Majesties will eventually hear that I am that same Arturus who so recently served as Dictator of Cilbe,” Artur informed them. “I hope you will understand that Gae and I are not particularly interested in having that spread about.”

“I can’t say I do understand,” Marnoric admitted, “but the least I can do is respect the wishes of the man who bound me to my beloved Firdan. But tell me, please, how did you happen to become dictator?”

Artur and Gaenor explained everything that had happened since they had been forced to run for their lives from Dana a year and a half earlier. It took them a long time to tell the entire story and by the time they were finished, not only had they finished the snack that arrived soon after they started, but were more than ready for lunch.

“Does our royal cousin, Pawlen of Mishanda, know all this?” Marnoric asked Artur.

“I would imagine so,” Artur nodded. “His Lymphad Herald was in Cilbe during the Dictatorship and he knows me fairly well. I would be very surprised if Sir Winniam had not informed his king on returning to Misha.”

“And do you truly intend to settle back into a quiet life when all of this is over?” Ymany asked.

“Why not?” Artur asked in return. “Rank in Cilbe may be similar to the way it is in the east, but there are differences. The title of Dictator, for example, is a temporary one, it carries no precedence nor is it held for life. As I have finished my term as dictator, I am just another retired senator, noble in rank, perhaps, but not of much importance.”

“Save that your son is now emperor,” Marnoric pointed out.

“I have no intention of inheriting a position from any of my children,” Artur replied.

“And you, Lady Gaenor?” Ymany asked. “You could have been empress. Do you have any regrets?”

“None whatsoever,” Gaenor replied. “We have more important things to do ahead of us and I can’t say I’m even vaguely interested in ruling over an empire. It would get in the way of my studies, I’m sure.”

“I dare say it would,” Ymany laughed. “Certainly I have had scant time for reading and writing, although I did find your letters worth taking the time for, but let’s skip over the frivolities and why don’t you show me your ring?” Gaenor did so. Her signet ring was a gift from the king of Mishanda on her elevation to the rank of knighthood and the ruby in it had been engraved with her arms, which were the Firdani crown encircling an oak tree. “Yes,” Ymany cooed, “even nicer than the way I envisioned it when Pawlen discussed it with me.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon with the king and queen and Ymany insisted they stay in the palace for the remaining time they were in Firdan. She was also interested in talking to Cornellya and learning about the Vieri. She was fascinated by Elena, telling the Cilben girl how lucky she was to be studying

with Gaenor, but what interested her most was whatever Gaenor could tell her about Pawlen's fiancée.

"Do you know this Ibbet, Gae?" Ymany asked. It had been a surprise even to Gaenor that the queen would address her by nickname, but as Ymany had explained it, the only closer relationship than between monarch and bonder was between siblings or between parent and child.

"I met her not too long before I first came to Firdan," Gaenor admitted, "but we became quite close in the short time we spent together. She and Pawlen practically grew up together. Pawlen's father used to visit Ander, her family's barony, frequently, I understand, before he became too ill to travel. His long illness, however, left Pawlen a lot of problems, so it was some years before they could renew their acquaintance."

"They're both very lucky," Ymany remarked, then she went on to inquire about Ibbet's likes and dislikes and soon Gaenor understood that Ymany was trying to get an idea of what to send as a wedding present.

"Aren't they married yet?" Gaenor asked. "I thought they were planning it for last spring."

"Nothing beyond their engagement has been announced yet," Ymany replied.

"That's strange," Gaenor commented. "I hope that's not a bad sign."

"I doubt it," Ymany told her

The conversation made Gaenor realize that in spite of the many seeds she had collected and the occasional other small gifts she had sent to friends and relatives, including Ibbet, from all over the world, she had not even considered what she could give her friend as a wedding present. For that matter, what did one give to her future queen, and whatever it was, could she afford it? Artur, with the restoration of his family's estate, had been able to take more than enough money with him for traveling expenses, but she knew those funds were starting to run low. They would be able to get more from the Cilben embassy in Misha, but they could not do the same in Dana since Firdan had not renewed diplomatic ties with Cilbe since the incident at the coronation.

Gaenor decided she would go shopping in Dana the next day and maybe something appropriate and within her means would present itself.

Two

As had become their custom, Gaenor, Cornellya and Elena spent much of their shopping trip in bookstores. Gaenor found several new textbooks for Elena, not in physical sciences, which the girl still needed training in, but in liberal arts in which she had practically no training. Gaenor had bought some poetry and fiction before, but this was the first time she was able to purchase some of what she had been taught was classic literature.

Cornellya found a book of sociological essays. "I'm getting tired of those romance novels anyway," she admitted. When it turned out there were several available, Gaenor bought one for her collection and Elena's education as well. When it came time to pay for their choices, Gaenor was surprised to find Leracian ahead of them at the sales counter.

“You knew I was escorting you today, my chief,” he told her.

“Can’t say that I did,” Gaenor replied, then asked, “What did you find?”

“A book comparing the folk music of the various Thimdra States,” Leracian replied. “I know some of these songs and also some other versions the author does not mention. I may write to him.”

“I knew that habit of yours was contagious,” Cornellya teased Gaenor.

“It is,” Leracian agreed, “but the writing habit was mine already. All competent Temi are literate; it is how we communicate at a distance. The habit I have picked up from Chief Gaenor, is studying.”

“I hadn’t noticed that,” Cornellya admitted as she paid for her book.

“There really has not been much to do some nights so I’ve been borrowing Miss Elena’s textbooks. I hope you don’t mind,” he added to Elena. Elena had never been entirely comfortable with the reserved Tem so she just shook her head mutely. “This should occupy me for a few days anyway.”

“I still haven’t found anything for Ibbet and Pawlen,” Gaenor fretted as they left the book shop. “I do wish Relle was here. She would know what the right gift would be.”

“Relle can afford some rather expensive gifts,” Cornellya observed.

“For someone from a culture that doesn’t use money,” Gaenor observed in turn, “You’ve gotten very comfortable with the concept.”

“It’s not all that hard to understand,” Cornellya shrugged. “Among the Vieri we trade skills, here you just trade useless pieces of metal for whatever you want.”

“That’s a bit simplistic and gold and silver have quite a few uses beyond their monetary values,” Gaenor replied, “some of which you’ve made use of in spells.”

“I made use of your coins,” Cornellya pointed out. “They may well have been some of the small bronze ones or even a flat pebble for that matter. No wait, you’re correct I made a mirror once with a silver coin. The silver was the active ingredient. Point taken. But what I meant is that trading is trading regardless of the medium of exchange. The real trick is in knowing how much what you have is worth to the other person.”

“All right,” Gaenor conceded, “but that doesn’t explain how you know how much Relle can afford.”

“Simple,” Cornellya laughed. “I just watched you. It’s always obvious from the way you react when Relle does or says something that you consider a waste of money.”

“Hmm, I suppose I do. That’s doesn’t mean Relle can’t help me shop within my means. She did last time we were in Dana. No come to think about it, we were spending Pawlen’s money, but I didn’t buy more than I might normally have although she did try to get me to buy jewelry.”

“Now that sounds like Relle,” Cornellya laughed. Two young men approached them from the other direction just then. They were just going from one place to another, but they took an extra look at Cornellya and she abruptly drew back and started walking slightly behind Leracian.

Gaenor, preoccupied with finding something for Ibbet and Pawlen, did not notice, but Elena did. “They were definitely not looking at your ears,” she whispered to Cornellya.

“Shh!” Cornellya whispered back, trying to fluff her hair up so that her ears wouldn’t poke through, but her long fine hair settled back down, betraying her.

“I could try braiding that if you like,” Elena offered helpfully. “That might cover your ears.”

“I don’t like braids,” Cornellya told her. It was the continuation of an old discussion the three women had since Elena had joined them. Elena had been too shy to argue the point at first, but all Cornellya’s complaints on the subject had finally exhausted her patience.

“Cornellya, just what is your problem?” she demanded, causing Gaenor and Leracian to stop and turn to look at them. “You don’t want your ears to show but you won’t wear a hat and you won’t let me braid your hair to cover them, but using magic to make yourself look human is fine? Well, guess what? The magic doesn’t work anymore. So either deal with people looking at you or pick another alternative.”

It was rare for Elena to speak in anger and both Cornellya and Gaenor were taken by surprise. Leracian merely nodded his head approvingly toward the Cilben girl. Cornellya glared at her, but Elena was not finished.

“I know about dealing with situations you can’t change. I know what it is like to feel helpless. I only wish the people of Olaka had just stared at me,” Elena explained, gradually becoming calm.

Cornellya’s glare wilted when she realized Elena was holding back tears. “Maybe I have been a bit childish,” Cornellya admitted. “You can try braiding my hair later if you want. If I decide I don’t like it, I promise not to whine about it.”

The women continued on, trying to pretend nothing had happened, but Leracian quietly slipped Elena a handkerchief to dry her eyes with.

They found a few other items along the way, but nothing Gaenor felt would be right to give to her king and queen and eventually they made their way back to the palace. Once back, Elena wanted to try braiding Cornellya’s hair, but Gaenor decided that it was time for Elena’s latest lesson. It was a pleasant late afternoon, so all three made their way to a small sitting area in one of the gardens.

Gaenor set Elena to reading the first story in one of the books she had just purchased and Cornellya started in on her new book. Gaenor was back at work on her idea for a magically propelled carriage when an elderly man in long black silken robes approached.

“I greet you, Lady Gaenor,” he told her.

“Sir Gerax,” Gaenor replied, looking up from her work. “I had hoped to see you while we were here. Please have a seat.”

“Thank you,” Sir Gerax responded as he joined her. “Congratulations on your advancement.”

Gaenor thanked him graciously and asked, “How have you been?”

“As well as an old man can be,” he replied. “Some days I wake up a bit less comfortably than others, but I keep reminding myself that at least I’m not working for the king and queen of frigid Aston.”

Gaenor smiled. "May I introduce my student, Elena Carolena from Olaka in the Cilben Empire and Artur's godchild, Cornellya Vasylya? Lena, Cornellya, this is Sir Gerax of Ond, the Court Wizard of Firdan."

"Pleased to meet you," he told Elena in Cilben and to Cornellya he spoke in Old Tongue, "Peace be yours." Both replied politely before he turned back to Gaenor, "What are you working on?"

"When I was in the kingdoms to the south and west of the Southlands I encountered self-propelled vehicles of various sorts," she replied. "I'm trying to design something of the sort using magic."

"An ambitious project," Sir Gerax noted. "May I see what you have so far?" Gaenor showed him the spell for the governor spell, then turned a few pages to show him her work on a power supply for the vehicle."

"Very impressive," he told her approvingly. "You look surprised that I could read your notation."

"As I recall, you did not particularly approve of it last time I was here," Gaenor remembered.

"Nor of female adepts in general for that matter," Sir Gerax admitted easily. "I hope you will accept the apologies of an old man who was perhaps far too set in his ways."

"I may have been a bit less diplomatic than I should have been," Gaenor told him.

"No, you behaved just as you should have," Sir Gerax corrected her. "Anyway, after you and Sir Artur cast the binding spell, I must admit that I was quite impressed by how quickly you were able to learn such a complex piece of magic, so after you left I took a look at your thesis and had to admit that it was, indeed, an excellent method of notating and analyzing magic. I have not used it to craft new spells yet, but it has opened my eyes to the workings of the spells I do know. My congratulations on your degree too, by the way."

"Thank you," Gaenor replied, "now that was a surprise. I knew the department at the University had a diploma ready for me, but I had expected a bachelor's degree, not a master's."

"They had the right of it," Sir Gerax assured her, "This was no mere undergraduate's project. If the truth be told, I'm surprised they did not just present you with your doctorate."

"My notational system is hardly a finished project," Gaenor told him modestly, "I'm constantly adding to it and I hope the concordance I'm working up with the periodic chart of chemical elements will help us identify and analyze new magic ingredients and spell tools without the danger of testing them."

"That would be a boon to us all," Sir Gerax replied. "Doctor Haxmire tells me you have some new ideas concerning the Laws of Sympathy and Contagion as well."

"Yes, I wrote a few papers on the subjects while we traveled and sent them to Doctors Haxmire and Lastor for review," Gaenor nodded. "I may publish them in a new periodical Artur and I have been discussing."

"A periodical?" Sir Gerax asked. "Do you mean like the scientific publications of the deep south?"

"Yes, that's where I got the idea. I had been writing letters about questions I had about the Law of

Conservation of Matter and Energy to Ellie Nyima in Taopolis and when I finally met her I discovered she had already been attributing the new wording of it to me. We started collaborating on some papers while I was there. I understand one has already been published.”

“Most impressive,” Sir Gerax murmured. “So you have made contributions to more fields than magic. Somehow, I’m not surprised. I just wish I was your age so I’d have a chance to see everything you’ll accomplish in your life.”

Gaenor was embarrassed by the praise, so she tried changing the subject, “Sir Gerax, we were in Ond two months ago or so.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he replied with a smile, “but it doesn’t seem to have done you any lasting harm.”

“We had more trouble in Sorvohn,” Gaenor recalled. “In Ond, the Cilben ambassador was an old friend of Artur, so we spent nearly all our time there in the refuge of the embassy.”

“Wise of you,” Sir Gerax agreed, “although far wiser would have been to not enter the holylands at all.

“It wasn’t entirely by choice,” Gaenor admitted. One of our companions was in Vohn, or at least we thought he was.” She went on to tell him about the prison along the border of the Parch and how its destruction was brought about.

“It will be rebuilt,” Sir Gerax told her. “If not in that location, then somewhere else, although the priests are not very imaginative. It will probably be in the same place. Although if you ever happen to go back to destroy it again, call me. I wouldn’t mind giving the walls a kick or two for myself even if I have never been to Sorvohn.”

“Now that I’ve seen Ond and some of the other Southlands for myself,” Gaenor continued, “I can’t help wondering how you ever managed to get out and more, what made you decide to learn magic.”

“Ah. Well, I was born and grew up in a small town called Trolixa on the River Ond,” Sir Gerax began. “Are you aware that it is the priests of Ond who decide what the occupations of the other people will be?”

“So I’ve been told. It seems to me it goes a long way toward explaining why the Southlands are both magically and technologically backward,” Gaenor opined.

“It does,” Sir Gerax agreed, “since one’s occupation is based on how well you can bribe the priests. To a lesser extent that is the way it is done in the other holylands, but in the others one can normally count on staying in the same occupation as one’s parents.

“In Ond you cannot even count on staying in the same profession all your life or even that your family will be permitted to stay together. When I was born, my father was a blacksmith and a better one than most in Ond. The things he fixed tended to stay that way. From what the elders of the town told me, that was not always the case. One day, however, a priest brought his horse in for new shoes. He wasn’t the local priest, but one of the inquisitors who travel from town to town, making sure the priests, themselves are kept in line. They also perform a certain sort of morality play.”

“I’ve seen it,” Gaenor told him “although that particular performance did not go well for the priests.”

“You’ll have to tell me about that later,” Sir Gerax replied. “My father reshod the horse and the priest

rode off. That should have been the end of it, but the horse stepped in a pothole near the edge of town and the priest was thrown. For whatever reason he blamed my father and he was given a heavy fine - all we had, in fact - and reassigned to picking up garbage from the town's streets. Further, my mother who had been able to supplement the family income as a seamstress was ordered to work in the temple as were my two younger sisters. We never saw them again.

"My father died two years later of whatever disease was going around that year. He probably could have been saved, but we had no money for medicines or for paying the priest-healer for that matter. Then two months later, my brother was chosen as the target of the next morality play. I left town before his body had cooled.

"There was nowhere I could go and be safe in Ond and evidently the priests were ready for me, or perhaps they always had patrols along the river. I was forced to hide hip-deep in the muddy water for hours before I could try swimming across the river. I could barely feel my feet by the time I started, and by the time I reached the other side I was not myself, or so I was told. I do not remember the next few days. I was found the next morning stumbling down a road by a traveling merchant. He gave me food, water and a warm place to sleep in the back of his cart. By the time he reached the village of Rin Lind, however, I was delirious with a fever and he left me in the care of a local family.

It wasn't until I woke up several days later that I realized that the Tinds didn't speak the same language I had grown up with, but the Wing family taught me their language and allowed me to live with them for the first few months until I was able to repay them for their kindness. I stayed in Rin Lind for another two years, working odd jobs and saving my money for the lessons I needed for what the Tinds considered a proper education.

"The schools in Tindi are open to all, but they are not free. Once he was certain I would continue working to pay for my tuition the schoolmaster of Rin Lind allowed me to learn on credit. It took me twice as long to get through the school system as most children in Tindi as I did not have parents to pay my way, but I graduated at last and managed to earn a full scholarship to the best secondary school in Chiring.

I spent four years in Chiring spending every waking moment either working or studying. Working was not necessary for scholarship students, but the uncertainty of life in Ond had made a permanent mark on me and I continued to save as much as I could. I was in Chiring for two years before I learned to trust the banks there. There are banks in Ond, of course, but it's never wise to keep all of one's money in one since the priests had a nasty habit of collecting our tithes without bothering to ask the people being tithed. My family's account in Trolixa was emptied by the Church at least once each year."

"Where did you keep your money?" Elena asked.

"My mattress, under a floor board, inside a hollowed-out book, in a decorative jar, inside a compartment in a wall, and much more. You see, life in Ond taught me that the priests would ferret out your money no matter where you put it. I suspect they were using magic to detect it; I can think of at least two spells that would work. Anyway a wise Ondan would keep as many caches of money as he could, since the priests rarely kept looking after they found the first.

"I was offered a scholarship at the University in Taopolis," Sir Gerax went on, "but my thirst for revenge on the priests of Ond had never been satisfied and I wanted to learn the one thing they would never allow any but their own to learn. I decided I wanted to be adept.

"At the time I had heroic notions of returning home to free my people, but later I came to understand

that no one adept could do that. In fact I realized that even an army of adepts would not be able to accomplish it unless the people were willing to rise up against the Church and that was unlikely.

“But with dreams of becoming a mighty sorcerer, I applied to and was accepted at the University at Es. I remained in Es for ten years, earning both my bachelor’s and master’s degrees. I started working toward a doctorate, but I was running out of money again, so I took a job with a bank in Es. My primary job that first year was to detect counterfeit coinage and documents. It wasn’t much of a job, but it paid well and it was by making a living by magic I was truly having my revenge on the priests of Ond.

“I did eventually earn my doctorate while working in jobs of increasing prestige until fifteen years ago when I was chosen as the wizard to the court of King Marnoric II. I’ve called Firdan home ever since,” Sir Gerax concluded.

“Thank you for telling us your story,” Elena broke the silence that had fallen. She wanted to tell him how inspiring it was, but could not find the words. Gaenor did, however.

“Yes, Sir Gerax,” she agreed. “I’m sorry I gave you so much trouble last time I was here.”

“You? No, Lady Gaenor, you gave me no trouble,” he responded. “Any problems I had were vestiges of my own flawed upbringing. Instead of doubting your abilities and scoffing at your achievements, I should have recalled just how I was treated in Ond and how hard I had to work to get to this place. Had I done so, I would have realized I was trying to do to you what the priests had done to me. No one deserves that.”

“Nor did you deserve to feel upstaged by a young woman who had not even been initiated,” Gaenor told him. “I’m sure I could have demonstrated my knowledge in ways that would not have put you on the defensive.”

“It’s kind of you to say so,” Sir Gerax replied. “So how long will you be in Dana?”

“Our ship leaves tomorrow afternoon,” Gaenor replied.

“A shame,” Sir Gerax told her. “I had hoped you would be here at least a week. I have a young student that I hoped might meet you, but he is visiting family and won’t be back for another two days.”

“I didn’t realize you were taking students,” Gaenor remarked.

“I haven’t in years, but it’s fair to say your thesis inspired me,” Sir Gerax smiled.

“I’ll be sure to send you a copy of the first Journal of Magical Studies,” Gaenor promised him.

“Is that going to be its name?” Gerax asked.

“Maybe, I just made it up. I may come up with something better,” she replied.

They were silent for a while until Cornellya asked, “When did you learn the Old Tongue?”

“I studied it in Es,” he told her. “There were several books on it in the library and there was a fashion for using it in spell construction when I was a student. I was never sure about the pronunciation guide, however. Was I at least understandable?”

“You could try pronouncing the gutturals further back in your throat,” she said critically, “they’re a bit too soft, but no vari would have trouble understanding you. You learned to pronounce Old Tongue from a book?”

“Of course. There are only a few humans who have met Vieri,” Gerax reminded her. “It just happens that one about a century ago was a linguist. His linguistic notation is still used and is as exacting as Gaenor’s spell notation. Oh! I hadn’t realized how long we’d been sitting here. Dinner will be served in less than an hour and I promised Earl Lirrint I would restore the portrait of his grandmother this afternoon.”

“That sounds interesting,” Gaenor commented. “I’ve never done that sort of work. Would we be in the way?”

“Not at all,” Gerax replied. “I’ll be mostly cleaning the surface, but there are some cracks in the paint and the spell that rejuvenates it may be of interest.”

“Let’s go then.”

Mishanda

One

“Admit it,” Gaenor told Artur as they lost sight of Dana, “It was a very nice visit.”

“It was,” Artur agreed, “and I appreciate the fact that they really did respect my wishes about staying silent about what happened in Cilbe, but I really could have done without the parade to the harbor today.”

“They really wanted to declare a holiday in our honor,” Gaenor told him. “Instead they just seated us in places of honor at all the meals while we were in the palace. And it wasn’t all that much of a parade, really, just an honor guard and three carriages.”

“We really didn’t need all the fanfare,” Artur replied. “It was a bit of too much.”

“It was, yes,” she agreed, “but it was their way of showing us the honor they feel we deserve, even if we would have rather slipped out of town as quietly as we arrived.”

“Ah,” Artur breathed. “I was afraid you had developed a taste for that sort of celebrity.”

“Not hardly,” she assured him. “I’d never get anything accomplished if I had to tolerate that sort of thing. Oh it’s very nice every now and then, but after the first hour or two I’d be bored silly.”

“Gaenor!” Elena called. She was working with two notebooks and a chemistry book at her usual place in the bow of the ship. “I’ve found one!”

“One what?” Gaenor asked as she and Artur neared the bow.

“An elemental relationship like we’ve been trying to record in the Concordance,” Elena replied proudly. “It’s copper. It’s a conveyer of power in its pure form like many other metals, but each of the copper-based minerals we put in the list is an instrument of change.”

“Different kinds of change,” Gaenor noted, looking at Elena’s notes.

“The change is modified by the other elements in each mineral. I didn’t realize that azurite and chrysacola were both copper ores until we got this book.”

“Hmm,” Gaenor considered Elena’s discovery, “we already know of malachite’s properties of change from my misadventure in Fasri. I believe azurite is sometimes used in healing, that too can be a modifying property, although I have not used it much. We’ll have to see how much we can quantify and qualify it. Chrysacola is similar to azurite in that, although not as strong. I’ve been told it is better for problems that are not as severe as those using azurite or for a patient who is very weak. There should be examples in which each of them can be substituted, I would think, although it is obvious that each will have specialties in which they are most appropriate.

“Very well done, Lena !” Gaenor complimented her. “Now let’s take these three minerals and pure copper as well and see how spells differ when we substitute one for another.” She grabbed a small notepad from her purse and started scribbling out spell notations as Elena watched excitedly. They were still at it several hours later when it became too dark to see.

They were at it again the next day, this time with Cornellya and to a lesser extent the other adepts, each of whom had spells and experiences to share with the project. It was Leracian who surprised her the next afternoon when, looking up from his study of the book on folk music, glanced over Gaenor’s shoulder and corrected a minor error in her notation. “How do you know that?” she asked.

“I told you that I’ve been reading Miss Elena’s textbooks,” he replied evenly. “Your thesis was one of them.”

“Better watch out,” Cornellya teased the serious young man. “Learn too much and we’ll just have to make you adept!”

“I’d rather not,” the Tem shook his head. “The Temi do not practice magic and I prefer music in any case. Still, it is interesting to know how you do what you do.”

The weather since Senne had been perfect but that changed just after dusk. For the next three days, the *Honace R. Mohgan* rolled and swayed violently on the swells of a hurricane as it made its slow way up the coast of Mishanda .

Cornellya was not the only one on board reaching for the candied ginger, but even with that limeade and a drink the ship’s cook offered, she was too sick to get out of her bunk without Gaenor’s and Elena’s assistance. Unable to keep food down, she stopped eating after the first day except to try her various seasickness remedies.

There was a crashing sound in the middle of the second day of the storm and the ship rolled over on her side, only to be pushed back up right on the next wave. After they had picked themselves up and put Cornellya back into her bunk, Artur went to investigate and reported an hour later, “We lost the main and fore masts when a wave went straight over us. The captain thinks we’re to be thanked, though.”

“Why?” Gaenor asked, as the ship rocked violently yet again.

“A wave like that could have destroyed us altogether,” he explained. “Instead we just got roughed up a bit. He thinks we’re lucky.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Gaenor retorted. “He could as well assume that we’re unlucky because we were on board when the storm blew up.”

“Be thankful that he doesn’t,” Artur chuckled, “or else we’d be swimming about now. However, if I had to guess, I think he understands that storms happen, but having one’s ship completely under water and yet manage to right itself is unusual to say the least.”

“We were under water?” Gaenor asked.

“Yes, but we were too busy bouncing off the bulkheads to notice at the time,” he replied. “You know, we may want to strap Cornellya to her bunk. It will save on broken bones.”

“I’ve been thinking of strapping myself into the bunk,” Gaenor told him, swaying with another swell. “I haven’t seen Elena in a while. I’d better go see if she’s all right.”

“Isn’t she supposed to be sharing this cabin with Cornellya?” Artur asked.

“She is, but she went to the head right after we finished picking up after that wave,” Gaenor replied and left Artur to sit with his goddaughter. First Gaenor checked the cabin she was sharing with Artur. She didn’t really think Elena had taken refuge in there, but it was a possibility. When that cabin was empty she checked the one next door.

Faber, Vito and Jimeleo were playing cards there. The ship rocked violently again as Gaenor opened the door, but all three men stayed firmly in their seats and the seats stayed attached to the floor even though Gaenor’s feet left the floor as she hung on to the door. “Adhesive spell?” she asked after picking herself back up. “Wish I’d thought of that. Have you seen Elena?”

“Try my cabin,” Faber suggested. I think she’s there with your bodyguard.”

“He’s not a bodyguard,” Gaenor started to explain, but the ship rocked again so she just stopped there and added, “Thanks.”

She found Elena trying to feed hot soup to a bed-ridden Leracian. “Come on,” Elena coaxed the Tem, “you need to eat to keep up your strength.”

“I need this ship to stop moving,” Leracian replied in an uncharacteristically shaky voice.

“I can’t do that,” Elena told him practically, “but I can give you this to eat.”

“I’ll never keep it down,” Leracian predicted miserably.

“You don’t know that for certain,” she told him sternly. “and even if you’re right, I have a bucket right here. Try a spoonful at a time. The storm won’t last forever you know.”

“Promise?” he joked weakly, but he did take a spoonful of soup. It was not enough for Elena, however, and she immediately pressed another spoonful on him.

"There you are," Gaenor noted as she stepped into the cabin. "I didn't realize you had troubles at sea too," she told Leracian.

"Nobody's perfect," he replied weakly.

"Have you tried some of Cornellya's ginger?" she asked.

"I don't like the taste," he told her.

"I didn't ask that," she retorted, "and do you prefer the taste of your own bile?"

"Can't say that I do," he smiled thinly.

"I'll get you the ginger," Gaenor told him.

"Yes, my chief."

"Then we'll see about freshening the air in here," she added. "You should have said something. The stale air just makes it worse and we do have magical means of keeping the ocean from pouring through the porthole."

The storm did not abate until late the next afternoon. The sea was still rough, and the ship moved strangely in the swells. When Gaenor went up on deck for the first time in days, she understood why. When Artur had said they had lost two masts, he imagined they had been swept away by the savage wave, but while several stays and shrouds had been broken, both masts were still in evidence, but the top two of three sections that made up the foremast had broken off and were hanging off the port side from the remaining shrouds and stays. The main mast was intact, although the top three yards had been shattered and their sails hung in shreds from their remains. However with so much of the foremast hanging loose, the hurricane force winds had unstepped it, so that it now tilted to starboard and forward at an alarming angle. The bowsprit was now a stub, just half its former length.

It took the crew of the *Mohgan* two days to finish jury-rigging the ship, but when they did the main mast was once again upright and the loose pieces of the foremast lay in two pieces on the deck. The mizzen mast was still fully rigged, but only the main sail was unfurled on the mainmast and the captain dared not rig any sail save a single jib from the foremast. Like the *Waverider* before her, the *Mohgan* was a crippled ship, but unlike *Waverider*, she still had most of her sails and while she could no longer fly, at least she did not limp into port.

But what port would it be? After three days at the mercy of a hurricane, there was no telling where they were, and as long as the sky remained overcast, they had no way to determine their latitude or longitude.

"We still know which way is north, however," the captain told Artur and Gaenor that evening. "More to the point, we know which way is west. We will sail due west until we come within sight of land, then we will seek out a harbor. We still have most of our masts and while we need to replace some spars and the entire bowsprit, any fair-sized harbor should have the repair facilities we'll need."

"How long will such repairs take?" Artur asked, concerned.

"At least a week I would think," the captain replied, "but barring something unforeseen, I'd say we would still be able to dock in Misha within a few days of how long it would take to go overland from wherever we land."

“Do you have even a guess about where we are?” Gaenor asked.

“Not a clue, my lady,” he replied. “We were near the coast of Kont when the storm broke but for all I know our current course is as likely to bring us to land in Pandenda as it is to leave us in the middle of Asquemaquet Bay. We may even have been pushed all the way back to Dana, but I doubt that.”

Later that evening Artur opined thoughtfully, “Landing in Goster or Pandenda may not be all that bad.”

“What makes you say that?” Gaenor asked.

“We still need to send someone to Mita to pick up those copies of the spell,” Artur pointed out. “Goster and Pandenda aren’t all that far from Mita - a week or so on horseback. Maybe you and I can let the others continue sailing to Misha while we get there via Mita.”

“Leracian won’t let us travel alone,” Gaenor pointed out.

“How’s he feeling?” Artur asked.

“Much better now that the ship isn’t rolling more than normal. He might have been worse, though, if Elena hadn’t bullied him into eating even during the worst of the storm. Cornellya’s almost back to normal already, by the way, and she is eating enough to make up for what she missed during the storm.”

“That’s normal for a vari, I think,” Artur told her. “She did the same thing on Olaka once she got over that cold, didn’t she?”

“She did, although, that chocolate had an odd effect on her.”

“So you mentioned once before,” Artur replied, “but you never actually told me what it was.”

“It turns out that chocolate is a powerful aphrodisiac for Vieri,” Gaenor informed him. “I thought I told you that.”

“No, you refused to say on Olaka,” Artur reminded her.

“Well, she was very embarrassed by the incident. We discovered it quite by accident during the celebration when Elena brought us some. I think it took every ounce of concentration Cornellya had just to get back to the inn without causing a scene, although the way the night went, I doubt anyone would have thought her behavior was odd.”

“Probably not,” Artur nodded, “but it’s just as well you got her safely back to bed.”

It was foggy the next morning and visibility was down to less than a quarter of a mile and the breeze had slacked off to just an occasional tickle of breath in the sails. However, in the distance, they could all hear the baleful, mourning sound of a fog horn. The captain carefully maintained the *Mohgan*’s westward bearing and when the fog lifted two hours later, they were in sight of land.

“Take a look at this,” Artur told Gaenor. Gaenor, Elena and Cornellya were diligently working in the bow as usual and had failed to notice that the fog was lifting, but at Artur’s words, Gaenor stood up and look forward.

“Oh my!” she gasped.

“What’s wrong?” Cornellya asked, worried.

“It’s Narmouth,” Gaenor replied. “I’m home.”

Two

“It’s a lovely city,” Elena gushed as they started up hill from the dock.

Faber, Jimeleo and Vito had left their belongings onboard the *Mohgan*. They planned to stay with the ship until it reached Misha, which for now meant the others had help carrying their extra bundles.

“City might be too strong a word,” Gaenor laughed. “You’ve seen real cities after all. Narmouth is just a small town in comparison.”

“No,” Elena disagreed. “Olaka was a small town. Narmouth may be a small city, but I think it’s definitely a city. You have a mayor, don’t you?”

“Sir Briscard,” Gaenor replied, “Yes. Okay, Lena you make the point well. Only cities have mayors. It’s just that having seen cities like Misha and Cilbe, to say nothing of Tandra and Boraedne, sleepy old Narmouth seems just a bit small now.” A woman with curly, light brown hair peeking out from under a wide-brimmed hat came around the corner just then, pushing a wide perambulator. Gaenor glanced briefly at her, but was too deeply involved in the conversation to pay much attention except to step carefully around the baby carriage.

“Gae?” the woman asked tentatively, then shouted joyfully, “Gaenor!” She let go of the pram and threw herself at Gaenor with an unbreakable hug.

“Marlie? It’s really you?” Gaenor gasped, having had the wind knocked out of her, but matching her younger sister’s hug strength for strength.

“Of course it’s me, silly!” Marlie laughed. “I’m not the one who’s been traveling all over the world. Let me look at you. Gods, Gae you’ve let your hair get so long I almost didn’t recognize you.”

“Marlie, I completely didn’t recognize you dressed like that,” Gaenor countered. “You look like a respectable matron.”

“I am a respectable matron, Gae,” Marlie laughed. “Or should I say my Lady Gaenor of Narmouth, Master of the Arts and Sciences?”

“You do and I’ll never forgive you,” Gaenor laughed. “But I’m glad to know that package arrived safely.”

“Oh it arrived and Sir Briscard immediately had both your diploma and your grant of arms framed and put on display in City Hall,” Marlie informed her.

“He didn’t!” Gaenor responded automatically. “Did he at least put Artur’s knighthood there as well?”

“Only until yours arrived,” Marlie responded. “He made a big speech about how important it was in the annals of Mishandan history and how we should all be proud you were one of our own. Think of it, Gae! The first woman knighted in history!”

“For inventing a hangover cure,” Gaenor laughed.

“Really?” Marlie asked, snickering.

“Not really,” Cornellya interrupted. “She was knighted for unique services of inestimable value to His Majesty.”

“Marlie, this is Cornellya Vasylya, Artur’s goddaughter and my publicist, or at least she might as well be,” Gaenor added sardonically. “And in spite of her ability to quote from a document you’ve, no doubt, read for yourself, the hangover cure was what started it. That and having some old duke try to tell Pawlen he could not knight a woman. Never tell a king he can’t do something, at least not directly.”

“Oh? Pawlen is it now?” Marlie asked catching Gaenor’s inadvertent use of the king’s unadorned name.

“We’re caroms buddies,” Gaenor laughed, “and it’s customary to shelf all titles while playing. I guess I’ve gotten a bit sloppy about the courtesies.”

“I don’t think he minds, Gaenor,” Cornellya put in.

“Oh,” Gaenor gasped, suddenly remembering her manners and dragging Elena forward, “This is Elena Carolena, my student, and Vitautis of Senne, Jimeleo of Laria, Faber Gerhardsson, and Leracian of the Ridec Clan.”

“Nice to meet you all at last,” Marlie replied. “I’ve heard about all of you from Gaenor’s letters. The whole town has, actually,” she added.

“What?” Gaenor asked.

“As soon as Sir Briscard heard you were writing,” Marlie informed her, “he asked me to read the letters out loud for everyone to hear. I must say, the readings have been quite a social occasion.”

“They were private letters from me to you, Marlie.”

“Well, I did edit a few of them,” Marlie admitted, “just a bit. But since we’re introducing people, I think it’s time you met your newest niece and nephew.” She indicated the twins in the pram proudly. “This is Bryon and Felice. Kids, this is your Auntie Gae.” The two babies cooed and giggled on cue as Gaenor stuck her head closer to them to get a better view. “You have two other nephews,” Marlie informed Gaenor. “Barte and Helisse had children too, but you knew they were expecting when you left, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Gaenor nodded. “How’s Mom and Dad?”

“Mom’s fine, but Dad twisted his ankle a couple months ago and he won’t give it time to heal. He keeps trying to walk without the crutches no matter what the doctor tells him. It doesn’t slow him down in the shop and his assistants have been doing most of the rough work anyway. Maybe you could have a word with him? He won’t listen to anyone else.”

“What makes you think he’ll listen to me?” Gaenor laughed.

“His daughter, the lady?” Marlie countered “He would wear pink flowers in what’s left of his hair if you suggested it to him.”

“Ha!” Gaenor scoffed at the notion. “I’ll find a way to tell Dad to stay off the ankle for a few weeks, but don’t be shocked if he burns the crutches by the time I’m done.”

“You could make them fireproof,” Cornellya suggested playfully.

“I could,” Gaenor considered, immediately thinking of three different spells by which she could accomplish the feat, “but not without his noticing, and even without the crutches he’d have plenty of time to get them away from me as well. Oh, I shouldn’t have taken that seriously.”

“Why not just cast a fire spell with a reversal modification?” Elena asked, having considered the possibility as well.

“That would extinguish a fire that had already been started,” Gaenor told her. “But the effect is momentary only. Making the pieces of wood unburnable for any period of time would take an entirely different class of spell.”

She started explaining just what it would take and why until Cornellya turned to Marlie and asked, “Was Gaenor like this growing up?”

“Not about magic,” Marlie laughed, “but the best way to distract her was to ask her questions about schoolwork. It worked every time.”

“Funny,” Gaenor replied flatly.

“True, though. So you’re home to stay now, aren’t you?” Marlie asked anxiously.

“I’m afraid not,” Gaenor replied seriously. “In fact, if it hadn’t been for the storm damaging our ship, we should have been in Misha by now.”

“Oh too bad, Gae. I’ve missed you,” Marlie admitted.

“I missed you too,” Gaenor replied, “but we’ll probably be here for two or three days before Artur and I leave for Mita.”

“I’m coming with you,” Elena added.

“You are not,” Gaenor replied. “You’re safe and sound, right here in Narmouth. You have years of schooling to catch up on and a couple years with Master Prendur will get you ready for University.”

“Gae,” Marlie interrupted, “Master Prendur passed away over a month ago. The City hasn’t found a replacement yet.”

“But Elena can stay with you until we get back from Ichtar, can’t she?”

“Of course,” Marlie shrugged. “We have room and a little help with the twins would be welcome, but...” She caught sight of the rebellious look on Elena’s face and Gaenor followed her sister’s gaze.

“Oh no,” Gaenor told Elena. “Ichtar is too dangerous, I won’t let you go there.”

“You’re going,” Elena retorted.

“I’m adept,” Gaenor replied, “I have to go.”

“Leracian isn’t adept,” Elena pointed out. “Are you going to make him stay behind?”

“Leracian can take care of himself,” Gaenor told her.

“So can I,” Elena shot back. “I took care of myself for years before we met.” Gaenor bit back several retorts to that. The fact was Elena was barely getting by on the grudging charity of her townsfolk; working from dawn until well past dusk for a few scraps of food and a place to sleep, more often than not in the loft of a barn.

“Gae,” Artur cut in, “Let’s discuss this later, in the quiet of our home.”

“I’m going to Ichtar!” Elena asserted.

“We’ll talk about that later, young woman,” Artur told her sternly.

“Yes, Senator,” Elena replied.

Marlie shot a strange look at Artur but instead of asking the question that raised, she announced, “We were just on our way to meet Joram for lunch. Why don’t you join us?”

“We were headed for my house just outside of town,” Artur replied, but seeing looks of disappointment from most members of the party continued, “but I don’t suppose there’s any food there, is there?”

“I’ve been keeping the place neat and aired out,” Marlie replied, “but it would have been silly to keep the larder stocked until I knew you were on your way home. It was bad enough throwing all the spoiled stuff out last year, although you did have some preserves in the pantry that are still good.”

“Remind me to order something to be delivered before we leave town,” Artur said to Gaenor.

Marlie’s husband, Joram, worked in Narmouth City Hall. He had been Mayor Briscard’s assistant when Gaenor and Artur had left, but now was Director of Public Works and considered well on his way toward a knighthood of his own. They found him talking seriously with Sir Briscard in the lobby. “We didn’t have the budget to repair the streets adequately this year, Mayor,” Joram was complaining, “Now with all the rain we had this season and with winter coming on soon, the situation is only going to get worse.”

“The problem was that we had to use your budget to clear the unusual amounts of snow off the streets last winter,” Sir Briscard replied. “And after such a cold and snowy winter, the streets were in worse condition than normal. I doubt that will happen again this year. . . . Yes, may I help you?” he asked turning toward the approaching people. “Oh, Sir Artur and Lady Gaenor! What a delightful surprise. Welcome home! Have you been back long?”

“Just arrived,” Artur told him. “Haven’t even been out to the house yet,” he indicated his duffle bag. “Thank you again for the loan of your horses. I hope they were returned healthy and hale.”

“Yes,” Sir Briscard nodded. “The king sent them back with a personal note of thanks.” He sounded more impressed by the note than the fact his horses had been returned. “Naturally I replied, inviting His Majesty to visit us.”

“We are overdue for a royal visit,” Joram noted hopefully.

“Perhaps after his marriage to Lady Erbeth,” Sir Briscard predicted.

“Ibbet,” Gaenor corrected him, “And I could invite them too if you like. I stayed with Ibbet at her family’s manor on our way to Misha.”

“I would have thought Ander was out of the way from here,” Sir Briscard commented.

“Not with the ferry out at Merahk’s Landing,” Gaenor replied. “We had to ride upstream until we could cross the river, and after all that rain, we were nearly at the headwaters before we could ford the stream. Just as well that’s where the baronial manor is, as the weather had also driven the lamorgs out of the mountains. Baron Rolder and Sir Tander were out hunting them that day and saved us.”

“You never mentioned lomorgs,” Marlie accused her.

“By the time I started writing we were already on the way to Firdan,” Gaenor explained. “Having His Majesty invite us to travel with him was more of a shock than being chased by trolls.”

“I don’t see why,” Marlie chuckled, “when you were already on a first name basis.”

“Only at the Caroms table,” Gaenor told her, “and that was a courtesy of the game. I did not feel we were close enough for that sort of familiarity away from the table until our first return to Mishanda. And even so, I would not presume to call him by name in public.”

“Of course not,” Sir Briscard agreed. “Our king is really two separate entities. One is the beloved monarch we see in public and the other is the man you have the honor to call Pawlen in private. Well, we may not have His Majesty but it seems to me a holiday in honor of the return of both our adepts is appropriate.”

“We won’t be in town long enough,” Artur told him. “Our arrival, as fortuitous as it might have been, was also accidental. We have not yet completed the task before us.”

“True enough,” Gaenor agreed. “We’ll only be here today and tomorrow, and then we leave again at dawn for Mita.”

“Then we just have tomorrow,” Sir Briscard told them. “Well, excuse me, but I have a lot of arranging to do.”

“Is this your grant of arms, Gae?” Elena asked as Sir Briscard hurried off. She and the others had strayed around the lobby, curiously reading plaques and now the Cilben girl stood before a pair of gold leaf-covered frames.

“That’s it,” Marlie confirmed before Gaenor could turn around.

“It’s hard to read,” Elena commented. “And the diploma is worse.”

“It’s the formal and archaic hand in which they were written,” Gaenor explained, “and the diploma is in Old Shandi which I’ve never actually taught you, although if you were familiar with the shapes of the letters, I’m sure you could puzzle it out.”

“It’s very pretty,” Elena sighed.

“I’m losing most of my lunch hour,” Joram commented, “but if we hurry, I’ll be glad to pick up the tab.”

Three

“My chief,” Leracian offered after lunch, “I would be honored to arrange to hire a carriage for the trip to Mita and then Misha.” Out of the corner of her eye, Gaenor caught Marlie silently repeating the words, “My chief?”

“The livery is not likely to rent us one for that length of time, and certainly not the horses. We had better buy them outright,” Artur decided. He reached into his duffle bag and pulled out the cloth pouch that held all the money he had left from the funds he left Cilbe with. “This ought to be enough for several carriages and teams of horses,” he told Leracian as he handed the pouch to the Tem. The Tem ran down the street and Artur added. “I had better take some more money out of the bank before Sir Briscard’s holiday starts. I wish we could have talked him out of it.”

“We tried,” Gaenor commiserated. “Hey, cheer up! At least he didn’t know about everything that happened in Cilbe.”

“Why?” Marlie asked. “What happened in Cilbe?”

“Nothing of consequence,” Artur told her flatly.

“I’ll tell you later,” Gaenor whispered, “After you’ve taken a vow of secrecy,” she added with a wink.

“Ah,” Marlie chuckled. “When will you be seeing Mom, Dad and the rest of the family?”

“It better be tonight, I guess,” Gaenor replied, “since I doubt we’ll have enough quiet time tomorrow.”

“Tell you what,” Marlie suggested, “I’ll invite everyone over for dinner. That should give you time to get to the house and then back to town with time to just relax. See you at dinner!”

Gaenor installed Elena and Cornellya in her old apartment in the loft over the workshop she shared with Artur. When she left Narmouth, Gaenor left her summer clothes behind. They still sat folded up in the cedar chest; two simple blouses and a skirt. On the floor of the workshop, however, sat a number of packages filled with clothing, books and other souvenirs from all over the world. She was pleased to find the packages she had shipped home from the far southern kingdoms and was not surprised to find her purchases from Laria and Senne were still in transit, but there was nothing in those shipments she would need. It was the packages from Cilbe that she took the time to go through. It was in these that her and Artur’s cold weather clothing were packed. She finally found the boxes she wanted and was surprised to find enough warm clothing packed away for not only herself, Artur and Cornellya, but enough for Elena and Leracian as well.

When she had last seen the home she shared with Artur she had taken two thirds of all the clothing she owned. Now she owned enough clothing for several people. Then she came across the first package she had sent home to herself. It contained clothing Relle had guided her to buy on their first visit to Dana. Firdani fashion was, perhaps, the most extreme she had experienced, but on seeing it again, she realized that a lot of the clothing she had purchased would be considered odd and outlandish in Narmouth. Her Firdani togs would be considered immodest, but at least the ones she had purchased were opaque. Quite a few blouses and dresses there had been translucent.

“Here you are,” Artur said as he opened the door to the workshop. “What are you doing?”

“Saving us some money on clothing this winter,” Gaenor replied. “I’d forgotten we had all these clothes.”

“Understandable,” Artur admitted. “You haven’t seen any of this stuff for nearly a year. Where are we going to store all these clothes?”

“When am I going to wear them?” Gaenor asked. “Why did I buy so much in Firdan the first time?”

“You went shopping with Relle as I recall,” Artur noted, “and your Caroms buddy, Pawlen, was picking up the tab.”

“I feel a bit guilty about that now,” she admitted.

“Don’t,” he told her. “His Majesty didn’t think you had bought enough, especially since the gown you wore for the coronation itself was paid for by Marnoric and Ymanya and even Relle couldn’t get you to buy jewelry.”

“I’ll tell you the truth, dear,” Gaenor replied, “I’m not all that fond of jewelry. Oh, it’s pretty to look at, but between the piece Ibbet gave me and my signet ring, that’s as much jewelry as I can wear without feeling like I’m putting on airs.”

“That reminds me,” Artur commented. “I never bought you an engagement ring.”

“What’s an engagement ring?” Gaenor asked.

“It’s a Cilben custom,” Artur explained, “to give one’s intended a gold ring with a precious gem stone set in it as a token of their engagement.”

“We don’t do that in Mishanda,” Gaenor told him, “and just as well. How many rings can I wear at once?”

“You have eight fingers and two thumbs,” Artur pointed out.

“Even Relle doesn’t wear that many rings,” Gaenor retorted.

“No, but she does wear a wedding band,” Artur replied, “so I did buy a pair of carved gold rings for us while we were in Nachli. The style is fairly popular in Cilbe, but I figure they should be unusual around here. We planned to get married on our return to Narmouth. Do you want to formalize our relationship while we’re here? The ceremony would be a bit rushed and impromptu, but we could stay an extra day or two.”

“Not until this is over, dear,” Gaenor replied after a long moment. “We still have a long hard way ahead

of us. This will give us both something to look forward to, don't you think?"

"Another few months will make no difference to me," Artur agreed. "Would you like to at least see the rings?"

"Yes, I would very much," Gaenor replied. "Keep them hidden."

"What?" Artur was taken aback.

"I want to be surprised," Gaenor told him.

"How do you know I got yours in the right size?" Artur asked

"How do you know it isn't the wrong size?" she countered.

"I measured it against your signet ring," Artur told her. "You do take it off when you're working with your hands, after all. How did the king know your ring size?"

"He didn't," Gaenor laughed, "but Relle took an educated guess. As it happens she guessed right, otherwise I would have had it resized before we left Misha. But you know that just because this ring fits on my right hand, it doesn't mean it will fit on my left."

"I took that into account," Artur chuckled. "The wedding band is half a size smaller. If it is still too large or too small, I know a spell that will modify it accordingly."

"Do you?" Gaenor asked. "You never told me about it."

"It never came up," Artur explained. "It's one of the ones Borrit taught me in the Village sixty some odd years ago. Strangely, at the time I thought it was one I'd find a lot of use for. I'll scribble it down for you." He stepped over to a workbench and took a notebook out of the drawer. He opened it up to write the ring-sizing spell in it but stopped when he saw what was already in it. "Gae, remember this? It's your last attempt at a flying spell."

"So it is," Gaenor smiled. "Is this the one you broke your leg trying?"

"Looks like it," Artur chuckled.

"You know," Gaenor said thoughtfully as she studied the old spell, "I think I was going about this all wrong."

"You think so?" Artur laughed. "I can still predict the weather with that leg."

"Sorry," Gaenor replied contritely. "What I meant was, I was trying to make a spell that would propel a person through the air. It wasn't under enough control, although with my governor spell I could fix that, I think. Momentum is still a problem too, I'm not sure it's one I could overcome either, but it seems to me that a good solution may be similar to the self-propelled carriage I'm working on. It may be easier to build a flying device that would carry people."

"Sounds dangerous," Artur opined. "If the power runs out while operating your carriage it would just coast to a stop. If that happened in a flyer it would fall and crash."

“So it needs to be able to glide,” Gaenor decided. “I recall that someone in Corinia designed a glider, at least on paper, two or three centuries ago, but I don’t recall his name. Maybe Ellie Nyima can point me in the right direction. Someone at Taopolis University ought to know who he was. If the craft can already glide, all we would need would be propulsion, at least I think so. I’ll make a few notes,” she decided, taking the notebook from Artur, “and maybe when I’ve finished the carriage I’ll get back to this. Somehow I suspect it’s going to be a lot more complex than it seems at first thought.”

Gaenor tried one more attempt at leaving Elena in Narmouth late the next morning before the festival in town, but Elena would have none of it. “I’ll follow you just like I did from Olaka if I have to,” she told Gaenor rebelliously. “You know that.”

“Elena, Gaenor is right,” Cornellya told the girl. “Ichtar is too dangerous for you.”

“How do you know?” Elena challenged the vari. “You’ve never been there either. Gae, how long is it going to take to cast the spell when you get there?”

“Two full days, at least,” Gaenor replied.

“And who is going to feed you if you’re all casting the spell?” Elena pressed.

“Leracian can handle that,” Gaenor replied. “Besides, who says he’s going?”

“You try and stop him,” Elena laughed harshly. “Besides you need Leracian to watch your backs while you’re involved with the spell. He can’t do that if he’s preparing a meal. Can he cook for that matter?”

“Meals aren’t likely to be more than chunks of bread, cheese, and beef jerky or the like,” Gaenor told her.

“You still need someone to serve it,” Elena pointed out. It was a weak argument and they all knew it. It was just as likely such rations as they would eat could be kept within reach or in a belt pouch. It was even more likely they would miss most of their meals while on Ichtar.

“Well,” Gaenor considered, “with Master Prendur gone, there’s no practical purpose in leaving you in Narmouth. I’ll consider the matter seriously and make my final decision in Misha where at least I can arrange for your lessons.”

Artur, however, did not approve of giving Elena even that much hope of accompanying them to Ichtar. “Why don’t we just land on Ichtar with the entire Twelfth Legion?” Artur demanded, “And the Ridec Clan as well?”

“Don’t be silly,” Gaenor laughed lightly. “We’re trying to sneak on and off Ichtar and you know it.”

“We already have enough in our party for a parade,” Artur grumbled.

“There’s only eight of us so far,” Gaenor pointed out, “and only six of us are adept. Seems to me we could use a few more.”

In deference to Artur’s and Gaenor’s felt need to leave Narmouth early in the morning, the mayor scheduled the celebration to run all afternoon and into the dinner hour. Vito, Jimeleo and Faber took the opportunity to move back onto the *Mohgan* before attending the festival.

“You’re welcome to stay in my house while you’re here,” Artur told them.

“Thanks, Artur,” Vito replied, “but we discussed this already. Your house is nice enough, but it’s a bit far out of town. There will be less chance of missing the boat if we stay on board. It will also put us closer to the inns and restaurants.”

“Your choice,” Artur shrugged. “Talk to Marlie if you change your minds about that.”

The festival included all the foods that were Gaenor’s favorites while she was growing up. It was the sort of banquet the mayor might have put on for a royal visit and it made her regret deeply that she couldn’t stay even a few days longer. Leaving, she realized, would be one of the most difficult things she had ever had to do.

Above all, Gaenor wanted to dance. The local band played all the dances she was most familiar with, but she found she could never get up to go to the dance floor because so many friends and family clustered around her, asking about the places she had been, what the king was really like, what the latest fashions in Cilbe were and even for small demonstrations of magic. It was not that they were not familiar with the practice of magic. Having Artur as their town wizard for so many years, made magic even more commonplace than in most towns their size, but they had never seen Gaenor cast spells and since there were two documents in City Hall that said she could, it was something they all wanted to see and admire.

As a child and even as a young woman, Gaenor had been seen as a misfit. It seemed that she was too assertive, too well-educated and too willing to ignore social conventions to ever fit in, but somehow two pieces of paper had changed all that for her fellow townsfolk.

This change of attitude had started when Artur had hired her as his assistant several years earlier. Those who either could not accept Gaenor as she was, or who despaired of ever seeing her in a normal role, thought Artur was courting her in an unusual fashion. As an adept, and a foreign adept at that, he was expected to be unusual and giving Gaenor her own separate living quarters had met the Mishandan rules of visible propriety. When Artur and Gaenor publically announced their engagement that afternoon and Artur gave her the traditional Mishandan carved wooden love token, it only confirmed what they thought they already knew.

Elena found herself the center of attention from the town boys near her age and she found herself torn between accepting their invitations to dance and wanting to wait on Artur and Gaenor. She eventually settled for coopting the help of whoever she had just danced with to carry food and drink to the table at which Artur and Gaenor were trapped.

Cornellya started out the day sitting shyly next to Gaenor and trying to hide her ears once more, but was eventually coaxed out of the emotional shell she had been building for herself when several young men asked her to dance in fast succession. By the end of the second set she realized that Gaenor, Elena and the other women to whom she had spoken recently were correct; it was not her ears that were attracting attention. Late that afternoon, she took the coin Gaenor had enchanted for her and flipped it into the fountain in the middle of the City’s square. As it splashed into the sparkling water she felt an enormous weight lift and she found herself occasionally brushing her hair back from her ears the rest of the afternoon. Somehow it did not deter any of the invitations to the dance floor.

Four

Leracian had spent a bit more for the carriage and horses than Artur had hoped, but on closer examination, Artur noted that the carriage was new with an improved support structure including better springs for shock absorbtion than he had yet seen in a Mishandan carriage. It looked, in fact, very similar to what was used on the carriages – horse-drawn and steam-driven - they had ridden in Baria and Drombra.

“Didn’t you make some sketches of those Barian carriages?” he asked Gaenor as they were loading it up the next morning.

“Yes,” she nodded. “I sent them to Marlie along with a request to show them to the various artisans in town. Why?”

“Remind me to have a talk with the livery man when we get back,” Artur commented, loading Cornellya’s pack in the back of the carriage. “The least he could have done was to give us a discount for giving him the design.”

“He would have had to pay the blacksmith to build this for him,” Gaenor pointed out.

“I’ll talk to both of them, then. I heard they started taking orders from all over southern Mishanda. Now I know why,” Artur concluded.

They were unable to leave as early as Artur wanted. First there was breakfast. Artur had bought enough food to feed the other male adepts so instead of a quick cup of tea and a piece or two of toast, there were still several eggs and vegetables left over. Unwilling to let them be wasted and not knowing when Marlie would stop in to check on the house again, Gaenor and Elena prepared a large breakfast, and then packed up the left-over bread and cheese to eat while traveling. Once breakfast was over, Gaenor decided they needed to straighten up both the house and the workshop before leaving.

“Gae, this really isn’t necessary,” Artur complained.

“I don’t want to come home to an unmade bed or a messy workshop. Why don’t you find a safe place to store the packages? We’ve been lucky; if the roof started leaking, the clothing might be ruined.”

Artur grumbled about that, but he and Leracian picked the dozen or so boxes and crates up from the floor and stacked them upon the largest of laboratory benches. It wasn’t until they were almost finished that he realized Gaenor was stalling simply because she was unwilling to leave Narmouth again. Finally, some three hours after dawn, Gaenor was satisfied and with a great sigh, she climbed into the carriage and they were able to start the next leg of their journey.

It was unseasonably cool that morning and Gaenor was glad she had unpacked the warm woolen clothing. However, it was even cooler than she had expected and when they arrived in Nistor, late the next morning, Gaenor suggested they buy some heavier coats. “We only have two winter weight woolen coats,” she told Artur, “and if this cold weather holds up, we’ll need one for everyone.”

Artur agreed and after lunch in a Sorvohnian restaurant that had not been there the last time they had visited Nistor, they found a clothing merchant. “The woolens are selling far too well this year,” the woman who waited on them commented, “although if you want something really warm, we have these sheep-skin

coats.”

“The woolens will do,” Gaenor decided, “but those fleece-lined mittens look like a good idea. We’ll take five pairs though I hope we won’t need them anytime soon.”

Prepared for colder weather, they continued on. As they started riding out of town, Gaenor pointed out a particularly seedy tavern to Elena and Cornellya. “Soon after I started working for Artur,” she told them, “we came to Nistor on a job. I went into that tavern looking for the foreman of the men who had been working on clearing the rubble from a warehouse that had been over there, where those shops are now.”

“You went in there?” Elena asked, looking at the greasy windows of the tavern.

“And you survived,” Cornellya added, sounding revolted at the notion of entering the place.

“I shocked Artur too,” Gaenor chuckled, “though I would not go in there again, although it doesn’t look quite as bad as it did then.”

“Did you find the man you were looking for?” Elena asked.

“I did, but he was too drunk to answer any of my questions,” Gaenor replied. “It was a waste of time and turned out to be completely unnecessary. About all I learned was that there were places it was wisest not to go. I think we’ll be safer on Ichtar than I was in there. As I recall, it was cold that day too. Artur bought me a cloak against my future wages.”

“What happened to it?” Elena asked.

“It wore out years ago,” Gaenor replied. “Cloaks are out of fashion these days anyway and not as warm as a good coat you can button yourself up in.”

They traveled upstream along the River Nar and stopped that evening at an old-fashioned roadside inn. Inns in Mishanda were quite familiar to Gaenor and Cornellya, but to Elena they were a novelty. The inn served good simple food that satisfied, but was not as excitingly exotic as the foods they had enjoyed elsewhere in the world, except to Elena for whom every thing they ate was a new experience.

Daybreak exposed a somber and mist-obscured landscape. “I don’t think I’ve seen the sunrise more than five times all year,” the innkeeper’s daughter remarked when she heard Gaenor comment on the depressing view. “Nobody around here can remember a year when it’s rained or snowed so much.”

“How were the crops this year?” Gaenor asked her.

“Depends,” she shrugged. “We grew lettuce even in the heat of summer, but peppers and cucumbers are at a premium. Turnips did okay and they’re the major crop around here, but they were smaller than usual.”

Gaenor filed that information away, but she was fairly certain the changes in weather were related to the spell coming from Ichtar.

For the next few days, they were thankful for the retractable roof on their carriage. It extended over the driver’s seat and kept them all dry. They were all thankful they had stopped for coats in Nistor when the cold damp air reached them even at midday. However they were forced to take refuge early in an inn on

the shore of the Bay of Pandenda when strong winds combined with heavy rains a week after leaving Nistor.

"This place looks familiar," Cornellya observed as they headed from the inn's stable to the taproom.

"It should," Gaenor told her. "We stayed here last year, although you probably hid in the barn most of the time."

"I think you're right," Cornellya agreed.

"Why did you hide in the barn?" Elena asked, holding her back a moment just inside the doorway. "Your ears again?"

"No," Cornellya replied. "Godfather didn't want me following him and Gaenor to Ichtar. Sound familiar?"

"Does he want anyone to go there?" Elena asked quietly.

"I don't think so."

"Chas?" they heard Gaenor ask from inside. "What are you doing here?"

"Staying warm and dry," came the reply.

"Who's that?" Elena asked Cornellya.

"Sir Chasur Felso," Cornellya replied. "He's a herald. Let's go sit down."

"I can see that," Gaenor told Chas dryly, "and from the level of beer in your glass I would guess you've been here for a while."

"I stopped around noon. This weather is just too beastly to travel in and my mission is not as urgent as most," Chas told her. "Have a round on me, Sir Artur?"

"Perhaps the next one," Artur told him. "I just ordered for everyone. I don't believe you know Leracian of the Ridec Clan, and here come my goddaughter, Cornellya, and Gae's student, Elena."

"I've met Cornellya," Chas noted after greeting everyone, "however briefly. I see you've stopped hiding in the corners."

"Chairs are more comfortable and they tend to be closer to the fireplaces," Cornellya told him with mock seriousness.

"Well, if I can't buy the drinks," Chas told them all, "the least I can do is buy you dinner, especially since we may be here a day or two. Besides, the mission I'm on is on your behalves."

"What are you up to, Chas?" Gaenor asked.

"Not me, so much as your colleagues," Chas laughed. "Doctors Haxmire and Lastor have been corresponding and Doctor Lastor has convinced His Majesty that they had need of the speedier and more secure courier service of the College of Arms. Naturally that fell to my department. On the other

hand, it did give me the legitimate excuse to petition for the creation of a new pursuivancy as assistant to my office as Torse Herald. Just as well, too, since we've all been running back and forth between Misha and Mita all spring, summer and the latter part of last winter. This trip, I'm carrying copies of the spell being copied in Misha to Mita for comparison and will be picking up copies of the spell being copied in Mita for similar scrutiny in Misha."

"Then I imagine this will be your last such trip," Gaenor told him. "We won't have time for another such delivery anyway."

Their drinks arrived. Only Artur was joining Chas in sampling the local brew. Gaenor, Elena and Cornellya had tea and Leracian had chosen to drink well water. As Gaenor thought back she had not seen Leracian drink anything alcoholic. Mostly he had sipped qahwah when he wanted a hot drink and either water or fruit juices when something cold was desired. From experience she knew the Temi drank beer and wine, so she asked him about his preferences.

"Beer, wine, hard cider, I like them all," he informed her, "but for a Tem drinking on duty is the fastest path to disaster."

"Perhaps you can answer an heraldic question that has been nagging me, Sir Artur," Chas suggested a few moments later.

"I doubt it," Artur told him. "You're the only heraldic expert I know aside from your uncle."

Chas smiled, "What is the correct title for a former dictator of the Cilben Empire?"

"My friends call me Artur," he replied wryly. Then he realized it was serious question. "There is no such title or any term of address for an ex-dictator. The whole point is that it is a temporary office. One is supposed to resign from the office at the conclusion of a crisis and the office is abolished. There isn't supposed to be any trace that it existed short of the scribbling of over-conscientious historians."

"I'm not sure King Pawlen is likely to accept that easily," Chas commented. "It is not unheard of for a monarch of advanced age to turn over the reins of government to his successor in the form of a regency, but no Mishandan king has ever abdicated."

"Then I have to wonder why we have a word for it," Artur commented.

"The word is from Old Gostri," Gaenor told him. "They have had several abdications over the centuries for various reasons."

After their first cups of tea, the women worked together on the elemental concordance. "I'd like to have the bare bones of this ready to show to Doctor Haxmire when we arrive in Mita," Gaenor remarked.

"What about your self-propelled carriage?" Elena asked. "I would think that might interest him as well.

"I'm sure it will," Gaenor replied, "and I have time to work on that as well, although the most important parts are ready to show now. I may see to having a special carriage built for us when we're in Misha so we can start with our first working model when we get back."

"That should be fun!" Elena enthused. "Will I be able to drive it?"

"I don't see why not, but you'll have to wait in line. Artur is being very reserved about it, but I can tell

he's very anxious about the carriage. He can't wait. It was all I could do to keep him from buying one of the steam-driven ones in Nimbria."

"Once we've made one," Elena pointed out, "we can always make others. Maybe a small one with seats for only one or two." Gaenor's current plans called for a carriage that would comfortably hold four to six adults, much the same as the horse drawn rig they were using on their way to Mita.

"Perhaps," Gaenor smiled. "It might be easier to manage than a large model." Gaenor nearly laughed when she saw the same anxious delight sparkle in Elena's eyes she had seen much earlier in Artur's. For Gaenor such vehicles were transportation only, but evidently Artur and Elena saw them as some sort of grown-up toy to be played with. *These Cilbens are crazy*, she thought wryly to herself.

Elena's discovery of the common properties of copper compounds had opened several doors in their attempt at an elemental concordance. Once they had looked at several copper compounds they compared them to compounds of iron and then of aluminum. The results were inconclusive as the common spell tools and ingredients those metals had in common were limited, but it did give them a chance to look for similarities between the oxides - cuprite, hematite and corundum - and between the sulphides - chalcocite and pyrite. They also considered the properties of cinnabar against those of the other sulphides, but neither Artur nor Gaenor had never actually used cinnabar in any spell and Cornellya had never even heard of it.

"We're also going to have to keep in mind that a lot of magical elements are not even physical substances," Gaenor told them. "Many tools and ingredients can be symbolic in nature such as a multiplication table and the properties can always be modified by the incantation or reversed or channeled by the ritual part of the spell. Well, we knew it was a complex situation and not one easily discerned."

"Not necessarily," Elena disagreed.

"Oh?" Gaenor smiled gently. "Have you been reading texts I'm not aware of?"

"You know everything I've ever read, Gae," Elena replied, "but it seems to me that the solution may well be similar to the one you discussed with Doctor Nyima."

"In what way?" Gaenor asked.

"Well, in order to measure the possible mass to energy conversion in magic we are planning to use identical spell tools and spells - flint and steel in that case. One set will be used by you to cast real spells and one by me to go through the motions without actually casting a spell. You called that the control of our experiment, right? We'll each cast, or go through the motions of casting, a light spell a few thousand times and then weigh the tools on that new balance of yours and see if we can detect a difference."

"Right," agreed Gaenor, "but how would you apply that to this problem?"

"We have a lot of minerals that we can identify but we do not fully understand their magical properties," Elena continued. "We can, however, devise experiments that will help us discern these unknown properties. From these experiments we can extrapolate the properties of other magical elements and compounds and thereby be able to fill in our periodic chart."

"I'm starting to wonder if this is really leading to a table of magical elements, however," Elena told them.

“Why not, Lena?” Gaenor asked.

“You said it yourself, Gae,” she replied. “‘A lot of magical elements are not physical substances.’ How will we add fire, for example to a periodic chart that includes the chemical elements? For that matter is fire a magical element? We can create fire with flint and steel. From what I understand from the chemistry texts, elements are substances that cannot be reduced to simpler substances. Can we say the same for magical elements? Are there really magical elements or are there just magical properties of the chemical elements?”

“That’s what we’re trying to learn,” Gaenor told her. “I like your idea for experiments. We’ll have to choose such experiments carefully, of course, and I would prefer it if we do not try any of them until we’ve exhausted our resources of other knowledgeable adepts.

“I do suspect you’re right about there not being a periodic table of magical elements though,” Gaenor admitted. “That’s why I’ve been calling this study a concordance lately. It would be nice if we could bundle this sort of knowledge up in the same way chemists have, but that may not be the way the world is made. However it’s just like I told the scholars of Senne, there are no failed experiments. There is only knowledge gained through experiment. If our results are not what we expect, we have still learned something.

“I’ve never actually expected to be able to build a magical periodic table.” Gaenor continued. “But I do expect to find out if such a thing is a possibility. Either way we’ll learn something along the way. It will be interesting to see if we can predict the effects of an unknown carbonate or oxide, but it will also be interesting to learn that we cannot.”

“So either way, it will be fun and educational,” Elena concluded, smiling.

“Right!” Gaenor smiled right back at her.

Five

By dawn the rain had become even heavier and Gaenor concluded they would probably not be traveling that day. For a moment she was tempted to go back to bed, but instead stepped into the kitchen to become reacquainted with the cook. On her last visit, Gaenor had enjoyed the local version of the clam chowder, but she had not had the opportunity to get the recipe. This time she was able to swap her mother’s chowder recipe for the local version to the satisfaction of them both.

She was just pouring a second cup of tea for herself when Chas came into the common room with a large mug of qahwah.

“Does Artur know they serve that here now?” Gaenor asked. “They didn’t have it last year when we came through.”

Chas took a sip and smiled. “No. They just started serving it last spring, in fact. Qahwah has been spreading in from Gostrina along with Sorvohnian and Pahnite immigrants. There are several good qahwah houses in Misha now.”

“I’m sure Artur will want to take some with us to Ichtar,” Gaenor speculated. “It may not be a bad idea. It does keep me awake better than most tea, especially when sweetened. So what’s new in Misha?”

“At the moment the biggest news is that the entire country is waiting for Ibbet and Pawlen to actually set a date.”

“Haven’t they even done that much?” Gaenor asked.

“No and it’s driving Relle crazy,” Chas chuckled, “but Ibbet will not be rushed.”

“Why in the world is she stalling?” Gaenor asked.

“She won’t say, but His Royal Majesty is backing her on this so I imagine they both have their reasons. My job is to help them whatever those reasons may be,” Chas added.

Gaenor shook her head. “At least I won’t be late with my wedding gift, assuming I can find something appropriate. They are the royal couple, after all; I can’t just buy them a toast fork.”

“I don’t see why not,” Chas grinned, “it’s unlikely anyone else will. They’d probably also appreciate more flower seeds for the royal gardens. Ibbet took a look at them last summer and started making plans. They really have been let go since the old queen died.”

The heavy rain forced them to take refuge in the bayside inn for another two days until Artur finally decided they might as well continue on to Mita. “I don’t know when it’s going to stop, but we’ve traveled through showers and mist before and from what the locals tell me, this is what has been normal the entire day.

Since they had the same destination, Chas joined them on their way to Mita, gratefully accepting a seat inside the carriage. Leracian, however, requested the use of the herald’s horse. “I can scout ahead for road conditions,” he explained. Remembering that this was the same sort of weather that had driven the Lomorgs out of the mountains around Ander a year and a half earlier, Gaenor expected he had more dangerous things on his mind besides road conditions, but a few hours later, he came riding back to the carriage to report a quagmire in the road a quarter of a mile ahead, so perhaps keeping an eye on the road was not a bad idea.

The section of road Leracian was concerned about was, indeed, a bad problem. Many carts and carriages had already driven through the mud, leaving ruts so deep there were traces of the carts’ undercarriages on the surface. Still other vehicles had been driven around the mess, expanding the unnavigable area still more. “My chief, I have not been able to find a safe path around this,” Leracian reported to Artur as they surveyed the sea of mud.

“We may be able to make our way around the right hand side,” Artur considered.

“How far does the mud go?” Gaenor asked. Judging by the muddy flanks on the poor horse, she knew Leracian had ridden to the other side already.

“The road becomes firm again around that next bend in the road, my chief” Leracian replied.

“I have an idea,” Gaenor told them. She went back into the coach and flipped to a blank page in her current notebook. She dipped her pen in the ink bottle and started writing furiously. A few minutes later she climbed back out into the rain and knelt down on the muddy road. She smoothed out a small section of the muddy surface before her then used her fingers to carve miniature ruts into the mud.

She began her incantation with a formal intentional. Most spells did not require a request to the gods in full detail and, in fact, most did not use passages describing the intent of a spell at all, but Gaenor felt better asking the gods for assistance when casting a long, complex spell, especially when doing so for the first time. Her intentional invoked aid not only from Nua and Hannor, the principle God and Goddess of Mishanda, but also from ever-changing Pleusa, who controlled the weather.

As she finished the intentional she became bathed in a warm golden light, which she took as a good sign. An intentional did not normally produce a visible manifestation, but since this one did, Gaenor was confident the spell would be fully effective. For tools she had only her pieces of flint and steel. As with nearly all her magic, she spoke the incantation in the Old Tongue and as she did so the steel in her hand began to glow the bright red of forge-heated iron.

Continuing on with the involved incantation, she used the steel to smooth over the surface of the small section of mud in front of her. As she did so the mud around that section smoothed out and then the smooth section expanded rapidly to the width of the road and then continued outward away from her. It expanded all the way down the road and out of sight.

Then she finished by bringing the flint and steel together in a modified fire spell. The golden aura around her flowed into the mud and spread out in the same manner the smoothing of the surface had. Once the entire surface was covered with a thin film of golden light, the light itself went out. For a moment nothing happened, then the mud began to glow the same bright red the steel had glowed. There was a loud hissing sound as clouds of steam billowed up from the mud. The hissing and the steam continued for five long minutes and gradually faded away.

When it was done, Gaenor carefully reached down to the road's surface to find it comfortably warm, perfectly smooth and dry and as hard as stone. She stood up and took a few steps on the surface she had just modified and discovered it felt like walking on the concrete sidewalks of Cilbe and Nimbria.

"I would have settled for dry and firm," she told the others as she got back into the coach. "It's like a cobble-paved road but smooth."

"How far does it extend?" Artur asked as he prepared to urge the horses forward once more.

"It should have smoothed out the deeply rutted surface as far as it extended," Gaenor told him. "If it didn't go far enough, I can always cast the spell again."

Elena took the flint and steel from her in a business-like fashion and wiped the mud off them. "That was really neat," she told Gaenor as she handed the tools back. "I can't wait to start casting spells like that. I know. It will be another three years at least."

"Probably," Gaenor agreed, noting the abnormally smooth ride they were getting.

An hour and a half later, the smooth ride had not yet run out. "I'm not complaining, Gae," Artur told her, "but just how much power did you put into that spell? We've rolled through two towns and made much better time than I'd have thought."

"I guess the road must have been in worse shape than I thought," Gaenor conjectured. "I structured the incantation to include the entire muddy section." She double checked the spell, looking for errors than might have caused it to produce such a disproportionate result.

"I think I'll recommend you to His Majesty all over again," Chas laughed. "Perhaps he'll elevate you to

the peerage for improving the highways of the kingdom.”

“I could probably design a spell that would do this on any road,” Gaenor replied distractedly, “although I don’t know how well this surface would hold up over time. We’ll have to check back every few months, I suppose, to see. It does seem to hold up in the rain, though, doesn’t it. I was only trying to dry it out, but I wonder if it vitrified too. It might have and if so it may last a fair while assuming it’s vitrified in a deep enough layer. On the other hand it might be relatively brittle and will crack to dust with the first frost.”

“My pursuivants and I come out this way frequently. We’ll keep an eye on the surface for you,” Chas told her.

“I doubt it will last more than a week or two,” Gaenor told him. “The vitrification if any, will be partial at best.”

Around dusk they rolled into a town with cobblestone streets and that marked the end of Gaenor’s improved highway. “It was nice while it lasted,” Artur commented.

Two days later, they arrived in Mita.

Six

With so many little changes in Narmouth, it pleased Gaenor to observe that very little had changed in Mita since her first visit. Artur drove them directly to the mansion and grounds that served as the Mita College campus. As they arrived, students were working on the grounds; mowing the lawn, trimming hedges and weeding flower beds, but they all looked up curiously to watch the carriage roll up to the front door of the house.

“Gaenor!” a young man called out as he approached with a steel rake in his hands.

“Hi, Radnire!” Gaenor replied, “How’s school?”

“Second year is tough!” he replied, “but I still like it better than University. Actually I’m doing third year work in some classes already. I’m on an accelerated program. Doctor Haxmire wants me to graduate next year with the first class.”

“That’s wonderful!” Gaenor replied before introducing the others. “Is Doctor Haxmire busy this afternoon?”

“When isn’t he?” Radnire replied. “Hi, Sir Chasur, do you have more spells for us to proof read?”

“One last bunch,” Chas told him.

“Good!” Radnire exclaimed. “That means I can stop working in the garden. The great spells take precedence over everything. Come on, I’ll show you to Doctor Haxmire’s office.”

They did not really need Radnire of Es to guide them, but he did not give them the chance to say so and a minute later it was Radnire knocking on the door for them. “Hi, Doc! Look who I found!”

“Are you done in the garden so soon?” Doctor Haxmire asked mildly as he looked up from a piece of paper. “Ah, Gaenor! It’s wonderful to see you again. I was just reading the letter you sent from Dana. Did you ever get any of my replies?”

“I read some of them in Narmouth, but I didn’t have time to reply,” she explained, “especially since I was coming here anyway.”

“Well, no matter,” Haxmire told her, “we’ll have plenty of time to discuss everything you’ve been asking and you’ll have time to answer some of my questions as well.”

“We’ll only be here long enough to catch our breaths and pick up the last copies of the great spell,” Artur cut in.

“So I assumed, Artur,” Haxmire nodded, “but you see, I’m going with you.”

“Are you certain?” Artur asked.

“Absolutely,” Haxmire told him, “Oh, I know I’m not young anymore and it’s going to be an arduous trek, but I’m in the best shape I’ve been in decades and Gaenor did say you failed to find as many adepts as you needed.”

“We do have enough,” Artur told him, “barely.”

“Maybe,” Haxmire nodded, “but I decided months ago that I really wanted to be one of the adepts to cast this spell.”

“The one we need adepts to cast from the mainland is a great spell as well,” Artur reminded him.

“It is, but this is the one that counts. The other will just provide support,” Haxmire told him. “Leave that to the faculty in Misha and the women of Kimn. Funny thing, though, I never even knew women ruled on Kimn, never mind that so many of them were adept. But I’ve written back and forth to Queen Khodania and it sounds like they have as much to teach us about magic as we can teach them. It should be interesting in the years to come, but first we have to cancel that spell from Ichtar. Beastly weather we’ve been having, isn’t it?”

At first Gaenor thought Haxmire’s last remark was unrelated to the rest of what he said, then she realized he was expressing her own recent thoughts. “So you think it’s related to the Ichtar curse?” she asked.

“Did you have any doubt?” Haxmire countered.

“No, not really,” Gaenor admitted.

“So why don’t you introduce the rest of your party?” he suggested. “Is this all of us?”

“There are three others,” Gaenor told him after the introductions, “Vitautis of Senne, Jimeleo of Laria, and Faber Gerhardsson. They’ll be meeting us in Misha. Are you really sure you want to join us?”

“This may well be the greatest spell ever cast by human adepts,” Haxmire laughed. “I’ll be with you on Ichtar if I have to swim all the way.”

"If that's the case, I suppose we'll have to bring you along," Gaenor laughed. "Oh, did you get the letter I sent you from Nundro? There's an old friend of Doctor Lastor's in Mirin, Drombra."

"The bookseller, yes," Haxmire nodded, "Robero of Castoe. Yes, I sent him a flawed copy of the spell with hand corrections. Only the copies with one hand-corrected mistake or less have been sent to Misha for vetting. There were sufficient extras available for those who were interested. Lastor suggested we have them printed on a press in Misha but we eventually agreed that while that might provide more than sufficient perfect copies, it might also propagate a single critical error in all copies. Given the nature of the spells, we felt it safer for each one to have been done by hand."

"I agree," Gaenor nodded. "I found an old grimoir in Minim. It was printed on a press and had several small errors within. Nothing to make the spells dangerous, but they were rendered useless that way."

"It may have been intentional," Haxmire told her. "Old adepts would rarely allow any but their apprentices to learn their spells. Adding in crucial but benign errors would have achieved the same thing while still publishing the master's spells."

"Why publish at all then?" Gaenor asked.

"I can think of a number of reasons," Haxmire shrugged. "An adept of sufficient expertise, such as you, might be able to spot the errors, but an adept of lesser talent would not. More likely, however, it was done for the money and academic credit. Around the University and around any university or college for that matter the unofficial faculty motto is 'Publish or perish.' If you want prestige among your peers, if you want funding for your projects or just to be able to prove your worth to the rest of your department, you need to write and have those writings distributed."

"You've never actually attended University, Gaenor, so it is understandable you wouldn't realize that. Most schools put out annual books by each department containing papers on whatever subjects the faculty members and sometimes the more gifted students have been studying."

"I've seen such books in the libraries," Gaenor noted, "and always wondered why the articles within them were so varied."

"And sometimes rather perfunctory as well," Haxmire chuckled. "The point was to have a writing credit and since such books only have so much space in them, it is important to keep articles brief and to the point."

"Then we need more outlets for such articles?" Gaenor asked.

"No professor would disagree with that," Haxmire nodded, "but publication is expensive even with modern printing presses."

"I've been thinking of starting some sort of periodical; a quarterly journal like those of the schools of the deep south," Gaenor told him. "Do you think that sort of thing might be popular?"

"Among scholars, probably. I've been perusing the Corinian journals for years," Haxmire admitted. "There's rarely anything that directly affects magical studies, but then in another sense almost everything applies when you get right down to it." He took another look at Gaenor's letter and then at the stack of spell copies Chas had delivered. "You know," he told them, "this may have been the largest work of any sort written by hand in three centuries or more. It's likely to be the last large hand-done work as well. Everything is printed these days. And speaking of print, and the Corinian journals," he reached under a

pile of papers and pulled out a small booklet. "I see you had the time to collaborate with Doctor Nyima while you were on the other side of the world. It's a nice article. Is this the sort of work you intend to publish in your own journal?"

"It's what got me started thinking about it," Gaenor admitted. "It seemed to me we need similar publications in Shandi or Gostri. The far southern kingdoms are way ahead of us technologically even if what magic they have is primitive by our standards. I want to encourage a healthy merger of the two sets of disciplines; magical and technological."

"Excellent," Haxmire told her, "but let's get you all settled in before we pursue this conversation further. Radnire, will you see our guests to rooms on the faculty floor?"

"We still only have two adepts," Radnire told them as he saw to finding rooms for everyone, "but we have two new teachers this year so now we have departments for Math and Literature." Artur chose the same room he and Gaenor had used on their last visit and went inside.

"Do you have a chemist?" Elena asked. Leracian, predictably took the adjoining room, leaving Cornellya and Elena in the room directly across the hall.

"There's an apothecary in town," Radnire replied leading them into the final room, "but I assume you mean a teacher of chemistry. Why do you need one?"

"We're working on a concordance of the elements and their magical properties," she explained.

"Wow!" Radnire exclaimed, "I'm just starting to get the hang of spell construction."

"Me too," Elena replied.

"I suspect Radnire is a bit ahead of you on that, Elena," Gaenor told her. "Radnire's been studying with Doctor Haxmire for the equivalent of two academic years, whereas I would guess you have one year equivalent experience. On the other hand you may be better versed in multiple languages."

"If you speak more than one," Radnire told Elena, "you have me beat. I'm having a lot of trouble with Old Gostri. All my incantations so far are in the modern language and they sound really silly."

"That's why I use Old Tongue," Gaenor told him. "Most spells turn out as passable poetry, at least if you like rhyming couplets."

"The great spells don't sound like rhyming couplets," Radnire commented, "more like an epic poem."

"Good gods!" Gaenor exclaimed. "You didn't leave them in Old Tongue, did you? The adepts casting the spells need to understand the incantation. Artur, Cornellya and I may be able to speak Old Tongue, but the others only know a few words in it."

"Not to worry," Radnire assured her. "Each copy also has texts in modern Shandi and Gostri. The great spell may sound insipid, but it will work."

"Doing the spell in Shandi," Gaenor mused. "Well, it's a good bet the locals won't know what's going on."

"I would prefer they didn't get a chance to guess," Cornellya replied with a shiver.

They were enjoying a quiet drink with Doctor Haxmire before dinner when he said off-handedly, "I hope I can prevail on you to give another lecture tomorrow, Gaenor."

"I suspected you might ask," she replied with a gracious smile. Last time I was here I speculated about magical extrapolations from Ellie Nyima's Theory of Relativity based solely on the two papers you showed me. Now that she and I have spent a little time together..."

"She?" Haxmire asked, surprised, "Doctor Nyima is a woman?"

"It surprised me too," Gaenor laughed. "And you would think I ought not to have been. Evidently the women of Corinia are equal under the law and more or less accepted as such by the men. It was fair, though, as she didn't realize I was a woman either, until we met of course."

"I shouldn't be surprised at all, really," Haxmire confessed. "I've known enough people from Corinia over the years. I even had to ferry books out of the library about fifteen years ago when a party of female scholars from Taopolis showed up in Es. The University wouldn't let them on the campus, but a large group of professors disagreed and we did what we could to help our guests. After that, however, only men came north from Taopolis, though a lot of them were doing research for their female colleagues."

"That was nice of you," Cornellya commented.

"It was the only decent thing to do," Haxmire replied, shrugging the matter off. "Why should the fact they were women mean they couldn't use our library? We had the same problem with Gaenor when she came looking for me, though. Doctor Naxtir threw a fit when Artur and Gaenor went to his office. That's when I first met Radnire, as I recall. He certainly didn't have a problem with a woman on campus and he comes from a fairly conservative family. Maybe it's just the idiots who had a problem that way. Sadly the idiots were the ones who set and maintained the rules there."

"By the way, have you heard what's been happening in Es lately?" Haxmire asked them.

"We've been a bit out of touch," Gaenor admitted.

"It appears there have been thousands of women protesting outside the royal palace and parliament for the right to vote and own property," Haxmire informed them. "According to what I've read, it all started down in Castoe where the local highpriest told the women that it was their right to protest and demonstrate so long as they did not break the law. I'm not sure what brought that on but it sounds like my countrymen are in for what the Tindi refer to as interesting times. Good! I always thought those particular laws were stupid anyway."

"Why do we need to stay here an extra day?" Elena asked. "With the copies of the spells ready we can leave anytime."

"You may be ready, my dear," Haxmire replied gently, "but I need to pack my tools and ingredients, not to mention a spare shirt, a towel and a bar of soap, or whatever else I'll decide I need. More importantly I need the extra day to make sure Master Fallendir is properly prepared to cover my classes."

"Radnire tells me there are still only two of you teaching magic?" Gaenor asked.

"We're having some trouble finding a third adept who appreciates our experimental curriculum," Haxmire admitted. "Doctor Lastor promised to send us a pair of graduate students for this semester."

However, they won't be able to get here for another two or three weeks, but I'm sure Fallendir can cover for me."

"We'll probably cross paths with them on the way back to Misha," Gaenor commented. "Well, I don't mind the extra day. I've barely had a chance to just sit in one place in over a year."

"We were in Cilbe for a long time," Cornellya pointed out.

"Somehow, between conquering an empire, fighting fires all over the city, and preparing for Colchicus' installation as emperor, I don't recall just sitting around most of that stay."

"At least you didn't have to lead the Twelfth Legion out to defend the city," Artur laughed.

"I like to leave that sort of stuff to the professionals," Gaenor replied dryly. She let Artur bask in the compliment for a few moments before adding, "I must admit I'd have been happier if you had too," but she smiled to let him know she wasn't serious.

Seven

The wet weather finally let up on the day they left Mita. With the sun shining down on the still wet grass, they loaded up the carriage just after breakfast and started back toward the east. Gaenor and Haxmire were discussing the self-propelled vehicle on the second day after leaving when something unexpected happened.

"I think I could make this work even as it stands," Gaenor told Haxmire, "but I'm not sure how fast it will move. If it's too fast, it will be dangerous and if it's too slow, why bother?"

"I doubt you need worry about that," Haxmire told her. "If the maximum speed is not fast enough, you just need to loosen the controls on your governor spell. I'm far more concerned by the complexity of the whole thing. You have the propulsion spell that turns the wheels, two different governor spells – one for the acceleration lever and the other for the brake. You have two light spells for night-time illumination, and another to automatically raise and lower the roof, and then the physical mechanism itself."

"Well, it doesn't need a roof that's convertible, I suppose," Gaenor considered, "and I can make the breaking mechanism strictly physical, rather than reversing the propulsion spell."

"Why two lights?" Haxmire asked. "Wouldn't a single one provide enough illumination?"

"The ones I saw down south all had two such lights. I guess at night it made it easier to see how wide an oncoming vehicle was. The ones in Corinia had smaller red lights in front and back that came on and off to indicate the direction a driver intended to turn. I don't know how necessary that would be. There were more in Corinia than elsewhere, however, so maybe when you have a lot of such vehicles it's safer that way."

"That's a lot of separate spells, however," Haxmire noted. "They'll have to be replenished as each one fails and that may make the vehicle a bit hard to keep operating properly."

"This is just the prototype," Gaenor explained. "Any adept could keep it running, but as you said, it is complex. What I want is something that can be run by most anyone. I figure for that I would need a single

power source that runs all the spells. That way only the power source itself would need to be recharged, rather than all the spells that operate the vehicle.”

“But if the power source ran dry the vehicle’s spells would dissipate too, wouldn’t they?” Cornellya asked.

“That would take another governor spell of a sort,” Gaenor admitted. “One that would stop the carriage before the power is completely drained, so there would still be enough to keep the operational spells from dissipating.”

“You would also need some sort of indicator to let the driver know the power is running out,” Artur commented from the driver’s seat of the carriage. “I don’t imagine it would be much fun to take your contraption into town for groceries only to discover it wouldn’t start up again for the trip home.”

“Well, I said it would be complex, and I have yet to work out all the attendant spell modules, but perhaps it needs an emergency power supply that can be tapped into, something just big enough to get you to your local adept for maintenance, and so you don’t get caught out on a rainy night. Still, I think I’m ready to build the first such carriage and see how the propulsion spell and main governor work in concert.”

“Someone is coming up behind us at a gallop,” Leracian informed them. He drew his sword and rode Chas’ horse to the side of the road.

The carriage’s roof had been retracted for the day so they could enjoy the rare sunlight and warmth. Everyone turned around to see the lone rider rapidly overtaking them. It was a tense moment, but Gaenor, even though she reached for her flint and steel, took comfort in the fact that Leracian made no move to intercept the rider. A moment later, Gaenor recognized Radnire of Es as the rider and she put her tools away.

“I’m coming with you!” Radnire told them breathlessly.

“Radnire,” Gaenor sighed, “This isn’t some summer outing in the country. It’s a dangerous undertaking.” *And what we need is more adepts, not uninitiated students* was what she did not say.

“Agreed,” Radnire told her, “but you’ll need me there!”

“And just what indispensable service do you propose to add?” Artur asked sternly.

“Uh, you need someone to turn the pages,” Radnire replied lamely. “Sir Artur, Gaenor may I speak to you two in private.”

“We were about to stop for lunch,” Artur admitted. “You may follow us into the next village at least. After that I want to hear a better excuse than page turning.”

“I’m worried about Doctor Haxmire,” Radnire confessed once he had managed to get Artur and Gaenor away from the others. “He’s an old man, and not as spry as he may seem at times. I’ve seen him in the mornings sometimes. He often has trouble walking up the stairs, rheumatism, I think, and in spite of his enthusiasm, even you have to admit you’ve noticed he gets winded easily.

“He’s going to need help,” Radnire insisted, “and the rest of you will be too busy. He’ll be a burden to the quest without my assistance, and I won’t let that happen!”

“All right,” Artur nodded, “you may join us.”

“What?” Gaenor countered. “Elena and Leracian can help Doctor Haxmire if he needs it. Any of us can, really.”

“No, Gae,” Artur shook his head. “Radnire is correct. He knows Haxmire better than any of us. He’ll be able to assist the doctor more readily because he can anticipate Haxmire’s needs where we would have to wait and see.”

Gaenor still wasn’t convinced and repeatedly tried to convince Radnire to return to Mita over the next week, with about as much success as she had so far with Elena. *What is it about incredible and unknowable danger that makes everyone want to join in?* she wondered to herself.

The next day the cold misty and rainy weather returned and they all bundled up once more inside the carriage, including Radnire, who had tied his horse to the back. Gaenor was pleased to see he had at least anticipated the colder, wetter weather, so while he had packed light, he had not failed to bring his own warm clothing. “Of course,” he replied when she commented on it. “Winter is coming and we’ll probably be gone for a month or more. Right?”

“Probably more,” she admitted.

The rain continued to drip down on them for the next week, but the roads beyond the section Gaenor’s magic had repaired were not in too bad shape, with only occasional puddles covering the surface and no more than small ruts worn into the surface.

They were a week out of Mita when they heard a familiar moaning howl split the air around them. “Lomorgs,” Artur identified the sound. “They’re not too near, however. Be ready to defend yourselves if they catch our scent, but otherwise we’ll continue on.”

“I wish Vito were here,” Gaenor commented.

“Who’s Vito?” Radnire asked, “and why do you need him?”

“Vitautis of Senne,” Gaenor amplified. “He’ll be going with us to Ichtar. He did a study of lomorgs in Aston and I wish he was here right now because those lomorgs sound wrong.”

“Do I want to hear them when they sound right?” Radnire asked nervously.

“No,” Cornellya told him with a deep shiver, “It’s even worse. Gaenor, I don’t think these sounds are hunting calls like the time in Aston. Vito and I talked a lot the first couple months or so after he joined us. Mostly he just wanted to know about Vieri and I kept trying to avoid such conversations because every time I answered one of his questions he tried to tell me I was wrong.

“Eventually he got the idea that while one of us was obviously misinformed it might not be me. But before that golden moment I used to try changing the conversation to some topic he actually knew something about. As he had been studying lomorgs and other trolls for years, I discovered it was fairly easy to deflect him by asking questions about them. We talked about trolls a lot.”

“So what do you think those noises are?” Elena asked.

“I think they may be mating calls,” Cornellya replied.

“Mating calls?” Elena asked.

“They are animals,” Cornellya pointed out, “so it isn’t a matter of a mommy troll and a daddy troll loving each other very much. It is more like the right time of year. The problem is, it isn’t the right time of year at all. They mate in the spring, but these sounds do sound the way Vito described them. If they are about having a baby troll, there is something very wrong.”

The low moans continued all around them for the rest of the day, but they never spotted any of the mountain trolls and more importantly, the trolls never saw or smelled them.

Finally, near the middle of the tenth day of travel, Chas asked Artur if he would take the next turn to Ander. “I’m under orders to report to Ibbet and escort her to Misha,” he explained. “With the lomorgs out of their usual haunts again, I would also appreciate it if you all came with me.”

“Suits me,” Artur commented. “The Ander baronial manor is a lot more comfortable than any of the inns we’ve been staying in lately, and cheaper too.”

“Are we running out of money again?” Gaenor asked concernedly.

“Not really,” Artur shrugged, “but we’re going to need money for passage to Ichtar and back and given that island’s reputation I suspect it will take more than the usual fee to get a captain to land us there, not to mention to stick around long enough to take us home again.”

“I’m sure His Majesty will help pay for that if you ask,” Chas told them. “He takes this venture very seriously, you know.”

“Perhaps, but I don’t want to have to ask,” Artur told him.

Ander Manor was as beautiful as Gaenor remembered it, even in the rainy, overcast condition. The main structure, a multi-storied wooden house, stretched out in a vee shape to enclose a front courtyard, with gardens around the sides and back. During her last two visits Gaenor had spent a lot of time with Baron Rolder’s daughter, Ibbet, in her favorite garden, but with all the rain, it was obvious that Ibbet would not be there today.

Instead, Gaenor, Cornellya and Elena were directed to a cozy sitting room with a large fireplace and a wall of mullioned windows overlooking a water garden. They found Ibbet and Relle pouring over the plans for a large garden.

“We can do this anytime, Ibbet,” Relle was saying. “The gardens can wait. We should be planning the wedding.”

“Relle, dear,” Ibbet replied calmly, “We’ve been through this often enough. We cannot make any further plans until Pawlen and I set a date.”

“And why haven’t you set a date yet?” Relle pressed. “What in the world are you waiting for?”

“Yes,” Gaenor agreed from the doorway, “I’d like to know that too.”

“Gae!” they both shouted in surprise and delight. They pushed their chairs back from the table and rush

to embrace their friend. "When did you get back to Mishanda?" Ibbet asked.

"We landed by sheer mischance in Narmouth a few weeks ago," Gaenor told her. "Since then we've been to Mita and back. You've met Cornellya, but I'd like to introduce Miss Elena Carolena of Olaka, my student."

"And ward?" Ibbet asked. "Please to meet you, Elena, and it's nice to see you again, Cornellya. I see you aren't sneaking around in the corners anymore."

"I'm no longer hiding from my godfather," Cornellya shrugged. It was an over-simplification, but neither Gaenor nor Elena corrected her on it.

"My ward?" Gaenor repeated. "Well, I suppose she is. I never thought about that really. I certainly never formally adopted Elena, but now that we're in Mishanda again, well we'll have to discuss that. Won't we, Lena?" Elena nodded mutely, but there was a glow in her eyes that told Gaenor that she was not adverse to the idea. Gaenor did not think Elena would object at all, but the Olakan girl had surprised her before. "Well, I'm no more married than you are, Ibbet and I doubt the judges in Narmouth would allow me to adopt Elena until I am."

"They would if Pawlen asked them to," Relle pointed out. "For that matter there's no reason you have to wait until you get back to Narmouth. Technically, Baron Rolder is a keeper of the King's Justice. If he were to recognize the relationship it would be as official as any."

"There is that," Gaenor nodded, "and I'm willing, but I want to make sure Elena understand what it means."

"It means I'll sort of be like your daughter?" Elena asked.

"It means I'd be your guardian," Gaenor told her. "That's the legal term. Our relationship is a matter between us, but do you really think of me as a mother figure? Or more like an older sister? It does mean that I would be legally responsible for you and that cuts both ways. It also means you'll be legally part of my family. You've met most of them, all the ones I see on a regular basis when I'm home, so that's something to keep in mind."

"I would have a family?" Elena asked wonderingly.

"You're not exactly talking her out of it, Gae," Relle snickered.

"We'll both think about it over night at least," Gaenor told everyone firmly. Then she turned on Ibbet, "You still haven't answered the question. What are you and Pawlen waiting for?"

"We're waiting for you, Gae," Ibbet told her seriously.

"I should have known," Relle commented wryly to herself.

"Me?" Gaenor asked. "Ibbet, I'm flattered, but your marriage is too important for Mishanda to hold it up just so I can watch you walk down the aisle."

"Gae, it isn't that," Ibbet tried to explain. "Well, that too, yes, but you were just trying to counsel Elena on the full ramifications of a ward-guardian relationship, now think about the ramifications of my marrying my childhood playmate."

“Well, you’ll be the queen, so I’ll be addressing you as Your Majesty,” Gaenor commented.

“Only on formal occasions, Gae,” Ibbet told her firmly. “I don’t have a lot of interest in playing Caroms, but if you call me anything but Ibbet outside of a formal court, I’ll start playing just so you won’t.”

“That custom generally only applies while actually at the table,” Gaenor corrected her.

“Then, I’ll just declare it a law,” Ibbet replied. “Pawlen is accepting me as co-ruler after all.”

“Wise man,” Relle laughed. “He doesn’t want riots like they’re having in Gostrina.”

“Riots?” Gaenor asked. “I hadn’t heard it had come to that. They were supposed to be demonstrating peacefully.”

“The women are,” Relle told her. “The men, on the other hand are being stupid.”

“Do I want to know?” Gaenor asked.

“You ought to,” Cornellya told her. “You started it.”

“What do you mean she started it?” Relle asked. Between them, Gaenor, Cornellya and Elena described the events in Castoe. “Oh wow, Gae, and I thought I was the troublemaker.”

“You’ve been talking about equal rights for women longer than I’ve even considered it a possibility,” Gaenor told her.

“Right,” Relle countered. “I’ve talked about it, but you just went right out and acted on it.”

“What did I do?” Gaenor argued. “I didn’t start the protests. I defended myself against an attack is all. It was Karenie who did all the real work.”

“Oh my gods!” Relle exclaimed. “You actually know Karenie of Es?”

“Elena and I visited her school,” Gaenor replied. “That was before... Wait a minute, are you saying it’s been Karenie organizing the demonstrations?”

“She’s been getting the lion’s... make that the lioness’ share of the credit, although the news reports do mention a handful of others,” Relle replied. “Anyway, at first the demonstrations were peaceful affairs. Large gatherings of thousands of Gostrinan women, but they made their points quietly enough and at first it seemed as though the men there were tolerating them even if they weren’t inclined to agree. Then a group of mid-level priests of Nauo decided their actions were an abomination and started encouraging men to break up the demonstrations violently. The latest report, though, sounds even more interesting. The Archpriestess of Hinna has come out in favor of the women and all the priestesses have joined the protests. The Archpriest of Nauo is evidently trying to stay neutral which leaves the lower priests to do what they want.

“So you can see why Pawlen wouldn’t want that to happen here,” Relle concluded.

“Pawlen offered me co-rulership before any of that happened,” Ibbet retorted.

“Told you he was a wise man,” Relle relied. “He listens to me, after all,” she added with a smirk. “More seriously, however, you can’t make a law on your own. You need to request it of the Parliament. That’s been the case since the reign of Pawlen I. I don’t think they would pass a law making Gae call you by your name. They take titles far too seriously.”

“The women’s rights movement could spread here easily enough,” Gaenor commented.

“It could,” Relle agreed, “but Pawlen is submitting a number of laws to be considered by Parliament; suffrage is the most important of the lot and the Lords are likely to go along with it. The Commons is already on record as being in favor.”

“Oh good, so now I have to start wondering who to vote for,” Gaenor noted. “or would I have to wait until I’m married so that I’ll technically be a land-owner?”

“You already are, Gae,” Ibbet assured her. “Your title makes you gentle even if you do not actually own land. Being adept gives you similar status so you’re gentle twice over.”

“Hmm,” Gaenor considered. “I hadn’t thought of that. No wonder they made such a deal about me when I showed up in Narmouth.”

“We’ve strayed,” Ibbet noted. “but that reminds me you were asking why I waited for you to return. You see as co-monarch of Mishanda, I need an adept to cast the spell binding me to the kingdom, right? I won’t allow anyone else to conduct the binding and Pawlen agrees.”

“Of course,” Relle nodded. “And unlike in Firdan we have no custom that says it has to be a foreign adept.”

“I’m honored,” Gaenor responded, “and I’d love to do it, but unless you’re planning to have the ceremony almost as soon as we arrive in Misha, it’s going to have to wait until I return from Ichtar.”

“Then, I’ll wait,” Ibbet told her stubbornly.

“And if we all die there? Gaenor countered. “It’s all too likely, you know.”

“Not you, Gae,” Ibbet replied.

“She’s right, Ibbet,” Relle cut in. “They’ll be horribly out-numbered on Ichtar. Even if they succeed, it is likely they’ll be discovered and killed there. I mean we don’t even know what demons look like, do we?”

“How do we even know there is anyone on Ichtar?” Ibbet demanded. “The whole island could be deserted.”

“No, there are quite a few stories about ships that got too close to the island. The witnesses reported seeing people on the cliffs. And sometimes those people cast fire spells at the ships. There are enough recorded instances to make it more than just some sailors’ superstition,” Relle told her. “No, I’m afraid Gae is right; there is far too great a chance they’ll all die there.”

It was well after dinner when she finally got Relle in private to ask. “How long have you known?”

“Known what, Gae?” Relle asked.

“That we’re likely to die on Ichtar.”

“Oh,” Relle sighed. “Since I first understood where you were going and what you had to do there. It seemed fairly obvious. Why? When did you first realize that?”

“I just figured it out this afternoon,” Gaenor replied quietly. “Oh, I knew it was dangerous, foolhardy even, but it never actually occurred to me that I might die there. On another level, I guess I’ve always known. It’s why I’ve been trying to keep Elena and Radnire from joining this expedition. Deep down, I’ve known from the start. I tried to stop Cornellya as well. But today was the first time I’ve actually admitted it to myself. Oh, Relle!”

Suddenly, Gaenor felt her tears begin to flow. After months of having to be the older and wiser companion to both Cornellya and Elena, she suddenly realized that in Relle’s company, and in Ibbet’s as well, it was safe to let her fears out. Both Relle and Ibbet had helped her when she was the younger, less worldly one and it was only with them, and in private, that she could let her vulnerabilities show.

Relle hugged her comfortingly for a very long time that night until Gaenor had let out all her fears about the coming mission, until she had felt them wash out of her and a small measure of calm determination began to take hold of her emotions once more.

“Feeling better?” Relle asked gently.

“A little,” Gaenor replied. “I’m glad I didn’t fall apart like that in front of Cornellya and Elena – especially Elena. It would have frightened her terribly.”

“You wouldn’t have,” Relle assured her. “I know you well enough for that. Otherwise you might have done so already. You’re strong, Gae. You’re probably stronger than anyone I know. It’s like I said this afternoon, I may have talked about equality with men under the law, but you’ve just gone right out and behaved as though it were already the case, and guess what? By behaving so, you made it true, for yourself at least.

“Look at what you’ve done so far,” Relle urged her when Gaenor shot her a disbelieving glance. “You have a degree from the University. There are darned few women who have been admitted to attend classes there and none I know of has ever been granted a master’s degree without ever having set foot on the campus. And you told me that some of the faculty wanted it to be a doctorate. I’ve met some of those old adepts and you won’t find a more conservative lot when it comes to the issue of a woman’s place anywhere. But here you come along and they readily recognized you as one of their own.

“And your knighthood and grant of arms, Gae,” Relle continued. “No other woman in Mishandan history has been elevated by any mechanism save marriage. But Pawlen barely hesitated to set new precedents by making you the first Lady of the Distaff, although I really wish he had chosen a different name for the order. Oh well, a century from now it will just be a name. I doubt anyone will much think about the fact the word comes from a traditional stereotypical woman’s activity. I’ll bet you’ve never even used a distaff.”

“Never even seen one,” Gaenor admitted. “Who dresses in homespun anymore?”

“It might be fun,” Relle commented.

“I really don’t see you in a gown made of homespun material, Relle,” Gaenor commented.

“It would be different,” Relle chuckled, “but it might be fun to learn how to spin and weave. You know all our ancestors, noble and common alike, used to do so. Cloth was expensive, but raw wool and cotton were cheap. One hundred years ago everyone spun their own thread and wove at least some of their own cloth. There’s an old loom in the attic of my father’s manor. A rather ungainly affair, it must have been a lot of work to use. The modern looms are much better, but now I wonder if anyone even knows how to use the old ones. I think I’ll have it shipped down to Misha.

“I could use a hobby and it will give me something to occupy myself with after the royal wedding. You know, I’ve been helping out Pawlen in a lot of ways that will fall to Ibbet soon. I’ll still advise them both if they’ll listen, but it would be best if I didn’t meddle.”

“It’s funny you should mention that,” Gaenor replied. “I may have a job for you, if you’re interested.”

“Tell me about it,” Relle requested, leaning forward just a bit.

“You’ve heard me talking about academic papers,” Gaenor started.

“Sure. Last time you were here you were all excited by some theory a guy in Corinia had developed,” Relle recalled.

“Theory of Relativity,” Gaenor supplied, “and you really ought to read it. You may not follow the mathematical proofs she presents, but you can still follow the sense of the theory.”

“She?” Relle asked. “That Doctor Nyima is a woman?”

“Oh! So now you remember her name,” Gaenor commented. “Yes, Eliyama Nyima is a woman. It’s not all that unusual in Corinia. Anyway, some other things that aren’t unusual in Corinia are what they call scholastic journals. There seem to be quite a few different ones down there. In fact Ellie and I collaborated on an article that was recently printed in one.”

“Really, Gae?” Relle asked. “I’ve love to read it.”

“Do you read Corinian?” Gaenor asked.

“Can’t say that I do,” Relle replied a bit deflated. “I wasn’t aware you could either.”

“I taught myself on the way there. All the scholarly writings in that part of the world are in Corinian. I’m not really very good at it and I evidently speak it worse than I write it.”

“Then how did you collaborate on a paper?”

“Ellie actually wrote it, but I made notes for it in Shandi. We plan to publish it in Shandi too, but at the moment there are no outlets. That’s where you come in.”

“You want me to translate it for you?” Relle asked. “No, that’s silly, but so is the only other possibility. Gae, I’m not a publisher. Tallur is sweet and he does tolerate some of my less endearing qualities, but I

doubt his tolerance would include spending his money to produce a scholastic journal, assuming I could make him understand what a scholastic journal is.”

“What about spending my money?” Gaenor asked.

Relle stopped short in mid-thought. Gaenor had to stifle a giggle when she saw the bemused look on her friend’s face. The expression remained fixed on Relle’s face for a very long moment until it melted as she asked, “What money?”

“Well, obviously I don’t have all that much yet,” Gaenor admitted, “but you remember that settlement between Mishanda and Cilbe? Pawlen did promise to give twenty-five percent to Artur and me. Artur referred to it as literally one quarter of a king’s ransom. It seems to us that since there is no way we could ever spend it all, we should do some worthwhile things with it. This is one of the ideas we came up with.”

“Pawlen is as good as his word. You will get one quarter of anything we get from Cilbe,” Relle assured her, “but we haven’t come to an agreement yet and there’s no guarantee the emperor will choose to honor our suit. Trade with Mishanda is lucrative for Cilbe, but not particularly necessary. We’re not a direct neighbor of the empire.”

“Did you know that Colchicus was Artur’s son?” Gaenor asked.

Relle’s expression froze again only this time into one of amazement. “I just can’t let you out of my sight, girl, you know that? How the heck did you manage that one?”

“Well, Artur’s full name, the one he was born with that is, is Arturus Cornellian Marno, and he used to be a senator in Cilbe.”

“Gae, I know that name,” Relle told her. “Arturus Cornellian was a great general of Cilbe. His father?”

“No, that’s Artur.”

“But...”

“It’s a very long story and I’ll tell you about it sometime, but I suspect you’ll want to know how we conquered Cilbe, broke out of a jail for adepts in Sorvohn, picked up a Tem for an honor guard and a dozen other stories as well. You never even asked about Elena, Relle. You’re being uncharacteristically uncurious. Is there anything wrong?”

“I’m just having a hard time figuring out where to start,” Relle laughed. “Okay why don’t you start with roughly a year ago when you left Misha?”

“Later, I promise,” Gaenor told her. “What about the journal?”

“How well does Artur get along with his son?” Relle countered.

“Well, Colchicus is worried Artur might be going a bit senile,” Gaenor admitted, “but they’re closer than you might expect for a father and son who haven’t seen each other in twenty-five years.”

“Why does he think Artur is senile?” Relle asked, concerned.

“Artur was the absolute ruler of Cilbe for about a month, you see...”

“Artur was the dictator?” Relle asked loudly.

“You didn’t know that either?”

“Gae, I knew there had been a dictator, and I knew that he had abdicated in favor of Colchicus,” Relle told her, “but I didn’t know it was Artur. You owe me a lot of stories, lady!”

“Trust me, I’ll pay with interest,” Gae promised, “but you really didn’t know? Sir Winniam did. He was there, or at least he showed up before we left town.”

“Sir Winniam may have told Pawlen,” Relle replied, “but I never heard about it.”

“He may not have thought it worth mentioning, Win hadn’t arrived until after Colchicus’ investiture,” Gaenor speculated.

“Even the Cilbens at their embassy in Misha only refer to him as ‘the dictator,’” Relle informed her.

“I heard they refer to that month as the ‘Dictatorship,’” Gaenor replied. “It amused Artur. So what about the journal? I warn you, I won’t tell you any more about my travels until you give me an answer.”

“I’ll admit I’m intrigued,” Relle confessed, “but I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“No one in Mishanda has,” Gaenor pointed out.

“There is that,” Relle shrugged. “How do Mishandan scholars publish their work now?”

“The University press publishes books,” Gaenor replied. “That’s how my thesis got turned into the book that’s in libraries all over the World. Did I tell you I found a copy in a bookshop in Drombra? No? I’ll get to it. Anyway, that’s the cheapest way to get published. The University keeps almost all of the money it gets from sales, of course, but since it takes the financial risk, I guess that’s fair. Each department publishes an annual collection of papers and there are also various academic gatherings where papers are presented, but the books are expensive. There’s no one publishing a relatively inexpensive periodical on a regular basis.”

“So how often are we planning to publish?” Relle asked. “And who do we get to review the papers?”

Nine

They stayed in Ander for three days and then left with Relle and Ibbet. The carriage was not large enough for the whole party especially when Ibbet’s brother, Sir Tander decided to escort them to the capital city. However, Tander had decided to ride his own horse, Radnire rode his and Leracian continued to ride Chas’ horse.

“There’s no shortage of experts at University,” Gaenor replied, “and at Mita College as well.”

“There are people in Es as well,” Haxmire told them both. “But do you have a focus for this journal,

Gaenor? Most University publications are on a single topic or theme.”

“I was planning to make this a journal of the magical sciences,” Gaenor replied. “That’s a bit broadly ranged, I admit, but my own studies have been so as well. We can work toward giving each issue a theme, however, but I really think we should keep the journal as general in scope as possible.”

“I always thought magic was a specialty,” Ibbet commented thoughtfully.

“It’s about as generalized as you can get,” Gaenor told her. “Magic is part of the world so a full study of magic includes everything in the world. The articles should all center on aspects of magic, but because magic can be used anywhere and for anything, we’ll need experts on just about everything available. Even non-adepts can review papers on the subjects of their specialties.”

“But if they do not need to be adept to pursue their specialties, it is not a magical subject, is it?” Ibbet asked.

“Many things can be done without magic,” Gaenor agreed, “and in the deep south, the technicians have accomplished some amazing feats without it, but our technology is based on magic. It is the one area of knowledge in which we are most advanced so why shouldn’t we apply what we know to the problems before us. Look at the self-propelled carriage I’m working on.” She flipped the pages of her notebook back to nearly the beginning to show some of her sketches. “The Nimbrians are propelling vehicles like this with steam-power engines. On a larger scale, they have locomotive trains that haul multiple cars for passengers and cargo along steel tracks. In Corinia they are using steam a bit especially on their riverboats, but have developed a different sort of engine that burns petroleum-based fuel to power itself directly. Why shouldn’t we use the sort of power we understand most. Relle, what are you looking at?”

“You told me about this carriage before, but this is the first time I’ve been able to see what you mean. I can’t wait to see one of these in action,” Relle replied.

“Good,” Gaenor nodded, “because this is the basis of my first scholarly contribution to the journal. I’ve already written a paper on the governor spell and its potential applications, so we’ll need to find someone to review it.”

“You want to have even your papers reviewed, Gae?” Relle asked.

“Of course,” Gaenor replied matter-of-factly. “What good would it be to establish a review procedure if I didn’t conform to it as well? Besides, I can be wrong you know. I’m certain that each of the spells I have devised for this carriage will work, but I don’t know how well they will work in concert. My notation system doesn’t extend to spell interaction. Up until now there hasn’t been much need for such a study since most adepts cast single purpose spells, not a complex of them. That’s something else I’ll be working on with Elena,” she added as she paused to smile at her ward.

The adoption procedure had been simpler than Gaenor would have believed. Baron Rolder asked them each if this was something they truly wanted. Then he had Gaenor sign a brief document of adoption. Once the baron had affixed his signature and seal, it was official.

Elena beamed back at Gaenor as she continued, “And we’ll be encouraging others who attempt such spell complexes to do the same. It’s a new field of magic and one we do not know much about either.”

“Perhaps you should also write a paper on that,” Cornellya suggested. She had started the comment in a sarcastic manner, but by the time she finished it, she realized she was serious. Gaenor should write about

that sort of thing. It was exactly the way she had been behaving as long as Cornellya had known her; freely sharing knowledge.

“No,” Haxmire disagreed, “That should be an editorial. A statement by the editor of the journal.”

“Relle will be the editor,” Gaenor replied.

“There’s no reason the publisher cannot write an editorial, I don’t think,” Relle told her. “Besides, I intend to study up on a lot of this, but I’m going to need your help in doing a creditable job, so maybe we should be co-editors.”

“We’ll work that out as we go along,” Gaenor replied. “Anyway, the reason I brought up the carriage was that I’m ready to have the prototype built and I was hoping you could oversee that while I’m gone. I’ll leave you all my notes and sketches, even copies of the spells it will take to power it and my attempts at a general-purpose power source. I won’t need those with me on Ichtar and I’d hate the knowledge to be lost if something happens to me.” A cloud seemed to cross over her face; it was the first time she had admitted the possibility of disaster in front of anyone but Relle.

Relle, however, covered that over by cheerfully replying, “Hah! More like you’ll end up recruiting various demons to write for your journal. Seems to me the details of their spell would be at least as interesting as the one you’re going to be casting.”

“They’re of a similar class,” Gaenor considered. “Well, if we’re very lucky, we’ll get on to Ichtar, do what we have to and get the heck off again. Who knows? Maybe Ibbet was right and there are no demons there any more.”

They spent the rest of the trip into Misha, discussing the carriages, the journal, and Ibbet’s impending marriage to the king, when Gaenor was not actively instructing Elena. To Gaenor’s mild surprise, Cornellya started paying more attention to the lessons again, although this time more as a student than as an additional teacher. Gaenor realized that they must have moved into an area in which Cornellya had not been trained herself and she was soaking up as much magical knowledge as she could. Doctor Haxmire helped out on some subjects and after the first day on the road insisted Radnire ride inside the carriage during Elena’s lessons. “These are topics we have not yet covered at the college,” he told the young man. “Some of this is new to me as well.”

The sky was dark and heavily overcast the afternoon they reached Misha. There was a cool breeze blowing in from the northeast and in the distance there were the occasional bright flashes of lightning followed after a long pause by long rolls of thunder. There was no rain as yet, but Gaenor was certain it couldn’t be too far behind.

Gaenor excused Elena from her lesson as they traveled across the Great Bridge of Misha when it became evident her mind was elsewhere. Elena was fascinated by the half-mile long rows of shops that lined the edges of the bridge. “What do they sell in them?” she asked breathlessly.

“Just about everything,” Relle told her. “This may be a bridge but it is also the largest market in Mishanda.”

“Do you shop here often?” Elena asked.

“Only when I can’t find what I want elsewhere in town,” Relle replied. “The Bridge is the most expensive place to do business in Misha and the prices here are commensurate. In spite of what Tallur

may think, I don't enjoy spending money unnecessarily. The bridge towers at either end are considered the most prestigious office locations in Misha as well, but I won't set up Gae's new journal in one of them. Too expensive no matter how much she wants me to spend. I may not even set up the office in Misha, but that all depends on where the best place for us to be is. I will admit, Elena, that this is a fun place to go window shopping. There are inns and taverns and restaurants on the bridge, three different banks have offices here. There's even a local newspaper for the people who live and work here.

"See those stairs," Relle pointed to a staircase between two shops. "There are walkways and park-like areas over the street-level shops. Look ahead and you'll see little foot bridges for people to cross from one side to the other without descending to street level. There are still more merchants up there. They set up their stalls each day and are required to clear them out at the end of each day, but when I do come here, I usually spend more time on the upper level, because you never know what you'll find up there."

"Sounds like fun," Elena remarked.

"If we have the time," Relle suggested, "we'll come back here some sunny day. But it's almost always an all-day trip, since the palace is still several miles ahead of us beyond the City of the Gods."

"City of the Gods?" Elena asked.

"That big gray complex of buildings up there. Most of it is the temple of Nua, but there are temples to all the Gods in there. Beyond that is the royal palace," Relle explained.

Foot traffic on the bridge was heavy, but once away from the pedestrians, the carriage was able to move at a faster pace as Artur urged the horses to get them to the palace before it actually started to rain. The thunder was now being heard only a few seconds after the flashes of lightning and he knew that meant the slow-moving storm was getting closer.

As they passed the City of the Gods, Elena peered through the massive grey stone gates to see into the wide courtyard. She had expected to see still more grey stone, but within the holy district only the buildings were grey. The area between them was filled with grassy pathways, brightly colored flowers, some stately elms and many topiaries. Far from the stark area it appeared to be from a distance, this was a monument to life.

The palace was much more colorful, with rows of brightly glazed bricks between courses of the native grey stone. As soon as they were within sight of the ornate wrought iron gate, Sir Tander galloped ahead of the others to arrange to have the gate open by the time the carriage arrived. It was just as well he did so, for as soon as the carriage passed through the gate, the party all felt their hair try to stand on end for a moment before a blinding flash of lightning accompanied a crash of thunder. The horses were startled, but Artur's firm hand kept them in line. Before the rumble of thunder had faded, a torrential downpour commenced. Soaked to the bone, Tander and Leracian led the way to the palace's main doors. Two servants with umbrellas came out to help those within the carriage into the palace, while others came to unload their luggage, take the horses off to be cared for and the carriage itself to be stored in a dry place.

"Welcome back, Lady Ibbet," one of the servants welcomed her, "and Lady Relle, your usual rooms are ready for you of course."

"Thank you, Mistress Lenna," Ibbet replied warmly. "Will you arrange for rooms for the rest of our guests?"

"Of course, my lady," Lenna replied calmly. "There is adequate room in the wing Lord Tallur and Lady

Relle reside in. You must want to rest before dinner.”

“Well, a change into fresh and dry clothing would be nice for all of us,” Ibbet decided. “Is Pawlen in the palace today?”

“His Majesty,” Lenna replied stiffly, “is in the Caroms room with Lord Tallur and Earl Mnoster.”

“You’ll probably want to join them directly, Gae,” Relle observed dryly.

“I’d prefer a bath and some fresh clothing,” Gaenor replied, as they started following Mistress Lenna to their rooms. “I can play Caroms all evening.”

“And probably will,” Relle chuckled.

“I haven’t played Caroms since I left Drombra,” Gaenor remarked, “but I still want a bath first.”

“I wasn’t aware the Drombrans played Caroms,” Relle commented.

“King Bourinda was given a table as a coronation gift,” Gaenor explained. “Mind you, no one bothered to give him a set of rules to go with the table.”

“I take it you corrected that?” Relle asked.

“It was an ice breaker,” Gaenor shrugged, “although to tell you the truth he was a lonely young man and any friendship we showed him would have been appreciated. I tried to show him how he could use the table as an instrument of diplomacy and also used it as we hammered out an agreement between him and the Queen of Baria.”

“I’d heard there were some border tensions down there,” Ibbet commented. “Were you involved in that too?”

“Only as negotiators for Queen Jallito,” Artur cut in. “Some sapphire and ruby mines of particularly high quality had been found in a disputed territory. It was actually Cornellya who formulated a solution.”

“King Bourinda gave me this ring,” Cornellya announced, showing off the gold ring into which a large blue star sapphire had been set.

“That stone was from one of the disputed mines,” Artur explained.

“These will be your rooms,” Lenna announced, opening a number of doors and letting them choose their own. “I will have your baths drawn immediately.”

“Relle, have I told you about the baths in Cilbe?” Gaenor asked.

“No, but I have heard about them,” Relle replied. “Do men and women really bathe together?”

“Not in centuries,” Gaenor replied. “These days each public bath has sections for men and women. I could lose the cold dip in the frigidarium, but on the whole it was very nice and sociable to bathe with friends. It’s a shame we don’t have such things here.”

“They would be a bit cold in the winter, wouldn’t they?” Relle asked.

“No more so than in Colch or up along the Arberoa border,” Gaenor replied. “The custom may have started because so much of their empire is in the tropics, but wherever the Cilbens have gone they’ve built their baths, even their embassies have them.”

“Their embassies, you say?” Relle asked. “That would mean the one here in Misha has one too?”

“A small one, probably,” Gaenor shrugged. “The ones in Maxform and Ond were in the basements of the buildings. I’m told that in the ancient world they heated the water with wood fires, but now it’s mostly coal.”

“Well, maybe someday I’ll get an invitation to the Cilben embassy,” Relle shrugged. “Mind you being able to chat with a friend while bathing sounds like fun. Even if we discussed business. I’ve got so many questions about the journal and ideas to get your opinion about.”

“We can work until our baths are ready,” Gaenor suggested.

After cleaning up, they all went to the Caroms room where Pawlen, Tallur and Mnoster were busily studying several piles of documents spread all over the Caroms table. “Doesn’t this make it difficult to sink the balls?” Relle asked after greetings and introductions were concluded.

“We’ve been studying the shipping reports for the last year,” Pawlen explained. “Trade has been down lately and we’re looking for reasons. We’re not getting anywhere, however. We’ll clear this off if you want to play.”

“How recent are those reports?” Gaenor asked, peeking at the papers.

“As of this morning,” Pawlen told her. “Why?”

“I was wondering how long the *Honace R. Mohgan* has been in port,” she replied.

“*Honace R...* I don’t think I’ve seen a report on her in months,” Pawlen commented thoughtfully.

“We have a report on her leaving port just past mid-summer,” Mnoster supplied, digging through the papers and pulling one up to show them. “But unless she arrived this afternoon, she’s hasn’t returned yet.”

“Why are you concerned, Gaenor?” Tallur asked.

“We traveled on the *Mohgan* from Laria,” Gaenor replied, “until we got caught in that hurricane a few weeks ago. The ship put in at Narmouth for repairs and some of our party opted to stay there while we went to Mita. The ship was supposed to be repaired and in Misha a week ago.”

“Repairs usually take longer than expected,” Mnoster shrugged. “They’ll probably be in soon.”

“We should have stayed together,” Gaenor worried.

“There’s time yet,” Artur reminded her. “We don’t even have passage to Ichtar.”

“How are you planning to arrange that, Sir Artur?” Mnoster asked. “No one sails there even on an irregular basis.”

“We’ll have to charter a boat,” Artur replied. “Somewhere there should be a captain we can pay enough to take us there and back. I’ll start asking around the waterfront in the morning.”

Eventually, Gaenor and Mnoster played a game of Caroms, while Ibbet and Pawlen sat down together in front of the fireplace. Gaenor only played one game and sat down to work with Relle after Radnire and Elena expressed an interest in learning the game. They ate in the Caroms room that evening, an occurrence that had been happening with increasing frequency according to Ibbet and stayed there until well after midnight.

Ten

Artur left the palace before breakfast the next morning and only had time to tell Gaenor, “I’d better start looking for a way to Ichtar,” before hurrying out the door. Looking out the window, Gaenor hoped he remembered to take an umbrella with him as it was still raining lightly.

When she finally got up, Gaenor decided she ought to pay a call on Doctor Lastor at the University. She had intend to take only Relle with her, but when Haxmire announced that he was planning the same thing, they decided that everyone might as well go. Gaenor decided it might be good for Elena to spend some time in the library and Haxmire wanted Radnire to meet some of the faculty members. Leracian was nowhere to be found and Gaenor decided he must have gone off with Artur.

The first faculty member they met, however, was an elderly gentleman with a long thin beard. He was making his way down the corridor in a deliberate manner as they approached until he spotted Cornellya. “I greet you,” he told her excitedly, but formally in Old Tongue.

“And I greet you, elder sir,” Cornellya responded with equal formality, looking confusedly at Gaenor.

Gaenor, having met the man before, handled the introductions, “Doctor Julinir, may I present Cornellya Vasylya. Cornellya, this is Doctor Julinir of Arceri. I believe I have mentioned him before, he’s the one who met and helped take care of a sick vari many years ago.”

“So pleased to meet you, my dear,” Julinir told her. “I’m afraid many of my colleagues will be quite surprised to meet you. They don’t believe you exist,” he added conspiratorially.

Cornellya winked at the old adept, pulled her hair back from her right ear and told him, “They’re wrong then.” Julinir laughed and led them to Doctor Lastor’s office.

Lastor was not in his office, however, but the Magic Department’s secretary informed them he would be out of class in a few minutes. “You may wait in the conference room upstairs, if you like.”

Once seated around the long table, Gaenor had Elena explain the elemental concordance project to Doctor Julinir. His attention kept wandering back toward Cornellya, so she decided she may as well help Elena explain. Cornellya had gotten over most of her shyness in Narmouth, but Julinir’s fascination with her tickled at her old worries. Soon Haxmire and Radnire joined in the discussion.

While that was going on, Relle and Gaenor continued their week-long discussion of the planned journal and were so deep into the topic they failed to notice Doctor Lastor entering the room. “A scholastic journal?” he asked. “Sounds interesting. Tell me about it,” he requested. That led to a long discussion that

only stopped when he realized it was time for lunch.

Doctor Lastor led them to a popular Sorvohnian restaurant just off campus where amid pots of qahwah and spicy dishes with various meats and vegetables they continued the discussion of the journal and its aims. A few minutes after they sat down, Master Tellyndar, the junior professor who had questioned nearly everything about Gaenor's thesis and experience, walked in with a colleague and were quickly drawn in by Doctor Lastor.

"I can't say I wouldn't want another outlet for my work," Tellyndar admitted, "but if this journal of yours is going to have any standing in the academic community, you're going to need an editor who is a highly respected scholar. No offense intended, Lady Relle, but just what are your academic credentials?"

"What do you mean by that?" Gaenor demanded.

"No, Gae," Relle stopped her. "Let me handle this. It's part of my job. Master Tellyndar, aside from a first year class in magic theory, it is true I have no credentials as an adept, not even the sort of detailed knowledge Lady Gaenor had when you first became aware of her. My education, however was in liberal arts and I graduated at the top of my class from Hombrook College, a school of this University.

"Now I can already see you getting ready to say, 'Ah ha! So you admit it,' but keep in mind that while I will not be able to pass judgment on the scholastic quality of the papers we accept, I am capable of stringing words together and creating properly constructed sentences. From what I've read over the years, that puts me one up over at least half the working adepts who have been publishing their results.

"I have no intention of deciding which papers have merit within their fields," Relle continued. "That would be as ridiculous as having you teach a class on knitting."

"How do you know I don't knit?" Tellyndar asked seriously.

"Do you?" Relle shot back, never breaking eye contact with him.

"Actually, no," he admitted at last, "and I take your point, but how do you propose to ensure your publication is not just a collection of crackpot theories, regardless of how well written they are?"

"By enlisting the assistance of people like you," Relle replied sweetly. "Scholars, whose own contributions have been in fields close enough to be able to judge the merits of the submitted papers. We intend to build up a jury, not only of adepts, but of scholars in all related fields, which as Lady Gaenor says, is just about everything. So can we count on you to be part of the vetting system?"

"Perhaps when I return from Ichtar," Tellyndar told her.

"You're joining us?" Gaenor asked.

"I just said so," Tellyndar replied. "Since your last visit, I have had a chance to revise my views both on your thesis and on the great spells that need to be cast soon. My own research has proven to me that it is essential that the spells, especially the one to be cast on Ichtar, absolutely must be performed. It's not that I refused to believe it before, but from what I have learned in the past year, failure to stop the spell that originates from Ichtar will have catastrophic consequences on the entire world.

"I'm not sure if your hypothesis that it will drain the world of all magic is true or not, but compared to what will happen, that is the least of our worries. The spell from Ichtar is, as you told us, building up, but

you did not take into consideration what would happen as it built.

“The spell is currently disrupting weather patterns across Mishanda, Gostrina, the Thimdra States and the Barbarian Kingdoms,” Gaenor replied.

“And the northern half of the Parch,” Cornellya added pointedly. “That’s where it all began.”

“Actually that is not quite true,” Tellyndar corrected her. “I did a study of weather patterns over the last hundred years and have detected a gradual change over the last decade. The average temperature in Misha has dropped by two degrees and the annual rainfall has increased by five percent. Most of that change has occurred in the past two years, but there are clear indications that this has been building up for years now. I estimate that the Ichtar spell was first cast about fifteen years ago plus or minus three years. The changes were minute at first and only in the last two years were they large enough for us to notice. However, as the Ichtar spell continues unabated, the effect it is having is accelerating.

“If allowed to continue unchecked, I believe, that the change in climate will be world wide in eight to twelve months,” Tellyndar concluded. “Therefore I feel it would be unconscionable for me to not volunteer to join you on Ichtar.”

There was silence at the table for a long time until Gaenor swallowed and told him, “Glad to have you with us, Master Tellyndar. The Gods know we need all the help we can get.”

“Did your quest for adepts yield many allies?” Tellyndar asked.

“You didn’t meet her on our last visit,” Gaenor replied, “but Cornellya had already joined us. We found Vitautis of Senne in Aston as you directed us, although it took us a while to track him down to a small shack outside of Remarscen. I’m sorry to report that Geramir of Es and his wife died as a result of an experiment gone awry. We found Jimeleo of Laria in Nimbria and Faber Gerhardsen was in a prison for adepts and political prisoners in Sorvohn. We freed him at the same time we were freeing several of our own party. Sarmuel the Sorcerer in Maxforn chose not to join us. He was very polite about it, but saw no reason to abandon his own lucrative practice in Teliodena. The women of Kimn are with us, but will be doing what they can to support us without leaving their island, the Vieri of the Parch will be doing likewise. So counting you, we have eight adepts and a total party of eleven.”

“We need a minimum of five adepts, but conditions may be dangerous,” Tellyndar observed. “I hope eight adepts will be sufficient.”

“It will have to be,” Haxmire told him.

“So, Gaenor, what new surprises do you have for us this trip?” Doctor Lastor asked.

“Surprises?” Gaenor asked.

“Well aside from your collaboration with Doctor Nyima, that is.”

“Well, I sent you those papers I wrote on the Laws of Sympathy and Contagion,” Gaenor replied.

“Yes,” Lastor nodded. “Fascinating work. We included one in this year’s volume of scholastic papers. Are you planning to publish them with the University press? They’re very interested.”

“I may,” Gaenor nodded. “I’ll stop around and have a discussion with the submissions office while I’m in

town. While I was in Corinia, Ellie Nyima came up with an experiment by which we can determine whether some power of magic comes from mass to energy conversion.” She went on to describe the experiment. “Obviously we haven’t been in a position to try it out yet. It will have to wait until we get settled back in Narmouth.”

“Are you returning to Narmouth when this is over?” Lastor asked.

“Yes, definitely,” Gaenor replied. “Misha’s too busy a place for me to get any real work done here, and Narmouth is home.”

“It’s also several days’ travel away,” Lastor pointed out. “I was hoping we might convince you to join the University faculty.”

“Or you could join us in Mita,” Haxmire offered.

“Thank you, gentlemen, and maybe sometime in the future I’ll take a year or two to do that, but I have too many other projects in store at the moment. I’ll be glad to travel for lectures and seminars, however.”

“Narmouth is several days away from either Misha or Mita,” Lastor pointed out.

“Not for Gaenor, at least not for much longer,” Relle chuckled. “Go ahead, Gae. Show them. You were going to publish it in the first issue anyway.”

“This is just the prototype,” Gaenor told them and brought out her sketches and spell notations for the self-propelled vehicle. Tellyndar and Lastor had trouble following the complex interactions of the spells involved, but Gaenor let Haxmire explain most of it. As they started debating the relative merits of various features and solutions, Gaenor took careful notes.

The highlight of the afternoon for her was when Elena suddenly spoke up to correct a faulty assumption of Tellyndar. He tried standing on his dignity with a glib comment about a one-year student not being able to understand the full implications of advanced magic and she started giving him a detailed explanation of the governor spell and how Gaenor had devised the linkages to the other spells involved. By the time she wound down, Tellyndar had a bemused expression on his face and the others were commending Elena on her grasp of the magic involved.

Late in the afternoon, Gaenor accepted Lastor’s invitation to deliver a lecture and conduct a seminar later in the week, before heading back for the palace.

Artur and Leracian left the palace early again the next day and Haxmire offered to give Elena a few lessons while he was teaching Radnire. “She proved yesterday that she was able to understand a second year student’s lessons, maybe more,” he commented.

“She has a few holes in her education, but magic is not one of them,” Gaenor agreed. “I think it will do her some good to learn from someone besides me. Thanks.”

Relle, Gaenor and Cornellya spent the morning around the University, partially to see about publishing Gaenor’s work on Sympathy and Contagion and also getting a notion as to what they would need to publish the journal. Cornellya got bored with the technical problems the other two were diving into, so she eventually excused herself and went to talk to Doctor Julinir. “He’s a nice old man,” she told them, “and I’d really like to know who he met from the Village all those years ago.”

“I doubt this is the place to find out what we need,” Relle commented as they sat down to lunch in the same Sorvohnian place they had patronized the previous afternoon. “Any printer knows how to do layouts and will be more than ready to correct any errors we have that way on the first issue. What we really need are prices on how much each issue will cost to print. We also need a distribution system of some sort.”

“I suppose we need to start with a call for papers,” Gaenor remarked.

“We also need to decide how much we’re going to pay for those papers,” Relle pointed out. “This isn’t a charity and scholars, like anyone else, like to get paid for the work they do. Imagine that. For the other stuff, I have contacts that may help. We can advertise subscriptions in newspapers and at schools all over the eastern kingdoms. Offer subscriptions to every library in the world.”

“Good idea, we have a guaranteed sale to the Royal Library of Maxform,” Gaenor remarked. “Their mission is to include every book in the world.”

“Are we publishing books?” Relle asked.

“This can be in book form,” Gaenor pointed out. “We can print each issue with a cardstock cover, but offer an annual compilation in leather. The libraries will probably prefer it that way. They can be arranged in the stacks easier that way. On the annual compilation we can even include an index for the whole volume.”

“All right, but what about compensation for the authors?” Relle pressed.

“How much do publishers pay in Corinia?” Gaenor asked.

“Wrong question, Gae,” Relle told her. “How much does the University press pay when it publishes one of its departmental compilations?”

“A pittance,” Gaenor replied. “A fraction of a crown unless it goes into reprint. I think I got all of ten crowns for my thesis so far. The percentage goes up if they have to reprint, but very few books get reprinted”

“Gae, the average worker makes roughly a crown per month, so you have made almost a year’s income with your thesis. That’s not too bad. Maybe we could offer a half-crown per article.”

“Maybe it would be better to pay by the word,” Gaenor suggested. “Longer articles ought to be worth more than short ones. That would also keep our expenses approximately the same from issue to issue.”

“Wouldn’t that encourage writers to be overly verbose?” Relle countered.

“You’re the editor,” Gaenor pointed out, “so you’ll edit. You can send a paper back and ask the author to rewrite it too. If we’re paying, we should get what we want.”

“All right,” Relle shrugged. “On second thought maybe we need to consider our distribution before setting an amount we’ll pay our authors. How many copies are we going to print and how much are we going to charge for them?”

That kept them going for another hour until Master Tellyndar happened by the restaurant. He bought a fresh pot of qahwah and joined them, setting down a heavy leather case on the bench beside him. “A little

late for lunch isn't it?" Gaenor asked.

"I had a class at noon, so I ate early," Tellyndar replied. "I'll be meeting some other faculty members here in an hour and decided to just come early, relax, and grade a few papers. So how are your plans for the journal coming?"

"We're still working out the monetary issues," Relle told him, "like how much to pay for articles and how much to charge for each copy. The problem is that we haven't had a chance to talk to a printer yet so we don't know how much each issue will cost. Of course we aren't exactly sure how many we're going to sell, so..."

"Afraid I can't help you there," Tellyndar replied, "I'm just one of the scholars who will want to see my name in your print. Have you tried talking to some commercial book publishers?"

"Good idea," Relle told him. "Thanks."

"I'm glad we ran into you, Master Tellyndar," Gaenor admitted.

"Maybe we should drop the titles between us, Gaenor," Tellyndar suggested. "We're going to be traveling together and all these 'Masters' and 'Doctors' and 'Sirs,' yes, and 'Ladies' are going to only get in the way of comfortable conversation, don't you think?"

"Suits me," Gaenor replied. "Anyway, Artur wants to start having meetings of our entire expedition, getting together for meals and what not."

"To what purpose?" Tellyndar asked.

"To get to know each other," Gaenor explained. "Like you said we're going to be traveling together. We're also going to have to work together and the more familiar we are with each other the less we have to worry about how each of us will react to various situations."

"That makes sense. It will also give us a chance to get used to each other's peculiarities. You may have noticed I have a few rough edges. What? You didn't think I knew it?" he asked with a laugh. "Being critical of my fellow scholars is not the sort of thing I do for fun, but it is the way I am."

"I've never minded the criticism," Gaenor told him. "How can we be certain what we think we know is correct if we don't question it?"

"That's the way I feel," Tellyndar replied, "although I'll admit I don't always react to criticism as well as you do."

Gaenor thanked him politely then continued, "Why don't you join us in the palace for dinner this evening and after as well. We usually gather in the king's Caroms room. Do you play Caroms?"

"I've never had the luxury I'm afraid," Tellyndar replied dryly.

"Well, here's your chance. You won't even have to worry about letting the king win," Gaenor chuckled. "Actually Pawlen is just a duffer at the game, like I am. It's as much an instrument of diplomacy for him as anything."

"Diplomacy?" Tellyndar asked.

“One of the unwritten rules of the Caroms table is that rank doesn’t matter. Players consider each other to be equals and address each other by their unadorned names. Theoretically, this only applies while one is playing Caroms, but in practice most players consider each other to be colleagues even when away from the table.”

“Face it,” Relle laughed, “it’s a fun way to get invited to all the best parties, and who knows, maybe you’ll manage to do some service for His Majesty like Gae did and get knighted.”

“How good are you with hangover cures?” Gaenor asked mischievously.

“Can’t say I have ever thought to invent one,” Tellyndar admitted.

“I did,” Gaenor told him. “It was during that big spring storm a year and a half ago. We took refuge in an inn where we met Sir Winniam, the Lymphad Herald. He and Artur were up late drinking the night before and Sir Winniam woke up in a rather predictable condition. A bit later I repeated the spell when the king and some of his entourage had hangovers on board the ship we sailed on to Dana.”

“And that’s why he knighted you?” Tellyndar asked incredulously.

“No, he knighted me because some stuffy old duke told him he couldn’t,” Gaenor replied, smiling.

“That’s not really true,” Relle interrupted them. “Gae, you forget I’m one of Pawlen’s close advisors. Thanks to you, I’m also close to Ibbet as well, but that’s a different story. Anyway, the hangover cure was never really the reason Pawlen wanted to knight you. Oh, he made appreciative noises that morning and when Duke Brevard tried to tell him ‘We do not knight women,’ I’ll admit he came close to doing just that right then and there, but the real reason he knighted you is symbolized by the device he granted you. You performed the binding Ceremony on Queen Ymanya of Firdan, getting Pawlen out of what could have been an incredibly sticky diplomatic position. Yes, I know it was my fault he got into it in the first place, but you’ll notice that I’m not the one who was elevated. The point is, when faced with the problem you not only found a solution, but performed it as well. Master Tellyndar, did you know Gae cast her first spell before she was even initiated?”

“How did you manage that?” Tellyndar asked.

“Amulet spell,” Gaenor replied. “Only instead of using a small object to hold the spell, Artur made me the amulet, charged me with the binding spell, and then made the invocation trigger the actual ritual of the spell. I had to perform the spell perfectly to get it to work.”

“Why didn’t you just make it a simple trigger instead of a long ritual?”

“I was there with Artur because Pawlen had asked him to cast the binding spell. Relle took an instant liking to me, but mistakenly thought I was adept too, probably because of the hangover cure spell. She didn’t realize that while I invented it, it was Artur who actually cast it, so when the queen’s dressmaker started getting snooty and refused to make a gown for ‘Miss Gaenor’ the commoner, Relle told her I was adept and here for the coronation. Word got back to the queen and she just assumed that Pawlen was making a grand gesture and supplying not one but two adepts for the ceremony.

“Don’t ask me why we couldn’t just tell Her Majesty I wasn’t adept. The excuses made sense only by the rules of unreality Relle calls diplomacy, so doing the entire ritual was the only way to cast the binding spell in such a way to preserve the fiction that I was adept.”

“I never thought of using an amulet spell that way,” Tellyndar admitted. “Why haven’t you written that as a paper?”

“I had too many other things on my mind,” Gaenor replied.

“It would make an excellent training tool for students,” Tellyndar commented, “and an excellent way to administer final exams.”

“Feel free to use it,” Gaenor told him. “Well, we need to get back up the hill. We’ll see you for dinner?”

“I’ll be there,” Tellyndar promised.

Eleven

“I was beginning to think you three had gotten lost,” Artur told Vito, Jimeleo and Faber two days later, when the *Mohgan* finally arrived in Mishaport. Not entirely by chance, Artur had been on the waterfront when the *Mohgan* had made port. Now he and Leracian were guiding the other three to the carriage.

“There was another storm brewing about the time repairs had finished,” Faber explained, letting his duffle bag down off his shoulder. “It turned out not to be much of one, but after that last, the captain and crew were understandably nervous so they held off until it passed. Of course the weather remained rainy, so they kept finding excuses to stay in port. I think the only thing that finally got them to weigh anchor was the mounting port fees in Narmouth.”

“The captain grumbled more than a bit at that,” Jimeleo added, “but I think that hurricane left him more shaken than he was willing to admit. We made pretty good time once we were underway, though.”

“Well,” Artur replied, “so far there has been no hurry. I can’t find a captain willing to take us to Ichtar and I’ve tried every boat and ship in the harbor. We may have to see if Gaenor has managed to perfect any of her attempts at a flying spell.”

“When did she start those?” Vito asked.

“Years ago,” Artur replied, unconsciously rubbing the leg he had broken trying one of them. “That was when I realized she still had a lot to learn about the conservation of momentum. She’s been talking about a new approach lately, but so far as I know she hasn’t done much beyond some sketchy notes. So how was the trip from Narmouth?”

“Wet,” Vito replied. “It rained most of the way, but we stayed in our cabins except for meals so it wasn’t so bad.”

“Thanks for that permeable ward spell for the windows, though,” Faber added. “Letting in the fresh air while keeping the rain and sea water out made the cabins far more comfortable, even if it did get a bit cool at times.”

“You’re welcome,” Artur told him as they reached the carriage and threw the duffels into the storage area in the back, “I’m particularly proud of that spell as it’s one of the few I’ve invented without Gaenor’s assistance.”

“I never understood what caused you to even try to invent new spells before Gaenor came up with her notational system,” Faber commented as they closed the hatch over the duffels.

“It goes back to my initial training,” Artur shrugged. He climbed up to the driver’s seat with Leracian at his side before continuing. “My master, Borrit, and I discussed a lot of theory in the two years I spent with him, but he only taught me a few spells beyond enough to get me safely out of the Parch, since most of the magic used by the Vieri would not be of much use to me. If I wanted to be able to make a living as an adept, I had to invent spells. I traded some of them with other adepts, but for the most part I just made my own. I taught Gae what I knew and she took it from an art to a science.”

“And how about your trip to Mita?” Jimeleo asked, “Good weather?”

“Hardly,” Artur laughed. “It rained almost all the way, although the weather in Mita itself was pleasant enough.” He went on to describe the trip as they headed uphill and continued talking all the way to the palace.

Artur let the three adepts settle into their rooms in the palace and went down to the Caroms room to find the others. Cornellya and Relle were playing Caroms, although from what Artur could determine they were having more fun just bouncing the balls around than worrying about actually sinking any in the pockets. Gaenor was working with Elena and Radnire on a lesson, while Haxmire and Tellyndar were debating various spell ingredient substitutes.

“You’re here early today, Tellyndar,” Artur observed as he and Leracian entered the room.

“Good afternoon, Sir Artur,” Tellyndar replied. In spite of his insistence they should drop the use of titles between them, most of the adepts continued to call Artur “Sir.” “I’ve managed to find others in the department to fill my University commitments for the duration, so I’ve taken His Majesty up on his invitation to move into the palace with you all.”

“Ah! Sir Artur,” Pawlen called from behind. He and Ibbet were just entering the Caroms room. The first few times that happened, everyone had risen in respect to His Majesty and his intended, but Pawlen put a quick stop to that, reminding them that in the Caroms room they were equals. It was taking the custom beyond its usual limits, but as this was the king’s Caroms room, all agreed he set the rules. “How goes your search for a ship?”

“No luck at all,” Artur sighed. “I’m starting to think I’ll have to buy one.”

“I thought you might be having problems that way so I asked Admiral Brenten to join us this evening. I’ve been supporting this mission for months now, so it only seems right I see this to its conclusion.”

Admiral Brenten kept what was left of his gray hair closely cropped, although he wore a beard of moderate length. “Your Majesty,” he replied when Pawlen asked about using one of the ships of the Royal Navy, “I am not sure it is wise to order one of your ships to Ichtar. Sailors are a superstitious lot and the idea of sailing to the land of the demons may not be well received.”

“Admiral,” Pawlen replied sternly, “this sounds suspiciously like some of the arguments we had with our grandfather’s old advisors when we first ascended to the throne. Are we or are we not the monarch of this land?”

“Your Majesty,” Admiral Brenten replied with a stiff, formal bow, “if you order it a ship will, indeed, be

dispatched to Ichtar. However, I cannot predict just how the crew may react once they are within sight of Ichtar. Faced with the source of some of the most grisly tales of life at sea, I cannot guarantee they won't mutiny. Even if they reach Ichtar, there is no saying if they'll stay there long enough to bring the adept party back home."

"Even though the penalty of mutiny is death?" Pawlen asked.

"Even so, Your Majesty," the admiral replied. "Likely we might never hear from the crew again. There are places they can go where we have no extradition rights, like the Johian Islands or Quinor and frankly I wouldn't be surprised if Pahn took them in and claimed the ship as her own, not that the Pahnese have the ability to build ships like any of ours."

"Once they mount a few of those new weapons of theirs," Artur remarked, "we might have a hard time getting her back even if they openly admitted they'd stolen it."

"Is there no way we can get these people to Ichtar and back, Admiral?" Pawlen asked.

"We have large boats capable of making the crossing, Your Majesty," he replied. "We use them as launches and for training cadets."

"We might as well loan you the royal yacht," Pawlen told Artur and Gaenor.

"Your Majesty," Admiral Brenten spoke up, "The training boats are the same size as your yacht and the same hull type as well, but they are also lightly armed. So there will be a way to defend themselves if necessary."

"A training boat will not be as comfortable," Pawlen countered.

"If Your Majesty prefers," Admiral Brenten told him, "we have time to refit a boat; install whatever creature comforts you wish, but I really recommend keeping the armaments installed."

"What sorts of armaments, Admiral?" Gaenor asked curiously.

"Ballistae, my lady," Brenten replied. "Basically, they are large, winch-drawn crossbows, mounted on swivels. They are fairly easy to aim and fire."

"Hopefully, they won't be needed, but they could be useful," she allowed.

"Certainly the armaments will be more useful than gold-plated trimming," Artur commented.

"Our yacht is not that frivolous," Pawlen replied, "but all right, let's have one of the training boats outfitted for this mission. I recall my own naval service as a prince, however. Let's make certain we have a freshly scrubbed cabin and all fresh bunks. Especially those bunks!" He nose wrinkled in disgust at the memory of the training boats he had sailed on. "I also want it stocked with the best food available. There's no need to make you survive on military rations."

"I've survived on such rations for months at a time before," Artur remarked. "Once we're on Ichtar itself, they'll be both easier to carry and less perishable." In the end they agreed to carry both sorts of food.

"Who will sail our boat, however?" Artur asked. "Gae and I may be from a fishing port, but neither of us

has spent any time crewing on a sailboat. And it sounds like we aren't likely to get a lot of help from our naval men."

"I could ask for volunteers," Admiral Brenten offered. "I'm sure there should be some men willing to join you."

"Only if necessary," Artur told him. "Before we leave we'll all need to learn enough about sailing to keep from being dangerous to the others."

"I have a bit of sailing experience," Vito admitted. "I used to go out and catch lobsters with my sister when we were younger, but it's been a long time."

"Then I'm the closest to a resident expert," Tellyndar told them. "I have a friend who races during the summer and I crew for him on most races. Depending on the complexity of the boat, we should be ready to leave within two weeks."

In the three days it took to refit the training boat, Gaenor finally found the time to lecture at the University once and conduct an afternoon-long seminar. On the third day, Doctor Lastor convinced her to spend two hours answering questions from students on whatever subjects they chose. She enjoyed it so much she stayed an extra hour before heading back to the palace with Elena and Cornellya.

The Navy had named its cadet training boats after various waterfowl. The *Tern* was a single-masted, fifty-four foot long sloop with a short, stubby bowsprit. She had been painted an ugly sea green-grey within and without and bore the registration number "TR-16." Inside she boasted a well-appointed galley, but only had sufficient bunks for nine.

"That shouldn't be a problem," Tellyndar told them. "We'll want at least four of us on duty at all times while we're at sea and once we reach Ichtar we'll be sleeping on the ground somewhere when we sleep at all."

"Do we have tents at least?" Vito asked.

"We have six two-man pup tents," Artur replied. "They won't be comfortable, but they'll be better than sleeping out in the rain."

"We'll worry about that later," Tellyndar told them. "First we'll need to master this boat. Today we're just going to stay at the dock. I want everyone to get experience raising and lowering the sails and getting to know the correct terminology for every part of this boat. It may seem silly and pedantic at first but in an emergency I can't go telling you to pull on this or that rope. In fact we'll barely be using the word 'rope' at all. I want everyone to know the difference between a sheet, a shroud and a stay. We all need to know how to secure a sheet to a cleat and the difference between a jibe and coming about. If we have clear sailing all the way it won't matter, but in an emergency it could mean our lives."

"Who made you captain?" Jimeleo demanded. "It should be Sir Artur."

"Tellyndar is our most experienced sailor," Artur pointed out. "He's best qualified to command this leg of our journey. By the way, Tellyndar, how well acquainted are you with a sextant and other navigational equipment?"

"I'm weak on that," Tellyndar admitted, "I've been shown how to use a sextant, but I've never had to use one for real. Does anyone have navigational experience?" Nobody answered. "Well, several of us

ought to at least know how to read a chart and take measurements with a sextant. We're going to be sailing out of sight of the coast and it may become necessary to find out where we are if we get blown off course. Of course, if the skies never clear, the sextant will be useless and we'll be stuck relying on our compass."

"That's the problem with having to rely on sun-based instruments," Artur inserted. "Without the sun or a known star, you're lost."

"For that reason," Tellyndar continued, "I propose to chart a course by the old fashioned method. We'll sail south along the coast until we reach a spot from which the prevailing winds should fetch us up against the coast of Ichtar and use the compass to keep to that course. It will make the trip a bit longer, but if we can't use the sun and stars to navigate by, it's our best chance to avoid being lost at sea."

"But I'd prefer not being the only one who can navigate," Tellyndar continued. "Do we have any volunteers?"

"I've always wanted to know how to use a sextant," Gaenor replied. "I think Elena ought to learn how as well." Elena nodded her willingness.

"Me too!" Radnire spoke up. "I've never even seen the sea before and want to learn everything I can."

Artur noticed Tellyndar flinch microscopically at Radnire's unqualified enthusiasm and added, "Perhaps we should all at least gain a basic understanding of how to navigate. It won't hurt."

They spent several hours each day for the next week and a half sailing around Asquamaquet Bay until Tellyndar was convinced they had a chance of surviving the crossing to Ichtar. The clouds broke just often enough that they were able to learn how to take sightings with the sextant, but no one had much confidence that they'd have such luck on the voyage. While everyone went through the motions of learning navigation only Gaenor, Elena and Radnire showed any genuine interest or aptitude for the activity, so Tellyndar gave them extra exercises for practice at reading a chart and plotting a course.

Finally he had to admit they were as ready as possible if they were going to get to Ichtar in time for the great spell to be effective. He did take Gaenor and Artur aside that evening to ask, "How are we going to coordinate the spells cast on the mainland with the spell we're casting on Ichtar?"

"I've already sent letters to everyone involved, but the Vieri have a communication spell," Gaenor replied. "I'll use it to contact the Council of the Wise in the Village and the Council of Wisdom on Kimn when we land on Ichtar. We'll arrange to begin at the same time."

"Better give us a few days leeway just in case we have trouble finding a safe place to work from," Tellyndar warned.

"Good idea," Artur agreed. "When do you want to leave?"

"In three days," Tellyndar replied. "We've all been working hard and deserve a few days of relaxation before we go."

Twelve

“I would really be more comfortable about this if you stayed behind, Lena,” Gaenor tried one last time. “You can stay at the palace with Relle and Tallur. I’ll arrange for a tutor and maybe some classes in magic theory at the University. You’re young for that and need more training in your general education, but Doctor Lastor thinks you’re ready for University-level classes in magic.”

They were out shopping with Relle and Cornellya and looking for rough clothing that would wear well on the unknown land of Ichtar. They decided very quickly that there was nothing suitable among women’s clothing and were perusing the shops that catered to boys and men. The clerk seemed terribly confused as to why four well-dressed and obviously upper class ladies would be interested in such clothing, but Relle had put on her best phony vacuous expression and explained it was for a fancy dress party. The clerk rolled his eyes but decided that what they did with the clothes was none of his business as long as they paid for them.

“No, Gae,” Elena told her firmly. “We already settled this. I’m going with you!”

But Elena was not finished. “I know Ichtar is dangerous, Gae, but so was Sorvohn. I can handle myself if I have to. Really!”

“All right, Lena,” Gaenor sighed. “Why don’t you try on some of these denim trousers and see if something fits. Did you know this cloth used to be worn with what is now the inside out? The cloth originally came from Wanlaria and was worn by the sailors there.”

“Really?” Elena asked. “That’s interesting. And now we’ll sail in them!” She hurried off to try a pair on while Relle took Gaenor aside.

“You may as well stop trying to talk her out of this, Gae. She’ll be on that boat if she has to hide away in the bilge,” Relle predicted.

“Ever since I officially adopted her as my ward I’ve had this horrible feeling something terrible will happen to her on Ichtar. I can’t tell her that, though. I’ve spent too much time convincing her that intuition and bad dreams have no basis in reality. I believe that. I know my fears are only based on the fact we’re going to someplace dangerous and I want to protect her.”

“Which will hurt her more, Gae? Getting killed on Ichtar, or being left behind?” Relle asked.

“She’ll survive being left behind,” Gaenor replied quickly.

“And if you never return, Gae?” Relle countered. “She’ll always wonder if her presence might have saved your life. She owes you her life, Gae. Don’t put her in a position to regret never having had the chance to repay the debt. You and I know it’s a debt that can never be repaid, that it brings added obligation only, but it’s not the way it would feel to her. Take her with you.”

“I never thought of it that way,” Gaenor admitted. “It’s not a normal way to think of such things. How did you ever come by it?”

“By observing others,” Relle shrugged. “Tallur and I haven’t been able to have children yet. I’m not sure why not, but I’m not too old, so there’s still hope, but a lot of friends have had kids and I watch the way they bring them up. I’ve made notes of everything I think they’ve done wrong and hopefully when the Gods bless Tallur and me, I’ll get it right. Or maybe I’ll have a better understanding of why the others behaved the way they did. Now why don’t you find a pair of trousers that fit you. You still need to choose a good sturdy shirt or two. Cornellya’s already outfitted herself.”

Gaenor hurriedly tried on several different pairs until she found a size that fit her closest. "It's still not quite right," she complained to Relle. "When I find a pair that fits over my hips, the waist is too wide. Belting them may hold them in place, but they still don't feel right to me."

"One of the maids in the palace is also a dressmaker; we'll have her take the waists in a little. It shouldn't take her too long. Oh, Elena! I love that shirt on you." Elena had found a light brown cotton work shirt that fit her fairly well. "I wonder if they have that in a size that will fit me."

They were headed back toward the palace when Gaenor noticed the window of a jeweler's shop. There was a small display with an ornate necklace on a stand. Below that various gemstones were arranged on a white piece of velvet. There was a clear red one with an odd flash that caught Gaenor's eye. "Excuse me," she told the others as she stepped into the shop. Curiously they followed.

"Good afternoon, ladies," the shop owner greeted them. "May I help you?"

"That red stone in the window," Gaenor replied. "May I have a closer look please?"

"Of course," he replied. He came out from behind his counter and opened the window display. "Which did you have in mind?"

"This one," Gaenor pointed.

"Oh yes," the owner enthused. "It's a cat's eye garnet from Thirin. Isn't it a pretty color? So red it almost looks like a ruby."

"A cat's eye," Gaenor repeated thoughtfully. "So that's what caught my eye. Hard to see it in here, isn't it?"

"With the cloudy sky lately, I'm surprised you spotted it at all," the shopkeeper replied, "but I have a jeweler's lamp on the counter. It will bring the eye out for you."

"Very nice," Gaenor commented a minute later when she could see the bright reddish white line that ran the length of the oval cabochon. It was a little like the star sapphire King Bourinda had given Cornellya, but red instead of blue, and there was just the single line, not six rays. But even to Gaenor's unskilled eye it was a high quality stone. "Do you like this stone, Lena?" she asked while Cornellya and Relle looked on.

"It's very pretty," Elena agreed. "What are you going to do with it?"

"If I can afford it," Gaenor replied, "I intend to have it made into jewelry."

"The stone is expensive for a garnet," the jeweler admitted, "but not when compared to a ruby or another precious gem." He quoted a price.

"I'd like to have it set into a simple pendant," Gaenor told him. "Do you have anything like that?"

"A simple solitaire setting," the jeweler considered. "Let me see. The fashion lately has been for frills and dozens of gem chips to set a larger stone off, but solitaires were quite popular some years back. It may be time for them to come back into fashion."

"I think a fancy setting would be too much," Gaenor told him. "It would attract attention away from the stone and the stone is beautiful enough to stand on its own. The setting should be an accent only."

The jeweler was busily looking through a drawer, "Yes, yes I agree. Let's see, cabochon settings. I have some simple ones. Hopefully one will be the right size for the stone. He finally brought out a gold setting. It had simple lines, shaped like a teardrop with an oval-shaped hole in the center. He put it on the counter and placed the stone in the hole. It seemed a little loose to Gaenor, but he smiled and muttered, "Perfect." He quoted another price that included a gold chain to go with it and Gaenor countered with a lower one. After a few rounds, they agreed to split the difference and he invited them to choose a chain while he set the stone in place.

Gaenor considered the chains carefully as she suddenly realized this was the first time she had ever bought a piece of jewelry. The setting might have been simple but she chose a complexly linked gold chain to go with it. Finally the jeweler was finished and he hung the pendant from the chain and put the piece into a small box. Gaenor paid him and then opened the box and fastened the chain around Elena's neck.

"There," Gaenor said. "I've been meaning to buy you a token to mark our relationship."

"Oh, Gael!" Elena exclaimed, tears of happiness filling her eyes, "It's far too beautiful!"

"Nonsense, Lena," Gaenor told her fondly. "It's just like you; bright, beautiful and quite precious."

That evening Earl Mnoster invited them to dinner. Gaenor had stayed in his house on her first visit to Misha and it had come as some surprise when she learned that the quiet and insightful Earl was best known for the wildly exciting parties he hosted. That was until she learned he rarely attended those parties. Most were held while he was out of Misha, tending to his duties in Ulren County. Such visits were not often necessary as he had long since allowed his only son to govern the county and according to Mnoster, "He does a better job of it than I ever could."

On Gaenor's previous visit to Misha, Lady Relle had dragged her off one evening to a party that turned out to be one of Mnoster's raucous events. Looking for a quiet corner, she happened by the door to the earl's Caroms room and hearing the faint clack of ball against ball, she entered to find Mnoster taking refuge there himself. It was a rare occasion, he admitted, but as he grew older, he found the cold climate of Ulren increasingly less comfortable. Now that his close cousin, Ibbet of Ander, was affianced to the king, he also found that Pawlen increasingly sought out his council, although that had been largely due to Relle after she discovered that he was not the flighty playboy he was reputed to be.

"You're a bit of an old fraud, Mnoster," she told him fondly a few weeks later when she had cajoled Pawlen into inviting the earl to dinner and Caroms. "Your public image masks a truly deep thinker."

"The same could be said of you, my dear," he had replied with a smile, then quickly added, "not the old part, of course."

"That's why I like you, Mnoster," Relle told him. "We're very much the same that way."

This evening's party, however was atypical of the sort Mnoster was reputed to host. Instead of inviting anyone of social prominence in Misha, he had only invited Artur, Gaenor and the others of the Ichtar expedition along with Tallur, Relle, Pawlen, Ibbet, and Ibbet's brother Tander.

"Well, Tander," Mnoster opened the conversation after dinner, "how soon will you be bound back for

Ander?"

"I leave the morning after next," he replied. "The harvest is next week and all hands will be needed. The rains have done a number on our crops, so we need to ensure there is no wastage."

"Will you need assistance?" Pawlen offered.

Tander knew he meant in the form of tax relief or money to buy grain for the populace since both Pawlen and Ibbet would be traveling to Ander with him. "We still have a surplus from last season, fortunately, so we should be well off unless we have another bad year. How goes the rest of the kingdom?"

"We all did well last year," Pawlen replied. "And crops were plentiful in Kont, Palernos and Goster, so we can ship to areas where they did not do as well, such as Ginostor and Ulren, perhaps?" he made it a question for Mnoster.

"Ulren imports over half of her food from Aston and Gostrina anyway," Mnoster reported, "except for the fish from the Bay of Bengolia, that is. Those fish are our major resource and they, fortunately, have flourished this past year. And you, Lord Tallur? How are things in Palernos?"

"We're another fishing county, most on the coast are, of course," Tallur replied. "We fish the deep sea for the most part. We lost two ships this year in sudden storms, but the remaining members of the fleet have had no problem bringing in record loads, which is well, since we'll need to buy grain because the weather destroyed most of what we tried to grow. The turnips did well, however."

"Well, then," Mnoster raised his cup, "here's to the turnips!" Everyone around the table laughed and raised their cups. They spent the rest of the meal talking about inconsequential matters. It was not until three hours later, after Pawlen and Ibbet along with Vito, Faber, Jimeleo and Tellyndar had excused themselves that Mnoster finally broached the subject everyone had been avoiding.

Gaenor and Elena were playing teams Caroms against Mnoster and Tallur while the others looked on when Mnoster commented, "You leave for Ichtar the day after tomorrow?"

"We do," Gaenor sighed, lining up a shot. "When Pawlen and Ibbet leave for Ander, they'll first accompany us to the harbor and see us off." She took the shot and missed.

"I'm surprised you don't plan to sleep on the boat tomorrow night," Mnoster commented. He strolled around the table only to discover he was snookered. He took a shot that left Elena with very little to try as well.

"There are only nine bunks on the boat, but there are eleven of us," Gaenor told him. It would not be the most comfortable night."

"Tellyndar and Faber plan to stay on the *Tern* overnight tomorrow," Artur told him from the overstuffed chair he was sitting in.

"The *Tern* is it?" Mnoster asked.

"That's the name she had when we got her," Gaenor replied.

"It's a nice name and more pleasing to the ear than *Albatross* or *Awk*," Mnoster told them "You know I

envy you all.”

“Why would you do that?” Gaenor asked. “We’re going to one of the most dangerous places in the world.”

“Exactly,” Mnoster nodded. “It’s a heroic quest from right out of the Age of Faith and Wonder. You’re going forth to battle demons and who knows what to save the world. Why shouldn’t I be jealous?”

“I’d trade you five times over,” Artur told him as Elena finally took her shot and knocked in one of the remaining blank green balls. Then she started looking for her best shot at one of the numbered balls. Seeing an easy shot for the four point ball she took aim. “You could always come along with us, if you think you’re up to roughing it.

“I would take you up on that if I thought my presence would help at all,” Mnoster assured him. “Sadly, you don’t need an old fool on this mission.”

“No, that’s my job,” chuckled Haxmire.

“At least you, sir, are adept,” Mnoster replied. “For some obscure notion that field of learning was denied me.”

“I know how you feel,” Relle told him as Elena sunk the four ball. Gaenor replaced it on the table while Elena started lining up another shot

“I rather suspected you did, dear,” Mnoster told her seriously. “So, instead why don’t you tell me about this new scholarly journal you two are working on?”

Elena missed her next shot and Tallur took his turn while Gaenor and Relle told Mnoster about the journal. They were still discussing it fifteen minutes later when Mnoster won the game for Tallur and himself. Then Radnire and Elena started playing while Relle and Gaenor continued filling Mnoster’s ears with talk about the journal.

It was much later when Mnoster asked, “Are you looking for another investor, or perhaps the word I want here is patron?” By that time the other’s had all left, leaving only Relle and Gaenor at Mnoster’s house.

“I can’t say it’s a good investment, Mnoster,” Gaenor told him. “I’ll be happy if it breaks even.”

“That’s why I suggested a patronage,” Mnoster told her. “Whether it makes a profit or not is of less consequence than the fact that such a publication ought to exist. I’m a rich man and I have more money than I can spend in a lifetime. Those silly parties I host in absentia ought to be fair proof of that and your periodical would neither be as expensive nor as wasteful as they are.”

“I was planning on financing the journal with Artur’s and my share of the settlement with Cilbe,” Gaenor told him.

“Which may or may not ever come through,” Mnoster told her. “I’ll tell you what, however. If the Cilbens ever settle I’ll split the costs with you. If not, I’ll cover all the costs.”

“That’s a generous offer,” Gaenor replied.

“No more so than what you propose to do if you pay the bills,” Mnoster told her. “Now I promise not to interfere with the publication in any way, but I may be able to help on some of your problems especially during the startup. I used to own a small publishing company. It did not make enough of a profit, so I closed it after a few years, but I still have the press in one of my warehouses. I’ll give you the press and a place to operate it from in that warehouse.”

“I wouldn’t want to keep working out of a warehouse,” Relle replied thoughtfully, “but it might do to start. It would certainly be cheaper than renting a building, especially here in Misha.”

“Is there any reason you need to actually be in the city?” Mnoster asked.

“It’s a long walk to the other side of the river,” Relle pointed out, “and not especially short if I ride.”

“I’m just thinking that real estate is cheaper out beyond the city limits,” Mnoster explained, “and while having an office near the University is a good idea, there’s no reason the press has to be nearby.”

“That’s a good point,” Relle conceded, “but how difficult is it to operate a printing press?”

“Are you planning on taking up a trade, Relle?” Mnoster teased her.

“I’ve already got a job,” Relle replied. “Asking questions like that is part of it. How much training does a printer need?”

“It takes a while to learn how to set type at a decent speed, and like any complex machine, a press needs constant attention and maintenance,” Mnoster told her. “An experienced printer knows how much ink to apply, when and where to oil the machinery and a hundred other bits of trivia as well, but Misha’s printing industry is not as active as it was ten years ago. There are quite a few printers working at other sorts of jobs so I don’t imagine we’ll have too much trouble finding one or two who will be willing to move wherever we decide to situate the press. And we only need one or two; they can train their assistants as the journal grows.”

“I don’t know,” Gaenor remarked. “Having our own press sounds nice, but do we have enough work for it to justify its operation? And the press isn’t the only part of publishing the journal. Once printed, we need to bind the pages into book form.”

“There are two bookbinderries in Misha,” Mnoster told her, “but there used to be ten. Some print shops have binding equipment for small orders and mine was one of them. I was including the binding tools in with the press, and before you ask, I still have all the type and other equipment as well. Hard to sell off what nobody needs. Some of the type faces are considered old-fashioned, but they are legible and if the journal is a success, we can always buy new type sets. Binding is mostly done by hand on a bench and of course experience counts, but once again there are experienced binders working in other trades, mostly as stitchers in the clothing industry, I think, and some of them may be willing to come back to binding books wherever we set up.”

“But can we offer all these people enough work to support themselves?” Gaenor asked. “If we only publish once each quarter, how much slack time will we have between issues?”

“I’ll scope that out, Gae,” Relle assured her. “We already planned to have the first issue printed and bound locally. It will give us a perfect notion of how long it takes, then we’ll know whether we have enough work to employ even a minimal staff of printers and binders.”

“It seems to me that this Journal of the Magical Sciences is likely to only be the first of such publications,” Mnoster remarked thoughtfully. “You may want to consider publishing journals for the other sciences as well. Each journal would have its own staff, of course, who would be responsible for its content, but basically you propose to be in the publishing business with this venture and another two or three periodicals would keep the printers and binders working.”

“I hadn’t thought that far ahead,” Gaenor replied, “and I’m not sure we should just yet. It seems to me that we need to get our own journal into print before worrying about the rest.”

“Of course,” Mnoster agreed, “but we should keep our eyes open to the possibility.”

“I can float the notion about to a few people around University while soliciting papers for the first issue, Gae,” Relle told her. “It will give us a notion if anyone else is interested, but it seems to me that we may well be leading the charge into a new means by which knowledge can be spread.”

“Not new, Relle,” Gaenor corrected her. “The Corinthians have been doing it for decades. New to the eastern kingdoms, however.”

They drained the last few drops of sherry from their glasses as a clock in the hall tolled the hour. “Four o’clock?” Gaenor asked. “Where has the time gone? Mnoster, it’s been a wonderful evening... uh morning too, I guess, but I think I need to get an hour or two of sleep before breakfast.” They all got to their feet and Mnoster started leading them to the door.

“Sleep in this morning if you can, Gae,” he advised. “Get as much rest as possible today, since I doubt you’ll be anywhere near as comfortable once you leave Misha. Take care of yourself, dear, and all your friends as well.”

“I’ll try, Mnoster,” she promised.

“Good,” he replied. “I look forward to hearing all your stories when you return.”

“And I’ll look forward to telling them,” Gaenor told him in return.

“And don’t worry about the journal,” he continued, as he opened the front door. “You’re leaving it in Relle’s capable hands and I’ll aid her in anyway she wants.”

“Thank you, Mnoster.” Then she started as she saw Leracian waiting patiently on the door step. “Have you been here all night, Leracian?”

“Only since I returned from escorting Chief Arturus to the palace, my chief,” Leracian replied calmly.

“You should have come inside,” Gaenor told him. “It’s warmer.”

“It’s a pleasant evening, my chief,” he remarked, “and I enjoyed breathing in the early morning air.”

Relle took a sniff. “It’s a bit sooty for my tastes,” she retorted, “but then it always is in Misha. Good night, Mnoster. I’ll be in touch. I’d like to see the press soon if that’s possible.

“It’s dismantled and crated up, but I’ll have it assembled for you,” he promised. “Good evening, and good luck.”

Gaenor did not get to sleep in as long as she would have liked. It seemed that no sooner had she placed her head on the pillow when Ibbet was in her room, insisting, "Wake up, Gae! Hurry, you ought to be in court."

"So much for sleeping in. You need me in court?" Gaenor repeated sleepily. "What have I done now?" Then her eyes snapped open. "Or was it someone else? What's happened?"

"Nothing dire, Gae," Ibbet laughed. "It's just that the Cilben ambassador has requested a royal audience. We think it may be about the settlement. Now let's find you something to wear. Hasn't your maid laid out anything for you?"

"I asked her not to," Gaenor replied. "I'm not used to being waited on. It makes me uncomfortable."

"Well, we'll have a pot of qahwah up here in a few minutes," Ibbet told her in a businesslike manner as she started looking through Gaenor's clothing for something suitable.

"I prefer tea in the morning," Gaenor grumbled as she got up to make her own choice of clothing.

"I'll have some waiting for you afterward," Ibbet promised. "Right now I want you awake. Take a sip. I swear you're worse than Relle this morning. Just how late were you up last night?"

"You tried waking Relle up first?" Gaenor asked, as she grabbed a dress out of Ibbet's hands. It was the same one Ibbet had given her a year and a half earlier. The dress had been shipped back to Narmouth after the Coronation in Firdan, but Gaenor had packed it into her bag again when she was home.

"Yes," Ibbet told her warmly, "I always liked that one. I'm glad you still have it. Now take a moment to sip some qahwah or you'll never wake up."

"Yes, mommy. You don't think I'm awake enough yet?" Gaenor asked acidly.

"If I walked out that door, Gae," Ibbet replied, "you'd be asleep again before the door finished shutting. Drink!"

"Okay, okay," Gaenor nodded. She took a sip and felt the hot beverage slide down her throat. Immediately she started feeling the mild lift it gave her. "Wow, that's sweet. Are you sure you left room in this cup of sugar for the qahwah?"

"I wanted to make sure you stayed awake," Ibbet told her.

The door opened and Relle stuck her head in the door. "Isn't she dressed yet?" Relle asked.

"Oh hush, Relle," Ibbet replied. "She hasn't finished her qahwah."

"And I'm not likely to," Gaenor protested. "This stuff is usually served in cups half the size of the ones we drink tea out of. This is a beer mug you filled for me."

"I had to make sure you stayed awake," Ibbet insisted.

"Ibbet," Relle told her as she started helping Gaenor get changed, "if she drinks all that she'll still be awake by the time she gets to Ichtar. I still don't know why Gaenor needs to be in court when the Cilben

ambassador arrives.”

“Pawlen wants her and Artur there when the Cilben settlement is announced so that he can formally grant them their share,” Ibbet replied.

“They don’t both have to actually be there,” Relle told her. “Actually neither of them needs to be. As His Majesty proclaims, so it shall be. Didn’t you think to point that out to him?”

“Pawlen insisted,” Ibbet replied.

“There are only a handful of people entitled to tell the king he is wrong,” Relle told her. “You’re one of them.”

“So are you,” Ibbet shot back, then to Gaenor she added, “That dress looks so much better on you than on me.”

“True enough,” Relle commented. “About saying ‘No’ to Pawlen, that is, but I wasn’t there at the time, you were. Here, Gae, don’t forget your pendant.”

“I’m not that tired and I wear it everyday,” Gaenor answered.

“Yes, I know,” Relle smiled. “A very good friend gave it to you,” she added with a wink toward Ibbet. “Now where are you going?” she asked as Gaenor got up and started walking toward the door of a small room that was part of the suite.

“I just woke up,” Gaenor told them both in measured tones, “and I’ve been force fed an elephant’s share of qahwah. You figure it out. I’ll be out soon.”

A few minutes later they hurried down to the small throne room, where Pawlen had decided to receive the Cilben Ambassador. They arrived mere seconds before the door opened and Chas, acting in his capacity as Torse Herald announced, “His Excellency Brotius Armellian Utho, Legate of the Empire of Cilbe!”

The ambassador came forward with a folded piece of paper in his hand, bowed respectfully to King Pawlen and then began reading, “Unto His Royal Majesty Pawlen III, Rightful Sovereign of Fair Mishanda, do weCornellius Arturus Colchicus Marno, Emperor of All Cilbe send our warmest regards and greetings.”

There followed a long and windy paragraph calling down the benediction of the Gods for both countries to bless all within. Finally the letter got down to business, “On the matter of the unfortunate events that took place at the coronation of His Majesty Marnoric II and Her Majesty Ymanya; while we maintain that the actions were precipitated by the representative of our predecessor who was later removed forcibly from the imperial throne and therefore has no connection with us, we do freely and openly accept the responsibility for the disgraceful attempt on the life of your chosen Lord Wizard, one Sir Artur the Southlander, and the attendant endangerment of the lives of all those around him.

“We hereby offer in recompense...” the document went onto detail many varied trade concessions, as well as large sums of money to be paid annually over the next ten years to the kingdoms of Firdan, Mishanda, Gostrina, Aston, and Wanlaria. Gaenor was secretly pleased there was no mention of Pahn or Sorvohn, both of whose “High Lords” or priest-kings had been in attendance as well. Gaenor took it all well in stride until the phrase, “on the sole condition that one quarter of all proceeds be given jointly to Sir

Artur the Southlander and Lady Gaenor of Narmouth.”

“I can’t have heard that correctly,” Gaenor blurted without thinking. “Oh, I apologize, Your Majesty and Your Excellency. I spoke out of turn.”

“Quite understandable, Lady Gaenor,” Pawlen replied formally, “but we do recall promising you one quarter of the settlement.”

“I was under the impression, Your Majesty, that you meant one quarter of the settlement with Mishanda only – a princely sum, literally, on its own. But this is one quarter of the settlements with all the kingdoms involved. Our share will be more than any single kingdom receives.”

“We do like to take care of our friends,” Pawlen smiled. “Our apologies, Excellency, would you please continue?”

“Of course, Your Majesty,” Legate Brotius replied smoothly. “This do we, Cornellius Arturus Colchicus Marno, Imperator Cilbanus, promise by our strength and honor to our noble friends and allies of Mishanda and the Eastern Realms.” He finished reading then explained, “It bears the imperial signature and seal, Your Majesty, and a passage that when you sign will agree that this agreement settles all differences between Cilbe and the Kingdoms of the East.” He handed the letter to Chas, who in turn, passed it to Pawlen.

Pawlen looked at it and then had Tallur study it as well. “It appears to be in order, Your Majesty,” Tallur reported.

“It seems that way to us as well,” Pawlen nodded. There was a small table with a small bottle of ink and a pen on it next to the throne. Tallur pushed it around until it was in front of Pawlen, who promptly signed the agreement.

Legate Brotius bowed and promised that Mishanda’s first installment would be deposited in the Bank of Mishanda even as the Cilben embassies in the other kingdoms would be instructed to deliver their payments.

After he left, they all retired to the Caroms room where Pawlen had a large breakfast waiting. Gaenor commented, “What in the world are we going to do with all that money? I can’t very well buy a kingdom.”

“Believe it or not,” Pawlen told her, chuckling, “you still can’t afford a kingdom. You could buy a barony or a county if there was a vacant seat. There aren’t any, by the way.”

“Just as well,” Artur replied, “We don’t have any time to tend to that sort of responsibility. Gae, especially, has too many other projects going on. As for me, well I learned there’s still a lot of work waiting for the local adept in Narmouth.”

“Neither of you ever has to work again, you realize,” Pawlen pointed out.

“That’s no fun,” Gaenor laughed. “Oh dear!” she added suddenly.

“What’s wrong, Gae?” Relle asked.

“What happens if we die on Ichtar?” Gaenor asked suddenly. “We have to make out our wills, don’t

we?”

“You never have?” Relle asked.

“It’s never been necessary before,” Gaenor replied.

“I can help you with that,” Chas offered. “As a herald I’ve helped others do the same and His Majesty can seal it”

“Do kings usually do that?” Elena asked curiously.

“No, almost never,” Pawlen replied, “but I am the ultimate justice in this realm so while such things are normally done by lower keepers of justice, there’s nothing to stop me, and the document will be at least as binding as any other will and testament.”

“And there I thought I would just have a quiet day with my friends,” Gaenor commented dryly. “Well, Chas, let’s get this out of the way quickly. Relle and I still have a lot of notes to go over before we leave tomorrow.”

“We’re likely to be going over them on the way to the boat” Relle pointed out.

“Not unless you have questions,” Gaenor told her. “Now that we’re sure we have the money, you can start right in on organizing the journal. We’ve gone over that so many times, you probably know what to do better than I. However, I have a lot of half-finished projects to describe to you so if the worst case happens, hopefully you’ll be able to find someone to finish them.”

“Now that does not make me happy,” Relle told her seriously.

“Better than knowing my work was wasted,” Gaenor told her. “but even more important, I need you to oversee the construction of a special carriage for me. I never did get around to it while we were here.”

Ichtar

One

Gaenor was greatly relieved that their send off did not turn into a parade and festival. They all rode down to the harbor with His Majesty although they did not all fit in a single carriage. Everyone pretty much felt they had already said their goodbyes, so they quickly hugged each other before Artur’s and Gaenor’s party boarded the *Tern*. Pawlen, Ibbet, Tallur and Relle stood on the dock and watched the *Tern* sail out into the harbor until it was obscured by the early morning mist.

Gaenor had dreaded this part of the journey, but now that they were at sea, she became calm and collected once again. It was nice to be able to let her fears air out with Relle and Ibbet, so now that she had to face them, they no longer bothered her in the least. It was time to get on and do what needed doing, she reflected as she watched the water slide on by the boat’s hull. The time of uncertainty had passed.

The fog lifted by the time they reached the mouth of the River Rind and it was smooth sailing as they entered Asquamaquet Bay .

“If I could count on clear weather,” Tellyndar told them, “We could set a course directly to Ichtar. But since there haven’t been clear enough conditions to verify our position, we’ll have to sail south first.”

“You’ve told us that before, Vito reminded him. “You call the course and we’ll sail it.”

“Did I? Sorry,” Tellyndar apologized, “Perhaps I’m a bit nervous this morning. Anyway I’ve been asking the captains about the prevailing winds and they seem to be running west by southwest, so our safest course will be to sail south until we’re off the coast of Firdan, then turn directly east and sail for Ichtar. Even with a northward drift, that way we’ll be almost certain to come up on Ichtar somewhere on its western shore.”

Jimeleo took a look at the chart. “That’s going to triple the length of the voyage. It seems to me that Ichtar is a pretty big target. We should just sail there directly.”

“The winds are unfavorable for that at the moment,” Tellyndar replied. “The prevailing direction may be south-southwest, but right now their coming in from the south-southeast. We would have to tack all the way there and if we can’t take our bearings we could easily get lost and miss Ichtar altogether and end up two months from now in Cilbe.”

“We don’t have two months worth of food on board,” Faber commented.

“We don’t have two months time to wander about the Ocean Sea either,” Tellyndar added. “The Ichtar spell will reach its critical strength in six to eight weeks.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t have taken the extra time off in Misha,” Vito suggested.

“No,” Artur disagreed. “We all needed a little time to relax. Look at us right now. We’re all a bit nervous.” Faber and Jimeleo shot him a look that said, *Funny, you don’t show it* , but he ignored that. “And that’s making us a little high-strung. Imagine how much worse it would have been if we just set sail three days ago.”

“Besides,” Tellyndar added, “there was a storm out here at the time. It’s blown out now so this should be a smoother trip than it would have been had we left immediately.”

“Given the direction of the winds,” Artur commented, “I would say we have another storm to our south.”

“It’s possible, but I think, instead, we have clear weather to the northeast and the clockwise circulation of the winds is bringing us the currently unfavorable breezes,” Tellyndar disagreed. “That should modify in a day or two if I’m right. Actually, it will modify in a day or two if I’m wrong too,” he added with a laugh. “This is Mishanda and if you don’t like the weather just wait a minute; it will change.” They all chuckled at that.

“I could stand a change,” Faber commented dryly.

“Be careful what you ask for, Faber,” Gaenor told him. “This may be a long trip but I’m sure we would all prefer to avoid a change for the worse.”

“Of course, my lady,” Faber laughed and gave her an exaggerated bow. “One hurricane per trip is

enough for me.”

“We’d be lucky to survive a hurricane in this boat,” Artur commented. “That’s another good reason to hug the coast until we’re ready to make the crossing to Ichtar. If a storm does blow up we can take refuge in the nearest port. Once we start across the Gulf of Firdan, we’ll have no place to land except Ichtar and we don’t even know where.”

“True enough,” Vito agreed. “I’ve been studying the chart of Ichtar and while we know nothing about the interior of the island, most of the coast is made up of unscalable cliffs.”

“There’s that impossibly long sand spit on the eastern shore of the island,” Jimeleo commented. “That should be easy to land on.”

“True,” Vito agreed, “but if you take into account how that spit had to have been formed, my guess is that we won’t find a sheltered harbor anywhere along it, so after a moderate storm, we could return to find the *Tern* has been blown away. I don’t think we can trust the anchor to hold her in the sand indefinitely and even if she did stay where we left her, she could be capsized or destroyed, so I’d say we should only land there if there’s no other choice.”

“What about sailing up inside the bay enclosed by that sand spit?” Faber asked. “That should be nicely protected.”

“From storms, yes,” Tellyndar agreed, “but while waiting for you all to return to Misha I did a bit of research. It seems there was a ship that got storm-tossed that way a century ago. Looking for a safe harbor and not realizing exactly where they were, they tried sailing partway up that bay. They reported cliffs on the western edge of the bay and treacherous racing tides within it. Doesn’t sound like the sort of place we want to go.”

“Nothing about Ichtar makes it the sort of place we want to go,” Elena spoke up suddenly, causing everyone to turn and stare at her, “but we have to go anyway. Maybe we’ll find a landing spot in one of those fjords or up a river. If not, we’ll have to see about climbing one of those unscalable cliffs. In the meantime, however, it seems to me that arguing about it isn’t going to help us at all, now is it?”

As they left Asquamaquet Bay, the nature of the waves changed and the boat rolled with the long ocean waves. The motion was slow and even, but Cornellya became seasick almost instantly. Gaenor and Elena brought her ginger wafers and limeade which helped a little, but the vari continued looking green for the rest of the trip and was unable to fulfill her duties on the boat, which only made her feel all the more miserable.

“Don’t worry about it, Cornellya,” Gaenor told her. “There’s more than enough of the rest of us here to handle the boat safely. Most of us felt a little sick the first day too you know.”

“But you didn’t stay sick,” Cornellya retorted. “Why does the sea affect me so badly?”

“Some people just react that way,” Gaenor told her. “I know men who come from fishing families who have had to take jobs on land because they just cannot work at sea. It’s just the way it is.”

Fortunately they ran into no storms and the weather cleared sufficiently by the time they reached the coast of Kont County, that Tellyndar felt comfortable sailing directly south into the Gulf of Firdan and out of sight of land. “We can always turn west and find a landmark,” he explained, “but if the sky stays clear tonight, we’ll be able to take a reading of our latitude and know when to turn east.”

The sky did remain clear until mid-morning the next day, and by then they had already come about and set their course directly for Ichtar with what had become favorable winds.

They passed through an area of heavy rain that night, but when the sun rose the next morning in the clear eastern sky, they could see the northwestern shore of Ichtar. Aft of the *Tern* the sky was dark gray and stormy, but Ichtar, at least this part of it, was calm and warm.

“Where are we?” Vito asked Tellyndar as he finished taking readings with the sextant.

“I’m fairly sure that’s Ichtar,” Tellyndar replied, “but until I do my sums and check the chart I won’t know just what part. That wide opening could be the Bay of Bight, or it could be Turnback Bay, although the Turnback is more of a fjord than a bay. Whichever it is, our chart doesn’t plot it in its entirety, so there could be a place to land further in.”

“Should we head that way then?” Faber asked from the helm.

“We have to start looking somewhere. The mountains on either side are pretty daunting, but the bay is long and narrow and we don’t know the full extent of it,” Tellyndar replied. “So, yes, go ahead.”

“Are we going to fill in the map as we go along?” Vito asked.

“We may as well,” Tellyndar shrugged. “The cartographers of the world would never forgive us if we didn’t. Besides once we go inland, we may not be able to find our way back without a map.”

“We could blaze a trail,” Artur offered as he came up on deck, “Good morning, by the way. Gae and Elena have decided it’s their turn to make breakfast.”

“Morning,” Vito replied. “After whatever that was Jimeleo whipped up yesterday, I’m glad they got to the galley first. We don’t want to mark any trails, though. Sure they’d help us leave, but they would also help whatever demons live on that island find us.”

Faber frowned, “We’re not taking the sextant with us, are we?”

“No,” Tellyndar replied just as he was about to go below to determine their location. “It’s a delicate instrument, it would only get broken and it isn’t all that light either. I’d rather carry that weight in food or water.”

“Morning, Tellyndar,” Gaenor greeted him from the galley.

“Morning, Gaenor, Elena” he replied. “What do I smell?”

“Lena and I made a batch of biscuits,” she replied.

“They’ll go with the eggs and sausage,” Elena added.

“Right,” Gaenor nodded. “We’ve had to keep cooking down to a minimum because the seas were rough, but now that we’re in calm waters I figured we may as well enjoy something hot besides the tea and qahwah. Good morning, Cornellya. Are you feeling better?”

“Yes,” Cornellya replied weakly. “I felt better almost as soon as the boat stopped rolling. Is there

anything ready to eat yet?"

"A few more minutes," Gaenor promised. "Why don't you have a little tea and a ginger wafer? It's not much of a breakfast, but you haven't had much to eat the last few days. Maybe you should start off lightly."

Tellyndar finished his calculations, checked them on the chart of Ichtar, then before he could hear Cornellya's reply, went back on deck to report, "It's Turnback Bay."

"Good thing, you brought us as far south as you did before we turned east, then," Artur noted. "We could have missed the island completely."

"Fortunately we didn't," Tallyndar shrugged off the praise. "Our next big challenge will be to find a place to land without being seen."

"Easier said than done," Faber commented. "You know, we might have done better had the stormy weather stayed with us. The fog would have covered our landing."

Artur took a look to the west. "It still might," he replied. "Those clouds look like they're getting closer."

"Not fast enough," Faber corrected him. "We may already have been seen and that fjord ahead runs for a couple dozen miles at least. It's hard to believe we won't be fully visible."

"Who's to say there's anyone watching for us?" Artur countered. "I can't say how the other sides of those mountains look, but I doubt anyone lives on the sides facing us. The slopes are too steep. "I could be missing a foot path or two, but not a dwelling. It may be a lot different, however, inside. We'll see."

They enjoyed breakfast and then sailed smoothly up the Turnback Bay. It gained its name on the nautical chart because after heading dozens of miles northeast, the snake-like bay curved back on itself and stretched out to the south-southwest. As they traveled up the bay they discovered it was far longer than they had thought. The bay was formed by a pair of peninsulas; one that curled almost completely around the other. They began to think of those two peninsulas as Exterior and Interior.

If anything, the slopes got even steeper as they approached the head of the bay. Several times they spotted broad pebble beaches, but on landing, they discovered that those beaches were completely isolated. The sun was just setting behind the peaks of the interior peninsula when they reached another isolated beach at the very head of the bay.

"What now, Artur?" Tellyndar asked. "Do we anchor here for the night and check the beach more closely in the morning? Or should we just start sailing back out?"

"That beach doesn't look promising," Artur admitted, "but for all we know, it's the best landing site on Ichtar. If there is anyone out there watching us I don't want to be a sitting target for them. Let's draw back a few miles and anchor for the night near one of those cliffs that come right down to the water."

"Aren't you worried about someone rolling a boulder down on us?" Jimeleo asked.

"How deep is the water in this passage?" Radnir asked.

"Deeper than our anchor chain is long," Tellyndar responded.

“Too bad. We could have anchored for the night in the middle. What about that small beach a few miles back on the internal peninsula? It was only one hundred feet long at best and we were certain there was no safe way down the cliff there.”

“We were sure there was no safe way up the cliff,” Artur pointed out, “Anyone could rappel down the cliff. We’re going to have to take a chance one way or the other. Tars won’t be up for hours so it won’t be safe to try sailing out of here. I say we move back to alongside a cliff, but I also say we vote on it.”

The vote was close, but they decided to follow Artur’s suggestion. It was a nervous night, however, and they kept six of their number awake and on deck the entire time. That watch was made all the more nerve-wracking by following Haxmire’s suggestion that they light no lights. “It would blind us to anyone who approached while making us fully visible. If we keep the lights off then even if they try rolling rocks at us there’s less chance of being hit.” The suggestion was accepted by all, but it neither made it easier for those on watch nor those trying to sleep.

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Gaenor, Elena, Cornellya, Artur and Leracian had the third shift from three in the morning until past dawn. Tars had risen at midnight and so provided enough light for Elena to make a pot of qahwah for them all. “I think I’m starting to like this,” she remarked after her first sip, “although I really like hot chocolate better.”

“Hot chocolate?” Cornellya asked.

“Yes, it’s sort of like qahwah or tea, but instead it’s made by dissolving chocolate in hot water then it’s all whipped up with a little sugar and various spices. It always made me feel warm inside,” Elena smiled reminiscently. “It was one of the few nice things on Olaka.”

“If it was anything like the candy you gave me there it would have made me all warm inside too,” Cornellya replied tartly. In the moonlight it was impossible to tell if she was blushing, but chocolate had turned out to have a powerful aphrodisiac effect on the vari. “I think I still prefer tea to qahwah, though.”

“It’s an acquired taste,” Gaenor noted, “but with enough sugar, I’m starting to understand what Artur has always seen in it.”

“Not always,” Artur told her. “I never had it before Haxmire introduced us to it in Es. As I recall, you were the adventurous one that time and I just tasted a bit of yours.”

“Yes, but you liked it right away. It took me a long time to get used to it and it seems to have become quite popular in Cilbe, so I always figured it was something that complemented Cilben tastes,” Gaenor explained.

“What will we do if we can’t find a place to land unseen?” Elena asked a minute later.

“That all depends on how we’re received,” Artur told her. “If they’re hostile, we’ll have to run for it and try again somewhere else. If they’re unaccountably friendly, I suppose we’ll land. You know it is entirely possible there’s no one left alive here.”

“But they cast that big curse spell,” Elena protested.

“We’re still not entirely sure of the nature of the curse,” Gaenor told her, “especially the reason it was cast. For all we know, it was cast by the last few people of a dying race.”

“Why would they do that?” Elena asked.

“I don’t know,” Gaenor told her, “but we don’t know how they think either.”

“It could be a form of revenge, my chief,” Leracian suggested. “If the people of Ichtar are indeed demons or even just evil people, it is entirely possible they are or were seeking revenge for perceived damages done to them by the rest of the world.”

“Perceived damages?” Cornellya asked.

“I have seen it many times,” Leracian explained. “Any *Tem* would. Those who hire us usually do so in the name of revenge. The concept of revenge assumes that one is attempting to redress a wrong. Sadly, in many cases we have been hired to redress a wrong if that’s the right word, which was committed in retaliation for some other damage done by the person hiring the services of the *Tem*i.”

“Did you take such contracts?” Elena asked tentatively.

“Of course,” Leracian nodded. “It is not the job of the Ridec clan to pass judgment on our clients.”

“Maybe you should,” Elena told him.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Your people used to be technically illegal in Cilbe, right?” Elena asked. Leracian nodded. “And now you have been officially recognized.”

“By Chief Arturus,” Leracian pointed out.

“Right,” Elena nodded, “but by who... uh whom, doesn’t matter. The fact is, you are no longer that society of criminals the Cilbens saw you as.”

“We were never truly as the Cilbens saw us,” Leracian told her, a little defensively.

“I suppose not,” Elena allowed, “but the point was for the right price you would do whatever they wanted you to.”

“There were exceptions,” Leracian told her.

“Not a lot of them,” Elena pressed. “In fact, from what I have heard from you, you only balked at killing those you respected. Sounds good, but for the most part you only respect yourselves. You didn’t have that regard for Senator Arturus and Lady Gaenor until after they had killed a good lot of you. Isn’t that right?”

“Our respect began the moment they killed even one of us,” Leracian replied. “That almost never happens.”

“That was the sort of respect you give a worthy opponent,” Elena told him. “That doesn’t stop him from

being an opponent. Face it, you only stopped trying to kill them when your father saw their existence as a personal challenge to his position. When it became apparent they were worthy of being *Temí* that's when you truly respected them."

"All right," Leracian nodded. "So?"

"So you prove my point," Elena pressed. "The *Temí* only truly respect themselves. The few others they do respect, they adopt into their clans. In the meantime you still murder and steal and whatever else you do for a price. What if you picked and chose your jobs a bit more discriminately?"

"We do need to eat," Leracian pointed out, "and whether legal entities or not, we always have been part of Cilben society and Cilben economy."

"No argument there," Elena agreed, "but don't you see? Now that you are legal, you can afford to choose your jobs. I think you always could have, but you did not. I guess you just didn't think of that. But you could have affected the Cilben Empire for the better by choosing who you worked for.

"Say you were being hired for an assassination," she continued. "If you thought that Cilbe would benefit from the action you'll take the job. If not... well, face it, most of the men who hired you were like Martius Girdecus; self-serving greedy people with little regard for anyone else. Not the sort whose existence was ever likely to benefit others; not by their own design, anyway. So you could refuse jobs like that, perhaps. Hire yourselves out as bodyguards to those you do support. The *Temí* could become a powerful force for the good of the empire, you know."

"We have always been a people apart from the empire," Leracian explained.

"And likely always will think of yourselves that way, but by your own admission, you're also a part of the society and economy of the empire. You really can't be both, you know. Besides, if word got out you were being picky about the jobs you took, your prices would go way up. It seems to me that there are also those who would pay good money just to have one or two red-clad *Temí* visibly acting as guards. Those red suits are very intimidating, you know."

"They are supposed to be," Leracian told her. "That's why we only wear them while working."

"Aren't you working right now?" Elena asked, "as Gaenor's and the senator's honor guard?"

"That's a different sort of service," Leracian explained. "The honor guard of a *Temí* chief is always on duty even within one's own clan camp. It is understood that an honor guard would not wear his or her red battle togs when not directly ordered to perform a task for which such garb would be required. If Chief Arturus or Gaenor were to order me to kill someone for them, for example, I would don my battle togs. If I felt my chiefs were in danger and I expected to have to defend them imminently, I would wear them as well, but as they themselves are not wearing the red and have not assigned me that sort of task, I likewise follow their example."

"So the red suits are a sort of combat uniform?" Elena asked.

"A good way of putting it," Leracian nodded.

"And of course you wear them for intimidation purposes as well," she noted.

"What other reason would we have for wearing a color so easily spotted from a distance?" Leracian

countered. "You have no idea how hard it is to move through a city unseen while wearing the red."

"I can imagine," Artur chuckled. "You were spotted in Teliodena, although at the time I didn't know it was you or why you were there."

"You saw me there?" Leracian asked.

"I didn't," Artur told him. "Flacco did, on his way toward the Cilben Embassy."

"Ah," Leracian nodded. "That one always did have eyes sharp enough for a *Tem*."

They had the *Tern* sailing back up the bay before the sun had completely risen and it still had not peeked down on them from over the mountains to their east when they reached the beach at the head of the bay. It was a fairly large beach, several miles long and it took all day to explore it, but in the end, they decided there was no place they could safely climb up and into the interior of the island.

"Maybe we should have packed some mountain climbing tools," Faber remarked as he and Artur walked back toward the *Tern* along the beach. Unlike the other beaches in the bay, this one was sandy. The surface was easier on their feet, but required more effort to trudge through.

"I've never climbed a mountain that way," Artur replied. "Have you?"

"From time to time, yes," Faber told him.

"Is it particularly difficult?" Artur asked.

"That all depends on the mountain," Faber replied. "Some have gentle slopes and are just a matter of walking along the right paths. Others are more difficult."

"And how do you judge the ones we've seen so far?" Artur pressed.

"I would only recommend them for experienced climbers," Faber began. "Oh. I see what you're getting at. As a group we aren't all that experienced, are we?"

"Mountains were not on our training program," Artur nodded. "We were more concerned with learning to sail so we could get to these mountains. Ah well, we'll find someplace else. It's a large island and there must be someplace we can land."

"Probably," Faber agreed, "but by our fifth time around the island trying to find it we're bound to be noticed."

Without having to stop and inspect beaches, they were out of Turnback Bay by noon the next day and started heading south. They made good time heading southward until they came to a small archipelago of islands between the Turnback Bay and the Bay of Bight. They tried sailing between those islands and the coast of Ichtar, but the currents within the inner passage became vicious as the tide turned and they had to thread their way carefully between the islands. That was when they discovered how shallow the water was there.

Leracian was observing their passage from the bow when he noticed a small foamy patch of water dead ahead of the *Tern*. "Something in the water ahead," he shouted back to Tellyndar, "Turn left as fast as you can."

“Port!” Tellyndar shouted back.

“What?” Leracian asked at the top of his voice.

“Turn port! Not left,” Tellyndar corrected him.

“I couldn’t care less,” Leracian told him as he ran aft to the wheel and turned the boat hard to port. There was a scraping sound as the boat’s keel scraped along the bottom, shaking the boat and everyone in it with a sickening vibration.

“What’s that?” Cornellya asked worriedly as she bolted up from the boat’s cabin.

“Almost a disaster,” Leracian told her. “That was what scraping the bottom sounds like.” He turned to Tellyndar. “Next time I forget one of your silly sailor words, just do what I say and correct my terminology afterwards.”

“Uh, yeah,” Tellyndar replied, somewhat shaken. “Thanks.”

“We’d better be a bit more cautious in this region,” Artur remarked to Tellyndar.

“Let’s drop the jib,” Tellyndar decided. “It will slow us down some.”

“And I think I’ll join Leracian on the bow,” Artur added. “If nothing else I can translate. But maybe we had better check the hull for damage?”

“We’ll drop the sails as soon as we’re in safer waters,” Tellyndar replied. “Then some of us can go for a swim.”

Apart from scratches in the paint, there did not appear to be any serious damage to the boat. After that, they had several near misses that afternoon, but the first was the only time they had actually touched the bottom. It was toward the end of the day that Gaenor brought up the problem of landing unobserved again.

“It’s not exactly going well, is it?” she asked Artur as they sat in the stern. “By now we almost have to have been seen and if it hadn’t been for Leracian we would probably be swimming by now.”

“It would have been nice to find a place to land on our first day,” Artur commented, “but it may not be as bad as all that. There have been boats and ships blown out this way by storms often enough, that our being here is probably not sufficiently unusual for them to become alarmed or even take much notice.”

“What about all the stories of magical attacks by fire and lightning?” Gaenor asked.

“Probably just stories,” Artur shrugged. “When I was wandering around the harbor of Mishaport, I met a lot of sailors who had seen the coast of Ichtar. Not a single one of them had ever been attacked.”

“That could mean ships that were attacked were destroyed just like that Pahnese pirate that tried to attack us,” Gaenor pointed out.

“Then who survived to tell the stories?” Artur countered. “The way I see it, either we’ve already been seen and the natives don’t think our presence is anything out of the ordinary, in which case we have a

good chance of finding a landing without have to face a reception party, or else they mostly stay away from the coast in which case we have an even better chance. If it weren't for Kseniya's and Borritt's insistence, I'd be tempted to assume nobody lives here, but they always maintained this was the only other place besides the Village where people spoke the Old Tongue as their native language."

"Why would they speak Old Tongue?" Elena asked. As was so often the case she had been sitting near Gaenor, quietly writing in a notebook. "That's the Vieri language. Why would demons speak the same language?"

"Many Human languages are obviously linguistically derivative from Old Tongue," Gaenor replied. "Shandi, Gostri and Astish are the closest ones, but even Cilben has some words that sound similar to their Old Tongue counterparts. It is thought that there was once a single language and that all the modern ones have evolved from that one."

"And that one would be Old Tongue?" Elena asked.

"Perhaps," Gaenor replied. "According to the Vieri that's the case."

"The sun is getting low in the sky, Artur," Jimeleo pointed out from the helm. "Why don't we anchor ourselves to one of these islands?"

"Suits me," Artur replied, "but Tellyndar's our captain while we're on the boat at least. What does he say?"

"He's been asleep for the last hour," Jimeleo reported. "That puts you in charge."

"Does it?" Artur asked. "First I've heard of it, but sure, find an island you like and we'll set the anchor."

Jimeleo chose the nearest one on their course, a small island with a clump of coconut palms in the center and almost nothing else but sand in sight. He also chose it because it was so small - a mere two acres at high tide - it was obvious there was nothing on it that might attack them in the night. "It's also far enough from the main island that we can have our lanterns lit this evening," he explained.

Cornellya, feeling much better than she had in days, chose to make dinner that evening with Vito's help. The food, a thick stew, heavily spiced with pepper, ginger and various other herbs was as close as she could come to a dish her mother had taught her how to make. They all found it quite unusual, but only Cornellya and Elena enjoyed it without reservation.

"I'll go along with the majority on this," Artur began after dinner, "but it seems to me that we're far enough away from the main island that we really ought not to be worried about attacks tonight. We should take advantage of that tonight and get more sleep."

"We still only have nine bunks," Faber pointed out.

"Agreed," Arutr nodded, "but even this far out, we ought to have some of us on guard. However, we can keep duty shifts shorter and sleep shifts longer. We'll probably reach the Bay of Bight tomorrow and if so and we find a place to land, we'll want to be as well rested as possible."

"I certainly won't mind getting a bit more sleep," Tellyndar commented. They all agreed with that sentiment.

“I’m beginning to think we may not be able to find a place to land,” Jimeleo commented a few minutes later. All these cliffs and that chart of ours shows them everywhere but the east shore.”

“Then we’ll make our way to the east shore,” Artur told him. Just because it’s a bad place to land, it doesn’t mean it isn’t the only place.

“Too bad we can’t use magic to climb these cliffs,” Vito sighed.

“There is a spell for the carving of stone,” Cornellya offered. “My people used it to improve the galleys and rooms of the Village, not to mention the terrace steps in our reservoir.”

“Why haven’t you mentioned that before?” Jimeleo asked sharply.

“I don’t actually know the spell,” Cornellya admitted. “It’s just something I was told about during my initial training. You don’t think we would teach children how to do something like that, do you? There would be graffiti on every available surface, most of it quite lewd.”

“Just how old are you?” Jimeleo asked abruptly.

“I thought humans didn’t consider that sort of question polite,” Cornellya stalled.

“For the sake of argument let’s just say I was raised in a barn,” Jimeleo shrugged. “How old?”

“I am eighteen years old by human reckoning,” Cornellya replied. “Just a few years older than Elena, in fact, and a bit younger than Radnire.”

“Really?” Jimeleo asked, “You seem much older.”

“Thank you, I guess,” Cornellya replied. “Among Vieri we reckon age in terms of wisdom. An elder might be as young as a century, or one who has seen a full millennium might never be considered an elder. Anyway, I don’t know how that spell would have been cast.”

“I don’t see the problem,” Haxmire commented. “We’re adepts, we should be able to create a spell that can carve stone. Perhaps we can just create a staircase up the side of one of these mountains. Gaenor, you’re better at new spells than any of us. Can you do it?” They all turned to see she had already opened a notebook and was scribbling in it almost feverishly.

“Crafting the spell is easy enough,” Gaenor replied, still working on her notes, “but did anyone think to bring extra sulfur? I know we have some, but it’s for the great spell. I’m trying to find a substitute, but so far nothing I’ve come up with works.”

“Maybe we can find some sulfur on shore?” Radnire asked.

“Are any of those mountains volcanic?” Gaenor countered.

“I don’t think so,” Artur replied, “at least none of the ones we’ve seen so far look like volcanoes, although you can’t always tell, I suppose.”

“Too bad,” Gaenor commented. “That might have been a source of sulfur or at least some rock with enough sulfur in it. Too bad I can’t think of a substitute. There must be a combination of spell ingredients that would serve, but I’m stumped.”

“How about using the periodic table,” Elena suggested. “Don’t elements directly above and below each other have similar chemical properties? Maybe that would apply here as well.”

“Maybe, but they are never identical. The question is, would those neighbors have the properties we’re looking for? Let’s see. Just above sulfur is oxygen. There’s certainly adequate oxygen in the air all around us.” She worked for a few minutes before heaving a loud sigh. “No, I might be able to burn the rock that way, but I’m as likely to produce a lava field as a stairway if I apply the sort of power we need. I’m also not sure what sort of byproducts we would get. Essentially the spell would act like a miniature volcano and volcanoes spew out poisonous gasses as well as ash and lava. I don’t know enough to guess which we might get.”

“The clouds of smoke and ash might attract attention as well,” Tellyndar commented.

“Right,” Gaenor nodded, “and below sulfur is... What is below it?”

“Selenium,” Elena supplied.

“Selenium?” Gaenor echoed. “Well, we certainly don’t have any of that floating about, do we? Anyone know of something we have that might have selenium in it? No? And below that is Tellurium. The only thing I know about Tellurium is its name. Below that there’s nothing. Well, there might be another element or two below Tellurium on the periodic table, but so far as I know none have been discovered yet. That pretty much leaves us back where we started, looking for compounds and tools to do what we want.

“I thought of using the Law of Sympathy to do that, but given the scale of the project and the nature of the terrain, we’d have to work slowly. It would probably take a week to get up the side of one of these cliffs that way and for all we know, there may be more impassable mountains beyond them.”

“How far on to the island do we need to be?” Radnire asked. “Wouldn’t one of these isolated beaches we’ve been landing on be enough?”

“If we run out of time,” Gaenor replied, “we’ll do just that, but I’d feel better if we were on solid ground. Somehow a sandy beach just seems too transitory to me, although I suppose it’s the distance from the source of the spell that really counts. That’s why we had to come here.”

“Just where is the source of the spell?” Radnire pressed.

“Somewhere on Ichtar,” Gaenor replied. “We think it is closer to the center of the island than the coast, but we just don’t know for certain. We couldn’t pinpoint it from there.”

“Then try again from here,” Radnire insisted.

“The spell they used requires three adepts and I wasn’t one of the adepts involved. I know how it worked, but not the details of how it was cast,” Gaenor explained.

“We could try the Kimmite Balance spell,” Cornellya suggested.

“It’s not as good,” Gaenor replied. “If this qualifies as an imbalance, all we’ll get is the direction toward the center of imbalance.

“What sort of spell is this?” Haxmire asked.

“The women adepts of Kimn believe there are certain imbalances that occur in the world that must be redressed or else all will devolve into chaos,” Gaenor told him. “Over the last few centuries they have quietly made it their business to correct major imbalances. Artur believes they really need not have bothered in most if not all cases, since the world seems to have taken care of itself before they stepped in to correct imbalances. I tend to agree, but their spell really will lead one toward what they call an imbalance. They call that ‘heeding the balance’ and we followed it through the Imperial Palace of Cilbe to find the Emperor.

“It doesn’t give you so much as a clue as to what to do to correct an imbalance. It just points you at it. I suppose if that imbalance is a landslide all you can really do is run for your life,” Gaenor chuckled, “so we haven’t heeded the balance more than a few times out of curiosity since leaving Cilbe. The only reason we did in the first place was to keep our promise to Queen Khodania of Kimn. Once the promised was fulfilled, there was no further reason to use the spell.”

“I would be interested in seeing that spell,” Haxmire commented.

“I wish I could show it to you, but the Kimnites do not allow men to practice magic and we promised we would not share the spell with any men,” Gaenor told him. “It’s silly, I know, but I did promise and even if I hadn’t, I would still want to respect their beliefs no matter how much I disagree with them.”

“It takes two hours just to cast the spell,” Cornellya supplied, “the first time, that is. After that it stays active in the back of your mind until you need it, but if you don’t use it, it goes away after a while. Gaenor and I can cast it later and see if it turns out to be of any use to us, if you like.”

“Not a bad idea,” Gaenor decided.

“Can I use the spell too?” Elena asked hopefully.

“How could you do that?” Radnire asked.

“Gae’s amulet spell,” Elena replied. “We’ve done it before.”

“It would take her an extra two hours to prepare you,” Artur pointed out.

“Not necessarily,” Gaenor corrected him. “Cornellya and I noticed an interesting effect when we cast the balance spell together on Kimn. We were each bathed in a red aura as we cast the spell. That was common enough; a lot of long spells have similar visible side effects while they are being cast, but as we continued the aura merged and we noticed that we were casting the spell on each other as much as we were on ourselves. I think if Elena were to sit between us and we stayed close enough, she would be able to use the spell.”

“So you would cast the amulet spell on me and then the balance spell?” Elena asked.

“Actually the balance spell incorporates a variant on the amulet spell already,” Gaenor told her. “That’s why it lasts so long. And yes, I think I will let you try. If it works there will be three of us heeding the balance. Maybe you can make more of the spell than we did.”

“I wish I could try that,” Radnire commented wistfully.

“You’re not a woman,” Gaenor replied, then laughed a little, “and you’re not my student either. It

wouldn't be right for me to cast amulet spells on you, but if Doctor Haxmire approved..." she left it hanging.

"I have been thinking of using that as a training exercise ever since you told me about how you cast the binding spell in Firdan," Haxmire admitted, "but our students are just starting to get to the stage where we would want them to get that sort of practice. Well, if we come up with a useful spell to use, maybe we'll try that."

Gaenor and Cornellya didn't cast the spell until well after dark, when they could sit on the bow of the *Tern* in relative privacy. When the bright red glow enveloped them, Gaenor was glad they weren't within sight of Ichtar, although she feared the glow might be bright enough to reflect off the clouds that had rolled in shortly after sunset. She decided that a casual observer might decide it was a twilight glow, even though such sights were not common this far south.

They heard a strange set of barking and roaring sounds as they continued casting the spell, but could not afford the luxury of stopping to see what was causing them. They were dimly aware the men had come up on deck to investigate, but their concentration continued to center on the balance spell.

Finally the spell was finished and they could turn to see what was making all the noise. The sand of the island they had anchored off the shore appeared to be moving and when Gaenor cast a light spell to illuminate the beach they saw hundreds of seals all sprawled out on the beach. They were making a horrendous racket and still more were arriving even as they watched.

"What are those creatures?" Cornellya asked. "They sort of look like big furry fish, but..."

"They're seals, silly," Elena told her. "We had seals in Olaka harbor every winter, although these are larger than the sort we had there. Sometimes they would sleep on the dock until the harbormaster chased them off. They get to be pests after a while and they make the dock and boats a real mess, but they usually only stay a week or two. They look awkward on land, but in the water there's nothing more graceful."

"They're mammals, aren't they?" Cornellya asked, "not some monstrous sort of fish?"

"Yes," Gaenor replied, "They're mammals just like you and me. They breathe air and feed their young with milk. I've seen this sort in Narmouth. They're called Monk Seals, and they used to be common all along the coast. We don't see them quite as often these days. There's some concern they've been overhunted. That might explain why they're so plentiful here, though. Nobody comes this close to Ichtar so the seals are safe enough."

Cornellya volunteered to take the first watch so she could look at the seals, but three hours later she was tired enough to find sleep more attractive. By the time dawn arrived the seals were gone again and there was a light misty rain soaking everything.

Three

"Won't have to worry about being seen for a while at least this morning," Artur declared. "We can't see much more than a few hundred yards ourselves."

"It's going to be slower going than yesterday," Tellyndar replied. "There's only a light breeze but even if

it was stronger, we would have to inch our way back through these islands to get to the coast of Ichtar .”

“Let’s give this stretch of coast a miss,” Artur suggested. “If the chart is at all accurate, the peninsula that forms the western side of the Bay of Bight isn’t going to be easily crossable anyway. We’re on the outer side of this island chain anyway, so let’s just stay on this side and head directly for that bay. If we find no landing spot, we can always come back this way to take a look before heading south and east.”

Tellyndar thought about that for a bit then decided, “All right, but I don’t want to lose sight of land for too long. There are no marker buoys in these waters telling us where we are. I’ll continue to the southernmost island of this archipelago, then turn east until we can see Ichtar again, but just barely.”

Artur nodded then went to the galley to see about making breakfast now that it was his turn to cook. Artur’s abilities at a stove had been a standing joke between himself and Gaenor almost as long as his inability to hold a tune in a bucket had been. However, he was not so helpless that he would ruin eggs, bacon and toast, although he was secretly glad when Elena came to help him with the qahwah and tea. Tea was simple enough, but somehow he had never gotten the knack of brewing a decent pot of qahwah. He suspected he would get better with practice someday.

He was just about to start breaking eggs on the griddle when it occurred to him that he hadn’t tasted an omelet since they had traveled through the Thimdra States a year earlier, so he paused to chop up an onion and start sautéing the pieces, before finding a bowl to break the eggs into.

“What are you doing, Senator?” Elena asked.

“You know, it’s really okay if you just call me Artur like everyone else, Elena,” he replied. “We need to use up the eggs, so I’m making an omelet.”

“A what?”

“You’ll see,” he told her. “Could you see about cutting up some of the cheese? Not too much since that will probably keep for our trip home, but there’s no reason we can’t enjoy some of it now. We’ll probably carry some inland with us too.”

Elena shrugged and after finding a small wheel of cheese, stripped off part of the protective wax and then cut thick slices of the cheese into cubes. “Like this?” she asked as Artur started beating the eggs in the bowl.

“Perfect,” he assured her as the smell of frying onions filled the cabin. “Too bad we don’t have a bit of garlic. Well, at least we have salt and pepper.”

By the time he was finished everyone was awake and most were watching Artur at the stove. “I was beginning to think you couldn’t cook,” Faber commented, “but that smells wonderful.”

“It was a good choice, my chief,” Leracian told him. “I should have thought of this last time it was my turn.”

“We were still trying to conserve the cheese at that point,” Artur reminded the *Tem* . He cut the large omelet into four generous pieces and put two of them on plates and handed them to Leracian. “Here. Will you take the other plate out to Tellyndar?”

“Of course, my chief.” Leracian replied. Then Artur served Elena and Cornellya and started the next

batch.

Faber and Vito volunteered to clean up after breakfast and Artur took his portion up on deck to eat while seeing how much progress they were making. He arrived to see a circle of water all around them within a wall of solid seeming fog about three hundred yards from the boat.

“Visibility is even worse than at dawn, I see,” he observed.

“We passed the last island while you were cooking,” Tellyndar told him, “but I’ll keep to a southerly course for another hour just to be safe. The wind is barely filling the sails, so we’re not moving very rapidly.”

“At least it stopped raining,” Artur replied.

“For now, anyway,” Tellyndar replied sourly.

“Gae, you never told us how the balance heeding went?” Artur asked.

“Balance heeding?” Gaenor laughed. “Well enough I suppose. I was right. By seating Elena between us, we gave her the ability to heed the balance. It will still take some doing to teach her how to use the spell, but since Cornellya and I figured it out mostly for ourselves, I doubt Lena will have much trouble. There’s a center of imbalance,” she paused to consider, then pointed some degrees south of true east, “off that way, and if our experience with the imbalance in Cilbe is typical, I’d guess it’s three or four days of travel away from us, assuming we were riding on a road.”

“I don’t want to actually reach the very center before we cast the great spell,” Artur told her.

“No, that would be stupid,” she agreed. “We would, no doubt be seen and stopped. But we should see how close we can get safely.”

“Just remember we have to get back out again when we’re done and we don’t know what sort of pyrotechnics this spell is going to produce. Something pretty spectacular, I would think.”

“We’ll call Kseniya when we land and ask how close we need to be,” Gaenor promised. “I’m getting different sorts of readings from the balance spell this time than last and I’m going to want to consult with Khodania as well to see if it’s significant. The nature of the imbalance is different, so it’s only sensible to conclude I’d get different results, but advice from someone with more experience would help.”

The fog lifted only a little that day so that by the middle of the afternoon when they entered the mouth of the Bay of Bight, they could see just over a mile around them. Consequently, they could see only the northern and western coast of the bay, but not the south and east. The side they could see was even more rugged than any part of Turnback Bay had been. Because of their slow progress they were not yet at the head of the bay by nightfall.

After another nervous night with five on duty at all times, they continued onward up the bay. The foggy conditions persisted as they approached the mouth of a river, although visibility was better than on the previous day with visibility over two miles.

“I see a beach to the west of the river with no mountains behind it,” Tellyndar told Artur.

“We’re more interested in getting to the east of this river,” Artur replied.

“I see some cliffs on that side,” Tellyndar told him, “but this river’s an estuary and the mouth is almost two miles wide. Let’s sail a little way up the river, a few miles or so. Maybe there will be a good place to land. At least it will be more sheltered than the bay, although the water in this bay is pretty calm.”

“It wouldn’t be in a storm,” Artur pointed out, “and maybe we’ll find a tree we can tie the boat to.”

As they headed up the river, it remained fairly wide, with gently rising grass-covered hills to the west and salt marsh on the east. After several miles, Tellyndar decided, “This is as far upstream as I feel comfortable going. Any river this large is likely to have someone living along it and our mast can be seen from a fair distance.”

“Do you still want to land on the west side?” Artur asked.

“I’ve decided against that,” Tellyndar replied, “There’s nothing but grass on that side and we would have to leave the *Tern* in the middle of the main channel. There are a lot of small channels in the marsh to our starboard and some trees of some sort – they look like maples – beyond the marsh. These tall reeds will go along way toward hiding that mast of ours too.”

“We could unstep the mast,” Artur pointed out.

“That could be disastrous if we have to leave in a hurry,” Tellyndar pointed out.

“And just as disastrous if the mast is spotted and someone comes to investigate,” Artur countered.

“Another vote?” Tellyndar suggested.

“No, I’ll go by your decision. You’re the captain; you choose where and how to dock.”

“That’s another issue,” Tellyndar pointed out. “if we want to be able to make a fast getaway, we’re going to have to back the *Tern* into a channel.”

“This boat isn’t really designed to go backwards, is it?” Artur asked.

“Not really, no,” Tellyndar shook his head. “The wind, what little we have is coming from the northwest, so I think I can sort of head us into it and then let it push us back a bit, but steering will be difficult because she’ll keep trying to turn around. None of these channels are as wide as the *Tern* is long, so we can’t just sail in and turn around. Several of us are going to have to jump into the water and mud and haul her as close to shore as we can get.”

“Good thing we have a half mile of rope on board,” Artur observed. “Oh well, I’ll volunteer to go swimming and we’ll see how many others care to get wet.”

“Oh, we’re all going to get wet,” Tellyndar laughed. “Nobody seems to have built a dock for us to land at. Darned unaccommodating of these demons, don’t you think? So we’ll all have to swim or wade our way to shore. I’m just hoping we can build a fire to dry off by when we’re done.”

“We can dry off by magic if necessary,” Artur told him.

“Fire’s more comfortable and it lasts longer,” came the reply

Tellyndar brought the *Tern* about masterfully and coaxed the breeze to start them off in the right direction, but his predictions concerning the steering of a sailboat in reverse proved all too accurate, so the other men jumped into the water and hauled the large boat slowly up the channel Tellyndar had chosen until the keel started touching the mud.

“Avast!” he called to them. “This is as far as we can go.”

“Very good!” Artur called back from almost dry land two hundred yards away. “Let’s pick a couple of good strong trees to tie up to,” he suggested to the others.

“I think this is low tide,” Tellyndar told them as they returned to the boat, “but we need to find out for certain. If the water level gets much lower we can get stranded in the mud, which won’t help us if we’re trying to make a run for it.”

“How extreme are the tides in here, do you think?” Vito asked.

“Judging from the mean level of the marsh,” Tellyndar replied after thinking about it, “probably not too bad except during spring tides around the full and new moons of Tars. We had a new moon, so the next spring tide is in another two weeks or so.”

“Spring tide?” Faber asked. “But it’s autumn, or it would be further north.”

“It has nothing to do with the season,” Vito explained. “Spring tides occur when Tars, the larger of our two moons is either new or full, and neap tides at the quarters.”

“I’m not sure exactly how high or low the water will get then,” Tellyndar continued, “but since those trees are there, we should be all right.”

“Unless we have to sail off during an extreme low tide,” Gaenor pointed out.

“There’s no helping that,” Artur told her. “Odds are this channel is almost dry at least once a year or two. Hopefully we won’t experience a really extreme tide while we’re here.”

The *Tern* came equipped with a small life raft, which while too small to accommodate all eleven in the party served well to bring their supplies and equipment to dry land. Immediately on arriving on shore, Leracian grabbed his bow and arrows and left to scout out the territory. “Maybe I’ll find some fresh meat as well,” he told them as he left.

“You know,” Artur observed to Tellyndar after they had changed into dry clothing, “it’s a good thing I didn’t talk you into unstepping the mast. It doesn’t really show too badly over those tall reeds, and we may need it to help find our way back here.”

When Leracian did not return immediately, they decided to set up camp a few hundred yards further in from the river where the presence of oaks indicated that the water rarely, if ever, reached that far.

“I hope he can find us here,” Elena worried.

“Leracian is a good tracker,” Gaenor reminded her, “and we deliberately did not cover our trail. He probably expects us to move even further than we have since it’s still a few hours before sunset.”

“Why aren’t we moving on right now?” Elena asked.

“We need his report as to what is around us. For all we know there could be a village half a mile from here. That’s why we haven’t started a fire yet. We don’t want to attract attention,” Gaenor replied. “This is a good time for you to heed the balance, however.”

“I have been,” the girl admitted, “almost constantly, but aside from the direction, I can’t really make out much more from the spell.”

“Neither can Cornellya nor I,” Gaenor admitted. “That’s why we are going to talk to the queen of Kimn this evening. Maybe there is nothing else we can do with the spell at our level of experience, but I do know that we’ll be able to tell if we have corrected the imbalance or made it worse. We need to call her anyway, to make sure the letter I sent giving her our timetable arrived.”

Gaenor spent much of the afternoon working on her self-propelled carriage again. It was mostly just to take her mind off of the danger they were in, but while working, she figured out how to supply power to the complex of spells the carriage would employ from a single source. “The source is basically a large amulet charged with magical energy,” she explained to the others while they were still waiting for Leracian. “It will funnel power out to a linkage spell which, in turn, is a smaller sort of amulet that does nothing but feed power to the governor spells which in turn control the actual working magic of the vehicle. The linkage amulet maintains the links to all the other spells so all you need to do on installing a new power unit is to renew the connection between the power and the linkage array. Simple.”

“If you say so,” Radnire told her, unconvinced.

“Well, I still have some details to work out, but that’s the way it should go,” Gaenor told him. She and Haxmire were still discussing the new means of powering the vehicle when Leracian finally returned with the cleaned carcass of a deer slung over his shoulders.

“I saw no settlements,” he reported, “but there’s a road about five miles north of here that leads to a large stone bridge that crosses the river another two miles further north.”

“A road?” Artur repeated.

“A fairly well-built one as well, my chief; not unlike some of the ancient Cilben highways,” Leracian told him. “It is paved with stones and higher in the center to facilitate drainage. Whoever built it was accomplished at engineering.”

“Sounds like,” Artur agreed. “Was there any traffic on the road?”

“None that I saw, my chief,” Leracian reported, “but I only followed it long enough to see the river, less than half an hour.”

“Perhaps demons don’t like to travel in the fog,” Jimeleo conjectured.

“That’s silly,” Cornellya retorted. “Why would fog bother them?”

“I don’t know,” Jimeleo admitted. “Maybe they’re superstitious about fog. Superstitions are often silly, or maybe Leracian just got lucky, or unlucky depending on how you see it.”

“Well, if the road is that far away,” Artur decided, “it will probably be safe to build a campfire this evening after it’s too dark to see our smoke in the sky.” That news was greeted happily by everyone and

Faber and Vito immediately started preparing the fresh venison to cook over the impending blaze.

After dinner Cornellya and Gaenor got down to the business of the calling spells they planned. Elena and Radnire were both especially interested in the spell as were Haxmire, Tellyndar and Faber to lesser extents, but Gaenor warned them off, “We’re going to try contacting Queen Khodania first and the Kimnites are sensitive about the whole concept of male adepts and especially about the spell we’ll be discussing with her, so please stay out of the visible range of the spell. Artur can tell you about the calling spell anyway, since he learned it from the Vieri before I did. All right,” she continued when the men had moved away from the area Gaenor had warned them would be visible from the other side of the calling spell, “I think we should add the power amplification module to the spell again, so Khodania won’t think she’s just hearing voices.”

“I just hope we don’t frighten her to death when we contact her,” Cornellya commented. “remember Kseniya’s reaction the first time she saw us via this spell?”

“That was because she had never experienced a visible image in a calling,” Gaenor replied. “Besides, we only met Khodania the one time we were on Kimn. I’m not sure I would recognize her by voice alone.”

“Maybe we should talk to Kseniya first,” Cornellya wondered.

“We’ll talk to her too,” Gaenor agreed, “but Khodania knows more about the Balance, I think, and we really do need to make sure she knows we’re here and when to start her part. My letter may have been lost or still on its way.”

Gaenor cast the complex spell, made all the more difficult by the power amplification module she had devised for it. As she did so, it occurred to her that this was very much like what she had been working toward on her powered carriage. The power amplifier spell might not be of use in the carriage, but the power unit she was designing could be used to provide the energy to maintain this spell and would work without draining energy from the user.

As she finished the incantation and ritual, a blue glow formed a few yards away from her. The glowing area expanded and began to form an image of Queen Khodania sitting on her throne in Kimn city. As the scene was inside a building, Gaenor assumed the weather did not permit Khodania to hold court outside as was her usual practice. “What is this?” she asked, alarmed until she was able to make out the faces of Gaenor and Cornellya. “Lady Gaenor? Is this truly your doing?”

“The basic spell is Vieri, Your Majesty,” Gaenor replied.

“Although the amplification necessary for a visual image is hers,” Cornellya added.

“Ah, Lady Cornellya, still serving as Lady Gaenor’s publicist?” Khodania asked lightly, although she still appeared a bit shaken by the spell itself.

“It’s something to do when studies get burdensome,” Cornellya laughed.

“Your Majesty,” Gaenor cut in, “we need to ask some questions about the Balance. I hope this is not an inconvenient time.”

“Not so inconvenient that I cannot make the time for you, Lady Gaenor; not when it concerns the Balance. Perhaps, however, you would be more comfortable if we discussed this in private. The best way would be to move to a smaller room, I think,” Khodania considered.

“Go ahead, Your Majesty,” Gaenor told her. “The spell is centered on you and me. It will follow us wherever we go so long as it lasts.”

“And how long will it last?” Khodania asked as she got up and headed out a side door from her throne room.

“As long as we have sufficient power,” Gaenor replied. “We usually don’t try to maintain it more than half an hour because it drains the user. Also we need to contact the Vieri this evening so we had better not stay with you too long. Oh, by the way, Your Majesty, I’d like to present my student and ward, Elena Carolena, late of Olaka in the Cilben Empire.”

“Pleased to meet you, my dear,” Khodania replied as she finally reached a private room and sat down. “Now, sister, what’s with all these ‘Majesties?’ They make me feel like one of your kings.”

“Sorry, Khodania,” Gaenor replied, dropping all terms of address, “but when you greeted me by my title, I thought you were in a formal situation so I used yours in return.”

“I was more startled than anything else,” Khodania admitted. “So many unusual events have occurred in the last two years, you would think I’d be used to them by now. I believe we truly live in the age of the Prophecy.”

“You never did tell us what that prophecy was,” Gaenor noted, “but at the moment that is not so important, I don’t think.”

“It may be quite important,” Khodania disagreed, “but as the Council of Wisdom believes it concerns you both and some of those with you it is probably best not to tell you anything about it in detail. As Cornellya pointed out when we first met, so many examples of prophecies are self-fulfilling. Besides, the Prophecy only predicts various events we appear to be building up to of which this is just one, not how they will be resolved, so of what possible use will it be to you?”

“That depends on how detailed it gets about those events,” Gaenor replied, “but if it’s like most such I’ve heard, it’s probably on the vague side.”

Khodania shrugged noncommittally. “We can discuss that on your return. Before we go on, I want to thank you again for the courtesy you gave my sister. I made a pilgrimage to her gravesite last summer. When you told me you marked it with a stone, I had not realized it was such a beautiful stone. Was the smaller piece you left in front of it of any significance?”

“It was what we call a footstone,” Gaenor replied. The big one or head stone was placed at the head of Khotina’s and Geramir’s grave, the footstone is at their feet.”

“Did it do any harm to remove it?” Khodania asked.

“None I’m aware of. They had already passed on,” Gaenor shrugged. “Why did you remove it?”

“It felt as if some of my sister’s spirit might be in it,” Khodania replied, “and I wanted to bring even a small part of her home.”

“By that reasoning if her spirit was partially in the stone, then so was Geramir’s,” Gaenor pointed out.

"I won't tell if you don't," Khodania told her conspiratorially. "Now what do you need to know, sister?"

"Heeding the Balance," Gaenor replied. "We can find the center of imbalance easily enough but how can we use the spell to interpret what sort of imbalance is involved? This one feels different than the last one we dealt with so I was hoping that might be significant."

"It is significant as each imbalance requires its own solution. You can tell the type of imbalance by experience mostly," Khodania told her. "The imbalance you followed to Cilbe was one that centered on a single person and his actions. When the Emperor Lusius died, the imbalance was adjusted."

"Did you know that was what was required when you gave us that task?" Gaenor asked, trying to keep an edge out of her voice.

"We knew the imbalance involved a man and was political in nature, sister," Khodania replied easily, "but not having investigated the matter ourselves, we did not know what adjustment would have been necessary. It might not have been necessary for you to kill Emperor Lusius, merely to turn him from the course he was on."

"I didn't kill him, not did anyone else in our army," Gaenor told her. "He killed himself by jumping out of a window."

"Army?" Khodania asked.

"Two armies actually. You really had to be there," Gaenor shrugged. "So what is the nature of this imbalance?"

"You already know that, sister," Khodania replied. "It is the great spell of Ichtar; the one you are there to disrupt. You need to end this spell soon, I would guess, so there are two things I think it will be safe to tell you.

"First, as you must guess by now, successfully casting your own great spell you will properly adjust the imbalance. I did receive your letter and we will all be ready six days from now. Second, be wary. While no one has lied to you, not everything you know is true."

"Such as?" Gaenor asked, but received no answer.

"You see?" Cornellya asked. "This is why I hate the very notion of prophecy."

"It never made much sense to me either," Gaenor replied, "and I should have known better than to ask. Well, Khodania, we have another calling to make yet tonight. Be well."

"And you, dear sister," Khodania replied. "Be at peace." Gaenor let the spell go and Khodania's image faded away.

"Gae?" Elena asked in the silence, "Do you really think her sister's spirit was in the stone Khodania took from her grave?"

"No," Gaenor shook her head tiredly. Her power amplification helped but did not entirely stop power from draining out of her while she used the spell. "But it's isn't what I believe that counts. If Khodania believes it and it gives her comfort to think she brought Khotina home, then all for the best. Besides, maybe I'm wrong and she's right. Or maybe we're both right. It's a religious belief and those are very

often right for one person and wrong for another. I'm going to need a break before I cast the next spell."

"I'll let you take a break," Cornellya told her, "but it's my turn. I've yet to cast it the way you do, so this should be interesting. And, boys, you won't have to stay hidden this time. Vieri are more concerned with the sort of person you are, not your gender."

Artur brought Gaenor a cup of tea and sat down next to her while she sipped it. When everyone was ready, Cornellya cast the calling spell and soon a bright blue image of Kseniya Keshayu appeared.

"Hello, Cornellya," Kseniya greeted her, looking up from a table she was working at, "Oh, and everyone else. Where are you?" By now I would have expected you to be near Ichtar. We're almost out of time you know."

"We're on Ichtar already," Cornellya replied.

"What! You're calling from Ichtar? You're too close to the," she paused almost imperceptibly, "demons! They might detect your spell."

"I don't think so," Gaenor disagreed calmly. "It's a very directional spell and as far as we know there are no demons between us and you. There's not a whole lot of Ichtar between us for that matter."

"Be very certain, Gaenor," Kseniya told her. "Hopefully, you're right. What did you need to talk to me about?"

"We just spoke to Queen Khodania of Kimn," Cornellya explained. "I mentioned their concept of the Balance to you, didn't I?"

"Yes, dear, you did," Kseniya agreed, "but while it sounds like an interesting notion I have not had an opportunity to explore it since I last saw you. The Council of the Wise has been very busy preparing for the spell you are about to cast. I have been expecting your call, but thought it would be before you left the mainland. How soon do you expect to cast it?"

"In six days," Cornellya replied. "That's what we arranged with the adepts of Misha and Kimn."

"Good," Kseniya nodded.

"That's really why we called," Gaenor explained. "Your directions were to merely come to Ichtar and cast the spell, but the Kimnite balance spell indicates the center of imbalance is near the center of the island. That's a long way from where we are. Should we cast the spell from where we are or try to get closer?"

"I'm going to have to leave that decision to you, dear," Kseniyah finally replied. "There's no need to endanger yourself unnecessarily, but the closer you get the better chance you'll have of success. Look, I'm really not very comfortable with you using this spell from there. Cornellya, much as I love seeing you again, you had better break the connection."

"All right, Kseniyah," Cornellya replied. "Be well."

"And you too, dear. All of you."

Cornellya let the spell go and the area became dark once more.

Four

It started raining again overnight and they had to pack the tents up wet. “Aren’t we supposed to refrain from rolling up the tents while they are still wet?” Jimeleo asked

“For long term storage they need to be dry,” Artur replied, “but if it’s just for the day it doesn’t make a lot of difference. Even in otherwise dry weather it could be hours before the dew dries off. I’m more concerned about having to carry the wet cloth all over Ichtar. It’s soaking wet and a lot heavier than if there was just a bit of dew on it.”

“We can’t travel without the tents, Artur,” Haxmire pointed out.

“No, we can’t,” he agreed, “but this is going to slow us down no matter whose turn it is to lug a tent.”

“It can’t be helped,” Faber commented, “beside they are small tents, and the cloth is fairly light, so it won’t be all that bad even with the extra water.”

They had decided the previous evening to attempt to get as close as they could to the center of imbalance. They ate a cold breakfast of sausage, cheese and bread as they started walking with Leracian leading the way.

“I think we need to stay away from the roads,” he suggested. “I know they would speed up our progress but the chance of being seen would become almost a certainty.”

“I’d like to have a look at that road you found yesterday,” Artur remarked, “but if there’s one road we’ll find others. You know the way through these woods better than we do, Leracian; take the lead, please.”

“Yes, my chief.”

The wooded area turned out to be very small and a few minutes later they faced an expanse of grass that stood chest high on most of them, but it came up to Elena’s chin and Haxmire’s eyes. The grass was taller than Cornellya altogether. Their progress through the thick, tall grass was slow and Leracian often ran on ahead of them to scout the area ahead. By the end of the day he had not found anything to alarm them, but they could all see the foothills and a mountain range that blocked their direct path.

“We may have to risk that road after all,” Artur commented as they stopped to make camp that night.

“My chief,” Leracian told him, “I’ve already been three miles to the west-southwest, but I think I should take a look to the east-northeast just in case we are nearer to a settlement than we think.”

“All right,” Artur nodded, “but it will be fully dark in an hour. Be back before then.”

“A quite remarkable young man,” Haxmire observed after Leracian had disappeared, making no more noise to mark his passing than the wind might have made in the grass.

“The *Temi* are a remarkable people,” Artur told him.

“You didn’t sound that admiring when they were trying to kill you,” Haxmire pointed out.

“I don’t admire them,” Artur replied, “but I do respect them and did even while they *were* trying to kill me. They have a more rigid code of honor than most other people and while they do take contracts to murder people, they do so only along a clearly defined set of rules. That’s why I survived those attempts. The first attack could come only after a challenge. After that I knew they would come one at a time at first and then in increasing numbers, but they do have their limits. When I survived too many attempts, their chief came and challenged me personally. Strictly speaking I could have challenged Chief Leracus sooner, but I would have had to know where he was. Once my challenge had been issued, however, he would have had to meet me and in single combat.”

“Why didn’t you then?” Jimeleo asked.

“First, I was fairly certain that in armed combat a *Tem* would make short work of me and second, I didn’t have the faintest notion of where he was,” Artur replied. “I’m sure that was intentional as well. After all, anyone can get lucky once.”

“The *Tem*i don’t let that sort of activity determine who they are, however,” Gaenor added. “It’s just what they do to make a living within the Cilben Empire. From those I’ve spoken to, I’ve found they are fairly well-educated for a technically nomadic people. They send many of their children to private schools in the Cilben Empire and they have a great love of all the arts. Leracian, for example, writes poetry. Others paint, compose music, invent new dances and much more. They are a very creative people.”

“There’s also a good chance they won’t be taking very many murder contracts in the future,” Artur told them. “Until I was Dictator of Cilbe their existence in Cilbe was illegal and they could only work illegally. Being that their existence was illegal, there was nothing to stop them from committing whatever crimes they were hired to commit. That changed when I gave them official recognition. Now they do have something to lose if caught. Of course they are *Tem*i and that may not make a difference. Like I said they have their own unique code of honor.”

Leracian returned just after dark and reported, “Nothing I could find within two miles of us. The road I saw yesterday must be further to the north and east. But we’re very exposed. This is all grassland until those hills and it’s almost perfectly flat.”

“No fires tonight,” Artur decided. “Probably none at all until we get back to the boat. Gae, better douse those light spells you cast. It’s probably a good night to get to bed early except for those of us keeping watch.”

“What’s wrong with the lights?” Jimeleo complained.

“They can be seen for miles around,” Leracian informed him. “If there is anyone up on those hills and mountains they can see the light.”

They struck the camp the next morning in still more rain in the dark gray light that illuminated the pre-dawn landscape. After a few hours they reached an area where the grass had been cut down and in the center of it was the stone-paved road.”

“Still no one traveling on it, I see,” Artur observed. “Maybe the locals just don’t like traveling in the rain.”

“Can’t say as I blame them,” Vito commented. “Do we follow the road?”

“We’ll walk parallel to it,” Artur decided. “Leracian, why don’t you scout ahead for us? The road is heading for those mountains and we’re going to have to cross them as well. We may have to do it on the road.” The *Tem* nodded and moved off as silently as ever.

The road led to a broad saddleback ridge between two large mountains. The sun was just setting as Leracian returned to report, “There are settlements on the other side, but I don’t think we’ll be able to get past them undetected by day, even in this rain.”

“Has there been any traffic on the road?” Artur asked.

“Not this one,” Leracian replied, “but I saw several cross roads in the valley beyond this ridge. There appear to be wagons on them.”

“I’d better take a closer look. We’re too tired to move any further today.” He decided, “Gae, see to moving as far away from the road as you can and set up the tents. We may need to start traveling by night only. Make sure the camp cannot be seen from the road though.”

Artur followed Leracian to the road and then up the mountain. “Is this wise?” Artur asked as they walked on the paved surface.

“I saw no one on the road, my chief,” Leracian replied. “It’s a calculated gamble, but a safe one, I think.”

A few minutes later they were at the top of the saddleback and Artur got his first view of the interior of Ichtar. In the gathering gloom he could barely make out the roads in the valley below, but there were hundred of lights coming on in the two settlements they could see from their vantage point.

“Mighty obliging of them to show us where their towns are,” Artur commented.

“And civilized too,” Leracian observed “Most of those are street lights you’ll notice.”

“I had noticed,” Artur agreed. “The implications aren’t good. These people don’t go to sleep when the sun sets.”

“Do you think they are nocturnal, my chief?” Leracian asked.

“No, probably not,” Artur replied. “A nocturnal race probably wouldn’t need street lights and if they did I doubt they would be that bright, I don’t see any moving lights though.”

“Moving lights, my chief?”

“On their wagons,” Artur told him. “I got the idea from Gae’s self-propelled carriage, although most carriages in Misha have lanterns for nighttime use. If their wagons don’t have lights, they likely don’t use them at night.”

“Or they really are nocturnal,” Leracian pointed out.

“Then why bother with street lights?” Artur countered “What did the people look like?”

“My chief?” Leracian asked, startled. “I did not actually see any people.”

“You saw their wagons moving, however?”

“Yes, my chief,” Leracian nodded, “Each was drawn by one or two odd-looking beasts with shaggy red fur, but I could not see who was driving them. The drivers were hidden under the roofs of the wagons.”

“The wagons had roofs,” Artur noted, “Canvas roofs?”

“Wooden or at least it so appeared from up here,” Leracian replied. “Actually I might not have been able to tell you much about the drivers anyway. We’re a long way away up here and I didn’t see the dray beasts with any real clarity. I just know they were neither cattle nor horses.”

“What did the land out there look like during the daylight?” Artur asked.

“Farmland,” Leracian told him. “As far as the eye could see except for those two towns. The ground is very flat, with only a few widely spaced low hills and valleys. The buildings in those towns looked fairly sophisticated too.”

“I’m not surprised,” Artur remarked. “Why do you say so, though?”

“To tell the truth I would have expected wattle and daub with thatched roofs. To this day there are still whole towns in Aston, Arberoa and parts of Cilbe that are constructed with wattle and daub, and thatching is a favored roofing material in several countries including parts of Mishanda.”

“So it is,” Artur agreed. “You’re not going to tell me those towns are covered with more marble than the Jube Cathedral.”

“No, my chief,” Leracian replied seriously. “They are built of timber and sided with long wooden shingles. The roofs appear to be of slate. The style is different, but this closer one did not look entirely unlike your own Narmouth,” Leracian told him.

“Well, Gae may feel right at home, then,” Artur commented. “Let’s get back to the others.”

Gaenor went with Leracian the next morning to have a look for herself. This time there were people visible in the streets. “Well they look like people,” she noted, “but from here that’s all I can tell. I wish we had thought to bring Tellyndar’s spyglass with us. We could get a better idea of what these people are like.”

“Your Vieri friends call them demons,” Leracian pointed out.

“I don’t think they did until I told them the sailors of the east coast said demons lived here. But why would demons have towns like these. Why would they need to grow food?”

“I suppose they have to eat,” Leracian shrugged.

“The *Temi* don’t tell stories about ruthless creatures devoted to evil?” Gaenor asked.

“Of course we do, my chief,” Leracian replied seriously, “It’s just that in our case, those stories are about ourselves.”

“For a brief moment Gaenor thought he was being serious, then she realized it was another case of his deceptive humor. “Oh you,” she laughed. “I should have known better. People don’t think of themselves

as evil; not as a group anyway. They may think of themselves as strong, ruthless or even vicious, but evil is reserved for others. Your enemies may be evil, but never yourselves.”

“My chief,” Leracian disagreed, “I have met people who thought of themselves as evil and they were all that; vicious, cruel, heartless ruthless and relentless.”

“They must have been sick individuals and I doubt they were *Temí*,” Gaenor told him with supreme certainty.

“You are right on both counts, my chief,” Leracian told her. “but how did you know they were not *Temí*?”

“I doubt *Temí* would tolerate truly evil people amongst them. Your code of honor would never permit it. Besides, it would give you a bad name.”

“Worse than we have already, my chief?” Leracian asked.

“Much worse,” Gaenor assured him. “The people of Cilbe fear the *Temí* but I don’t think they hate them. You kill people but you don’t torture them first.”

“No, we do not torture, my chief,” Leracian admitted. “When we kill, it is done immediately following the obligatory warning, and it is done as quickly as possible.”

“As I recall the only warning Artur got was, ‘Die, traitor.’ It barely gave him time to react,” Gaenor pointed out.

“And yet, he still lives, my chief,” Leracian pointed out. “If it makes you feel better, my warning to Martius was considerably more verbose. Strangely, until I drew my sword, I don’t think he had the foggiest notion what was happening.”

“Martius was not reputed to have been as intelligent as his father,” Gaenor noted. “I know Flacco said so to Artur on several occasions.”

“Old Girdecus was never all that smart either,” Leracian opined. “It was Flacco who had all the brains. I very much admired the way Chief Arturus turned Flacco around as well. It was something I mean to remember when I am chief of the Ridec Clan someday.”

“I thought that was not an hereditary title,” Gaenor remarked.

“It isn’t, my chief, but I will be chief one day nonetheless,” Leracian told her calmly.

“You keep calling me ‘my chief,’ but I would make a terrible *Temí* chief,” Gaenor remarked.

“Not at all, my chief,” Leracian disagreed. “It is true you could probably never become chief in the normal way, but you have a way of inspiring strong loyalty among your friends. That’s far more important than the ability to win an armed combat. You would make a fine active chief of the Ridecs. I only hope I can do as well. There are at least a dozen men and women among the Ridec alone who might be able to defeat my father, but they do not challenge him for leadership because they are loyal to him and believe he has done well for the clan. If someone they deemed unworthy were to challenge and defeat him, they would each in turn challenge his successor until he was no more. The best fighter might win a few such challenges even when delivered with the same warning we gave Chief Arturus, but no one is good enough

to do that a dozen times in a row.”

“But you intend to challenge your own father?” Gaenor asked.

“Of course,” Leracian nodded, “or whoever replaces him. I rather hope the former, because I’m in no hurry to be chief.”

“You would kill him?” Gaenor asked.

“That is not required,” Leracian told her. “He would only fight to the death if he did not deem a challenger worthy. If I can make him proud enough of me before my challenge, he will willingly step aside in my favor after a few token blows. His loyalists will respect his wishes. If he does not deem me worthy, I will withdraw my challenge. I don’t want to harm my father no matter of the harm to me if I ever lose his respect.”

“Then you truly love him, don’t you?” Gaenor asked.

“Of course,” Leracian replied. “He is my father and my chief. And no matter how often we may quarrel in private, I would lay down my life for him a thousand times over if I could.”

“I think he would do the same for you,” Gaenor commented thoughtfully.

Leracian let out a great sigh. “I hope so.”

“If he did not love and respect you, why would he have given you this assignment?” Gaenor pressed. “From the way you’ve described it, this was an assignment any *Tem* would have jumped at the chance to get. In Mishanda we would call it a plum assignment, although given where we are, I’m glad we have one of the very best with us.”

“My chief,” Leracian replied, “I do not mean to impugn your wisdom, but how could you know I am one of the best. For all your superlative knowledge in matters I can not even understand, are you sure you can discern a good *Tem* warrior from an excellent one?”

“I’m sure I can not,” Gaenor replied instantly. The statement was not strictly true as she felt that with another *Tem* for comparison she could probably work it out. “But who else would Leracus assign as the honor guard of not one but two Ridec Clan Chiefs?”

“Yes, of course,” Leracian nodded. “I should have thought of that. Thank you, my chief.”

“There is still no one driving a wagon this way,” Gaenor changed the subject. “Is it possible it doesn’t actually go anywhere?”

“Who would build such a road, my chief?” Leracian asked.

“I don’t know,” Gaenor admitted. “Maybe there used to be another town on the end of the road, but it was abandoned for some reason, maybe it’s only used seasonally. Maybe they have some crazy group of religious fanatics who feel their mission is to build roads. Well, I can’t speak for you, but I’m tired of lying out here in the rain. Let’s go back to camp and change into something marginally drier.”

“You should also try to get more sleep before we have to move out this evening, my chief,” Leracian suggested.

“Doctor Haxmire is the one who needs his rest,” Gaenor replied. “He’s not complaining, but I know this is not easy for him. I’m glad we were able to sit still today.”

“Radnire of Es is helping him and doing a good job of it,” Leracian commented admiringly. “I don’t think Doctor Haxmire has even noticed it yet.”

“Oh, he’s noticed but I also think he knows that’s why we allowed Radnire to accompany us. But you are right that Radnire has been assisting him in a very unobtrusive way. I caught him faking a stumble of his own just to make Haxmire feel better. It was nice of him. He certainly did not have to do it, but it did make Haxmire feel better when he slipped a bit a few minutes later. Still, if you don’t mind, keep an eye on the old dear, would you. Artur and I can run for it if we have to, but Haxmire will need a distraction if something happens and I don’t want Radnire throwing his own life away in a situation you could have handled and survived.”

“I understand, my chief,” Leracian assured her as they headed back to camp.

Five

Making their way into the valley that night proved to be a dangerous, slow-moving affair. The rain had become heavier and the ground was now fairly slippery. After both Faber and Jimeleo slipped in the mud, Artur decided, “Like it or not, we’ll have to use that road and just hope there’s no one on it tonight.”

“Seems a safe bet,” Vito commented. “There’s been no one on it so far.”

“That’s enough to make me worried that it’s about due,” Artur replied.

They headed directly for the road to discover in order to actually travel on it, they first needed to climb a steep slope and then over a three-foot high stone barrier. “How does the rain drain off the surface?” Vito wondered when they discovered the stone-cobbled road was no more than merely wet in the downpour. “I would have expected lots of puddling in this weather.”

“The stone walls aren’t solid,” Cornellya pointed out. “and the road is raised in the center, so the water drains out and off the sides.”

“That would explain why the ground was so soft and slippery on the boundary slope,” Faber noted.

“Well, this should make our passage a bit faster,” Jimeleo conjectured.

“We don’t have to worry about sinking in the mud, sir,” Radnire replied. “That’s true enough, but these paving stones are still fairly slick and we’ll be going down hill for quite a long way even if the road does switch back several times. What’s worse, we can’t use a light spell to see where we’re going. Too bad this road doesn’t have steps built into it.”

“Eh?” Jimeleo asked, “Like the ancient roads of the Barbarian Kingdoms? How do you know it won’t?”

“The ancient Barbarians did not have wheeled carts when those roads were built,” Radnire replied. “In spite of their name, they had a civilization in which the wheel was used for pottery and most other

functions we would recognize, but they never thought of building a wagon with them. Instead they loaded everything they carted, so to speak, on horse-back. These people have wheeled vehicles, however, so their roads will be ramps when heading up a slope.”

“Well reasoned, Radnire,” Haxmire commended him.

“Thank you, sir,” Radnire replied happily.

“Of course, this might be a very old road,” Haxmire continued, “and we will find steps further down. That could be why there has been no traffic on this road, you realize.”

“Oh no, sir,” Radnire disagreed instantly. “If that were the case there would be no switchbacks, just long staircases on the side of this mountain.”

“Very good,” Haxmire admitted, “I agree.”

Gaenor smiled, but kept her mouth shut. She was fairly certain Haxmire had thought just the opposite until Radnire proved his case. She was, however, quite impressed by Radnire’s reasoning power and the strength of character he showed by being able to argue so persuasively with the teacher he respected so much. She knew Elena would not have done it in the same way if she had a disagreement with Gaenor. Elena was more likely to just nod her head until she could visibly demonstrate why her own opinion was correct.

Radnire was correct on another very vital issue; the paving stones were treacherously slippery and they all slipped several times as they made their way down the slope. When they finally reached the bottom, Faber commented to Radnire, “You were right, kid. No stairs. Now would you like to predict how we’re going to avoid that town ahead?”

“We’ll get as close as we dare,” Artur told him, saving Radnire from having to consider the problem, “then get off the road and circle around the town.”

“Walking through the fields?” Gaenor asked. “We’ll trample their crops and leave a trail that can be followed.”

“That is a point,” Artur nodded. “If we could do this in daylight, we could easily walk along the borders of their fields and tomorrow night I think we’ll have to do just that, but tonight you may be right. It’s either very late or very early depending on your point of view and we really need to be well beyond that settlement before it gets light. Maybe we had better try walking straight through and hope for the best.”

“We can make a final decision as we get closer,” Gaenor told him.

They stuck to the bold plan however and arrived in the town at what Gaenor estimated was two hours before sunrise. “Keep your hoods up and no talking unless you have to,” Artur warned everyone, “and if you have to, only use Old Tongue.”

“Why Old Tongue?” Elena whispered to Gaenor in the Veiri native language.

“We’ve been told it is spoken here,” Gaenor whispered back, “but don’t strike up any conversations, our accents are bound to be all wrong.”

They walked briskly and quietly through the streets of the town, while Gaenor took a few odd moments

to study the architecture. Leracian's report that the buildings were built of wood with shingle-covered walls failed to note the ornate carvings on all the corners and all around the doors and windows. Even the risers of the steps up to the doors had been carved. As far as Gaenor could tell the carvings of each building were unique from all the others, although she had to remind herself that she did not have the time to examine all the buildings or even time to take a serious look at even one of them.

The center of town was a large market where the street was twice the width of the other streets in town and dozens of small shops were to be seen as they rushed through. Gaenor felt a pang that she couldn't take the opportunity to look in those shop windows to see what sort of goods demons would buy and noticed that Elena, Cornellya and some of the men showed signs of repressed curiosity as well. However, while it was a good-sized town, it was still only a town, not a city, and it was not long before they reached the far side of the settlement.

They did have a bad moment when just at the edge of town an early-rising resident was up and sweeping mud off her door stoop with a stiff broom. "Good morrow, friends," she greeted them. As they did, she too wore a hood that hid her facial features so they were unable to see what a demon looked like. Her accent was not quite like any Gaenor had heard, but closer to that of the Vieri than any she had heard Old Tongue spoken in.

"Good morrow to you too, mistress," Cornellya replied, aping the woman's accent.

"And where are you bound in such horrid weather?" the demon asked curiously.

"Just going from one place to another," Cornellya replied cautiously.

"Then I bid you a good journey, friends," she told them and returned to her house.

"That was too close," Jimeleo fretted once they were well beyond the edge of the town.

"I'm just glad Cornellya could copy that accent well enough," Gaenor remarked. "I doubt I could have."

"It's easier when it's your native tongue," Cornellya replied. "Besides her pronunciation wasn't all that different, it was the archaic words she used I really had to take care with."

"It's strange how the demon didn't question Cornellya's answer," Vito noted.

"Maybe the people here aren't naturally curious," Gaenor responded.

"I doubt that," Vito shook his head. "I don't think people would be people without curiosity, just intelligent animals."

"Then maybe she was being exquisitely polite," Gaenor replied.

"Hopefully we won't have to find out by trying that again," Artur told them all. "It's starting to get light now, we need to find a place to spend the day."

"There is a wooded area a few miles beyond the town, my chief," Leracian told him. "It comes right up to this road so if we can get there, we can spend the day in the shelter of the trees."

The sun was just rising as they reached the woods, but they managed to get beneath the tall oaks and nearly out of sight of the road before Leracian, acting as lookout spotted the first wagon leaving the town

behind them. Wagons rolled past their hideaway off and on all day, while they slept in shifts. When Gaenor and Elena were awake together, Gaenor drilled her ward on her lessons mostly to keep their minds off everything that could go wrong. Cornellya joined in as she had come to do by habit of late and eventually all three settled down to writing in their notebooks. When Radnire woke up a little later, Elena shared what she had learned with him. Just before dark, they ate a cold meal of sausage and cheese, with bread that was starting to go stale. Then they set off to attempt to get a bit closer to the center of imbalance, still somewhere off to the southeast.

They spent the next few evenings and, when possible, days walking between fields and through other small wooded areas. They only used the roads when there was no other way. One such occasion was when they encountered a moderately swollen river two days after passing the first town. They cautiously made their way back to the road, crossed over a bridge then left the road once more. As they moved there was increasingly more road traffic and some even at night, so their progress was slow and they had only shortened their distance to the imbalance point by two-thirds at best. "We'll have to stop nearby," Artur told them as they crossed a second wide river. "We need to start our spell at noon today and some sleep first is essential."

"There's a town just ahead, my chief," Leracian reported, "but the area around here is not as heavily farmed. Perhaps if we strike south for a few miles we'll find an adequately sheltered area." He jogged on ahead and an hour later they found a mostly dry stream bed, one with just a trickle of water running on one side of the gully, where they decided to set up camp.

"We will be out of sight unless someone actually walks up to the edge of the gully," Artur commented, "although with all this rain lately, I'm surprised it isn't as full as the other streams and rivers we've seen."

"This one flows from the east," Vito pointed out, "maybe it's been raining less that way."

"Could be," Artur replied. "I don't know how the local weather runs normally, but most storms that affect eastern Mishanda travel up the coast between Mishanda and Ichtar, so this could well have just brushed the west coast of Ichtar. We're roughly one third of the way across the island, and it's a very large island, so it's possible to have dark and stormy on one coast, bright and sunny in the middle and light showers on the far coast. Let's set up the tents, but whoever is on guard duty, keep an eye on that stream just in case. I don't feel like casting the great spell while trying to tread water."

The rain was still drizzling down lightly when the sky lightened the next morning. Gaenor crawled out of the tent she shared with Artur to find only Leracian on duty. He was wearing his battle togs, the first time he had done so in months. "You're wearing the red again, I see," she noted.

"It seemed appropriate, my chief," Leracian replied.

"You're probably right. Didn't anyone stay up with you?" she asked.

"I scouted the area earlier and saw that there was no one anywhere near, even the nearest road is two miles off," Leracian replied. "So I let Faber and Vito get some sleep. They needed it more than I."

"I should have thought of this earlier," Gaenor admitted, "but we could use something like a table to lay out the spell ingredients and tools on. We could put everything on the ground, but that's a lot of bending and stretching or just crawling through the mud, and items could get lost or have their effectiveness corrupted if they get muddy."

"What about one of those boulders over there," Leracian pointed a short way off to Gaenor's left.

Gaenor turned to see a large brown stone sitting in the stream bed just a few feet away from the tents. It was about five feet across and while its top was not completely flat, it would do well enough for the purposes of spreading out their tools and the sheets on which the spell had been written on. There were several others nearby as well. "I must have missed them last night," she remarked.

"Understandable, my chief," Leracian assured her. "It was dark and we were preoccupied with other matters."

"Thank you," she told him. "I'll see about making some hot water for tea and qahwah."

"We probably should not start a fire here," Leracian warned her.

"I wasn't planning to use a fire," she chuckled softly.

"Of course."

She used her flint and steel as the basis for a heat spell, marveling just how much magic could be accomplished with just those two implements. The spell she cast for hot water, needed two other ingredients, powdered wood and, of course, water, but while there was a small puff of smoke as the wood was consumed, it was nothing compared to what would have been produced by a real fire. So much magic, she reminded herself, was accomplished through the Law of Sympathy – actions in microcosm, affecting the situation on a larger scale. This simple spell was a perfect example, she noted as the water within her chosen pot began to boil. She then prepared the tea and qahwah just in time for Artur to emerge from the tent.

"Morning, dear," he greeted her and reached for the qahwah. "Today's the day. I don't know about you, but after all this time, I'm glad we're almost finished with this."

"A lot has happened in the last two years," Gaenor agreed, "but I'd like to go home to Narmouth and watch Marlie's children grow up."

"And our own too, if you're of the mind," Artur suggested.

"Our own too," Gaenor mused. "Is that such a good idea?"

"You tell me," Artur suggested.

"If we survive to get home, dear," Gaenor told him, "We're going to still look and feel young and healthy a century or two from now. Our children will have grown up, had children of their own and died of old age and we'll still be there."

"Maybe not," Artur told her. "Anything could happen. You could discover a version of the Vieri health spell that will work for everyone, but even if not, we probably won't be there. As you say, it wouldn't be fair to our children. It would probably be best for us to have several homes in the long run and just be that mysterious couple who spend a few months of the year before moving elsewhere."

"That might be pleasant," Gaenor smiled. "A house for each season. If that's the case I'll want Narmouth to be the springtime house. I don't think I'd ever want to be elsewhere in the spring. Where else would we live?"

“You seemed to like Corinia,” Artur suggested. “That could be a springtime home as well. I understand the cherry blossoms there are something special and it would leave you close to the University.”

“Nice thinking. And Cilbe, perhaps, so you can keep tabs on your family,” she told him.

“Maybe, although, we might want to wait a generation or two before moving there. You may recall my children made it difficult for us to continue this quest,” Artur pointed out. “They may make it difficult for us to leave again.”

“They meant well,” Gaenor told him, “and they didn’t stop us, nor could they, really. Well, we have plenty of time to decide such things after we get home.” They drank in silence for a few minutes as the rain lightened up into a heavy mist.

“At least it isn’t too cold,” Artur commented at last, “and if it doesn’t start raining again, that will be the Gods’ own mercy.”

“That would be nice. I need to reread the spell, I guess I’ll take my tea into the tent, rather than bring one of the copies out here.”

“I would have thought you had it memorized by now,” Artur chuckled.

“I’m just being thorough,” she replied. “I’m trying to figure out the best way to arrange my tools and ingredients. The rest of you can afford to fumble a bit, but I’m casting the key part of the spell.”

“In musical terms,” he corrected her, “you’re our conductor. I understand. So you need to be accurate and timely in everything you do so the rest of us can stay in time and organized.”

“Right, although it wouldn’t do any harm for the rest of us to recheck the spell before we start. I was thinking of using that boulder over there as a table to set up on. We should probably all set up at least an hour before we start,” she told him.

“Any way you want it, dear,” Artur assured her. “I’m going to take a look around the area by daylight just to make sure we’re as isolated as we think we are.”

“Be careful,” she warned him. He assured her he would be, then set off up stream with Leracian by his side. Gaenor took her tea back toward her tent and ran into Faber emerging from his. “Morning,” she greeted him. “Fresh tea and qahwah in the pots.”

“Thanks, Gae,” he told her as they passed.

Inside her tent, Gaenor opened her pack and pulled out one of several oilcloth wrapped bundles of paper. The great spell had required some fifty pages of paper for each copy. The copyists had been careful to make each copy legible and fully annotated, although Gaenor decided that even if they had written it in the shortest form, the spell would still have taken over thirty pages. As it was, she was glad they had included the sub-textual annotations since at the moment she was more interested in the mechanics of certain key passages of the spell. She was doing dry rehearsals of some of the ritual an hour later when Elena poked her head inside the tent. “Morning, Gae,” she greeted her.

“Get enough sleep, Lena?” Gaenor asked her.

“Not really,” Elena replied, but Cornellya kept rolling over in the tent and waking me up, so I decided I

may as well get out of bed and have breakfast. Would you like something?"

"Oh, yes," Gaenor replied instantly, "a large bowl of porridge and some sausage, but since we don't have any of that..."

"We have the sausage," Elena pointed out.

"Wrong sort," Gaenor laughed, "but some of that with cheese and whatever is left of the bread is about the best we can hope for today. I'm going to be mighty tired of all that by the end of this trip."

"I already am," Elena laughed, "and it wasn't all that long ago that I was grateful for anything that tasted as good as that."

Gaenor smiled, but couldn't hold the pose. "You should have stayed on the mainland," she told Elena after a while.

"No, Gae," Elena disagreed. "There's no place there for me yet; not without you. This is where I should be, just not for very long is all. Let's just do the spell and get out of here. Is that what you're working on?"

"Just refreshing my mind is all," Gaenor replied.

"The others should do so as well," Elena told her. "I'll fix you something to eat, then make sure everyone gets up. It's past mid-morning already anyway. They should be awake."

It was still an hour before noon when Gaenor led the others to the boulder and instructed them to lay out their tools and ingredients. Then she handed each one an oilcloth-wrapped packet which they dutifully opened and then placed the pages on the stone surface as well.

"Glad it stopped raining," Vito commented. The heavy soaking mist had slacked off to a moderate fog. The air was still damp, but moisture was no longer collecting on every surface. "But what if the wind picks up later? We need something to hold these pages down."

"Radnire and Elena will collect some rocks to help hold the sheets in place. While we cast the spell, they can also collect the used pages and get them out of our way. It's not like we'll be able to go back and do anything over even if we want to," Gaenor informed them. "Now I'd like to run through the Intentional of the spell, because it is most essential we are in unison as we start. Later it is not as critical at least until the end when the Intentional is repeated with some emphatic modifications. I think we have time to run through that as well. If not, well, we did practice in Misha and we'll keep a close eye on the notation. We already know there are five parts to the spell, or that's what we would call them if we were a chorus, and eight of us, so three parts are doubled. If you're doing a part on your own, keep an eye on your part and make sure you start at the right times. We have some latitude there, but not much. Don't lose sight of your part. It won't hurt to do someone's else's while your part rests, but we may have trouble if a passage is left out.

"All right," Gaenor sighed, "It all starts with our ash wands in our right hands but with the point held downwards..."

She continued coaching them until Elena informed her it was nearly time to start. "Just time for a sip of cold tea, qahwah or water, Gae," she announced. "Mostly water at the moment, but I'll be on hand to offer food and water as you all have time during the spell."

“That’s probably won’t be too often,” Vito told her. “Large spells have a habit of sustaining the user so we won’t feel hungry or thirsty very much.”

“That’s more of an illusion,” Artur corrected him. “You’re just so busy you aren’t aware of your needs. Make a conscious effort to at least sip some water during the rests. Gae, are you sure you’ll be all right? Your part never really stops.”

“But the way we portioned out the spell,” she replied, “I only have a few sections where I’m working solo. Most of the time there’s at least one or two others doing my part, so I can take breaks as I need them. Let’s get started.”

Six

Just as in the rehearsal, Gaenor raised her right hand with the ash wand in it point down. It felt odd because most rituals using a wand were done so with the end either upward or pointing at an object, but there would be plenty of that ahead in the spell as well. For now this was how it started. She took a deep breath and began the first section of the long Intentional – that section of the spell that clearly described what they wished to do. The others waited until she had finished the first sentence and then joined in reading the long passage together.

As the introduction of the Intentional wound down, Gaenor detected a soft glowing nimbus of light all around them even Elena, Radnire and Leracian. Even though they were not adept, evidently they were part of the spell itself. The glow was not enough to attract attention as yet, but in the corner of her mind Gaenor began to worry just how spectacular the side effects might get especially after nightfall.

She paused to count to five then began one of her few completely solo passages. Gaenor did not have the most beautiful singing voice, but she could carry a tune better than Artur at least. That was essential as she chanted the next section. The nimbus grew a little brighter and less transparent as they began the third and final section of the Intentional; a series of responsive passages that each adept in the circle took turns with. It was the only section in which it made no difference who said which line. They just kept doing one line each as the next person in the circle took his or her turn.

Finally they reached the end of the Intentional and began the first Invocation. There would be five repetitions of the Invocation as the spell wore on. It was part of what allowed a certain amount of flexibility as the spell progressed. Each of the five parts were designed to call for aid by the various Gods of the world. Gaenor’s part prayed to the Gods of Mishanda, Artur’s to those of Cilbe, Faber prayed to the Gods of Aston, Haxmire to the Gods of Gostrina and Cornellya to the Vieri Gods. The others were allowed to improvise prayers to their own gods as they saw fit. When it was Cornellya’s turn, she sang out in a voice so high and sweet that Gaenor marveled that the vari had never sung for them during their travels. There had been no melody specified by the spell, although Gaenor knew the Vieri sang nearly all their spells. Perhaps Cornellya felt music should be reserved for magic or perhaps she was just shy about her talents.

By the time they had finished the first Invocation and could start in on the spell proper, Gaenor realized they must have been going for almost three hours already, but somehow it felt like only a few minutes had passed. They all paused to take a few sips of water however, and Gaenor chewed at a bit of the same

sausages Elena had brought her for breakfast. The spell itself, she noted, told her she had the time. Now that it had begun, it would proceed at its own pace.

When the spell was ready, the adepts once more lifted their right arms with the ash wand still pointed downward. As one, they suddenly flipped the wands in their hands so that the points were up and Gaenor began the Incantation. One of the ingredients spread out before her was a wide bowl in which powdered wood, sand and burnt cloth had been mixed with a great deal of water. As she chanted the opening passage of the Incantation, she used her left hand to stir it up until she was able to take a handful of the loose mixture and fling it all around her.

Suddenly there was a bright flash of light and they were encased by a large and solid-seeming black bubble. The bubble was opaque at first but over the next hour it became quite transparent so that eventually the adepts appeared to be within a bubble of smoke-color glass.

Elena fretted that she and Radnire might not be able to enter the bubble to accomplish their assigned duties, but they discovered that as they approached the boulder the adepts were using, the bubble reached out to include them and then let them go as they finished their business within.

The spell went on all night. For long periods of time nothing seemed to be happening and then one of the adepts would use a new tool or ingredient and the visible nature of the spell would change. As the sun set, the smoke-colored bubble began to glow softly, providing much needed illumination for the adepts within.

“Gaenor thought of everything, didn’t she?” Radnire whispered to Elena when that happened.

“It might not have been Gae,” Elena told him, feeling as though she were betraying her guardian by the admission as truthful as it might have been. “The Council of the Wise wrote most of the spell, she told me.”

“Well, it was still fairly clever,” Radnire admitted after digesting that, “no matter who came up with it.”

Around midnight it started to rain again, but the water just bounced off the large glowing bubble, leaving the adepts comfortably dry. Only Leracian, Radnire and Elena got wet and Radnire and Elena watched the proceedings from their tents while they could so only Leracian stayed out in the rain the entire time. The rain did not last long, however, and overhead the clouds began to thin so that the two moons, Tars and Miala, could occasionally be seen through the thinner clouds.

The night wore on and eventually Radnire suggested that Elena take a nap. “Look, they have to be awake, but we can best help if we don’t wear ourselves out. I’ll stay up for now and wake you up in a few hours.”

She nodded and went back to her tent, but before she knew it, it was no longer night time. The dawn had arrived and Radnire had allowed her to continue sleeping. “Why didn’t you wake me?” she demanded.

“You looked so cute just sleeping there,” Radnire replied, earning himself a glare.

“As opposed to when I’m awake, you mean?” Elena asked dangerously.

“At the moment?” Radnire replied without thinking.

“Play nicely, children,” Artur told them from the circle of adepts. Sometime in the night the large smoky bubble had turned to something the color of sapphire. Inside, however, the spell continued.

“Sorry, Sir Artur,” Radnire apologized.

“Sorry, Senator,” Elena told him at the same time.

“Sorry,” they told each other.

“I just thought you needed the sleep,” Radnire admitted. “You looked pretty tired.”

“You still do,” Elena told him. “Go get a couple hours of sleep.”

“You’ll wake me up in a couple of hours?” Radnire asked.

“That depends on how cute you look,” Elena told him. She rushed into the circle of adepts to see where they were in their progress. Cornellya was singing another passage with heartbreaking beauty, while Gaenor and Haxmire performed a complex ritual with rods of onyx and long white candles. Looking at Gaenor’s copy of the spell, Elena noted they had just changed the current page and Radnire had already cleared away the used sheets. Everyone had a full cup of water and there were bowls of beef jerky and roasted nuts in front of each of the adepts. They would be fine for the time being.

She stepped back out of the circle to find Leracian watching her closely. “What?” she asked. She had intended to make the question a sharp one, but the *Tem* continued to intimidate her and it came out less challenging than she had intended.

“I think he likes you,” Leracian told her. Elena blushed but said nothing else. Instead, she found a dozen ways to busy herself, while waiting for the next time she would be needed within the circle.

There was still a heavy overcast with fog and occasional light rain all morning and into the afternoon. Leracian occasionally left the gully to scout the area around them. Radnire woke up around noon on his own and he and Elena continued to help the adepts.

Even Leracian was surprised, however, in the middle of the afternoon when a voice suddenly asked, “What are you doing?”

Doctor Haxmire was the only one with something to do at that moment and so all the others spun around to see a male vari just standing there, rapt with fascination. He was obviously a vari male, but his skin was much lighter than Cornellya’s or that of any other vari Elena had met. His hair was a lighter brown as well.

“Who are you?” Elena demanded.

“How did you get here?” Radnire asked at nearly the same time.

“What are you trying to pull?” a more menacing Leracian demanded, jumping directly in front of the intruder, sword drawn.

But the vari mesmerized by the sight, barely noticed them. “Are you making magic?” he asked excitedly, peering around Leracian. “May I watch?”

“You may watch, but you may not leave until we are done,” Leracian told him sternly.

“Really?” the vari asked. “Thank you!”

“I don’t think he’ll be a problem,” Radnire told Leracian.

“You may be right,” Leracian replied, “but keep an eye on him anyway. We can’t let him go until we’re done here.”

“We’re more likely to have trouble getting rid of him when we’re through,” Radnire opined.

“You’re a vari, aren’t you?” Elena asked.

“Yes,” the vari replied. “Aren’t you?”

“No, I’m human,” she told him. “My name is Elena. What’s yours?”

“Tamitt,” he replied, never taking his eyes off the adepts in the circle.

“Where are you from, Tamitt?” Elena asked.

“Dair,” he replied easily. “It’s a few miles north of here. It’s boring, so I came exploring down this way today. Do you do this often?”

“Not this sort of thing,” Elena told him. “It’s a very special spell.”

“How so?” Tamitt asked.

“Uh, I don’t think I can tell you,” she replied.

“Oh, you don’t know either, do you?” Tamitt asked knowingly. “Otherwise you’d be in there making magic with the others.” Elena wanted to correct Tamitt’s mistaken notion, but she knew she was suppose to keep her mouth shut. Her frustration must have shown because Tamitt told her, “It’s all right. Nobody ever tells me anything either. I don’t know anyone who knows how to make magic either.”

“I’m learning how,” Elena told him.

“Really?” Tamitt asked. “Can you show me something?”

“Humans can’t practice magic until they are initiated,” Elena told him.

“What are humans?” Tamitt asked curiously.

“My people,” Elena told him. She wondered if she should mention that there are many sorts of humans.

At that moment Gaenor left the circle while Artur and Jimeleo started intoning a section of the spell together. “Who’s this?” she asked Elena.

“He says his name is Tamitt,” Elena told her.

“How did you get here, Tamitt?” Gaenor asked.

“I walked,” Tamitt informed her.

“Walked?” Gaenor echoed. “From the Village?”

“No,” Tamitt corrected her, “From Dair.”

“I think that’s the town we avoided to the north of here,” Elena supplied.

“The so-called demons are Vieri?” Gaenor asked, mostly to herself. “Well, that may explain a lot.” Behind her Cornellya began to sing again.

“Who is that?” Tamitt asked, fascinated at the sound of her voice. Gaenor just shook her head and returned to the circle; the spell was too advanced now for anyone to walk away from it for long in safety. “She’s beautiful!”

Judging the age of a vari was difficult, but Elena got the impression Tamitt could not have been much older than she was. At the most he was Cornellya’s age, but if so, perhaps he was a bit immature for his age. Elena had not known much of the world when she first met Gaenor and the others, but she doubted she had been as shallow as Tamitt appeared. Perhaps it really was just the magic that fascinated him and that once he got over the novelty he would become a more sensible young man. As it was, his emotional transparency bothered Elena. Even Radnire, who she might never refer to as a reserved soul, was less openly emotional.

Soon her concerns about Tamitt became of secondary importance as she and Radnire repeatedly stepped into the circle to continue assisting the adepts. Leracian, was far more concerned about Tamitt than Elena was. It bothered him that the artless young man had somehow approached their encampment unseen and unheard. The Tem, deeply troubled, got up and scouted their perimeter again, then widened his scope and scouted again. Eventually he found some of Tamitt’s footprints in the mud and noted that he really had just wandered along. His path had not been along anything approximating a straight line, but had also not taken him along a sheltered route, so his undetected approach had been a fluke after all. It still bothered Leracian, but he realized that a single guard could not possibly see everywhere at once.

Back at the encampment, exciting changes were happening to the bubble around the circle of adepts. Haxmire had become too tired to stay on his feet, but Vito easily stepped into his part while Radnire escorted his teacher to his tent. As they left the circle the bubble flashed through a number of colors and settle on bright pink. Seeing Doctor Haxmire have trouble walking, Tamitt immediately stepped in to help Radnire, addressing the old teacher as “Revered Elder.”

During one pause, Artur suggested to Elena, “You want to start striking the tents and packing everything up. We’ll be going for some hours yet, but when we’re done I suspect this is not a place we’re going to want to be.”

“Yes, Senator,” Elena nodded and rushed to do as he had asked. By the time sunset bathed them all in a brilliant red light, she and Radnire had packed up everything except the tent Haxmire was still sleeping in.

By now the protective bubble over the adepts had turned a bright golden color that threatened to give their position away. Looking upward, Gaenor was thankful the sky had cleared and that cool dry air was moving in now. The last thing they needed at this point was a beacon to allow the natives to find and stop them before the spell was completed.

An hour after sunset, Haxmire awoke and rejoined the circle, allowing Elena and Radnire to finish packing the gear. The spell continued inside the circle and the bright golden light of the bubble began to pulse, sending up occasional sprays of light and sparks into the nighttime sky. After that started Elena discovered she could no longer enter the circle and all they could do was to wait for the spell to be concluded.

“Someone is approaching,” Leracian reported. “A large number of people. You should try to get away.”

“Where would I go?” Elena worried.

“Anywhere,” he replied. “Just try to get away. If no harm comes of this, you can rejoin us later, but some of us should be free so in case we are captured, there will still be some hope of freedom.”

“What can I do?” Elena fretted. “You’re the one who should try to get away.”

“I am honor-bound to stand by my chiefs,” Leracian replied.

“I’m staying here,” Tamitt told him.

“You aren’t my concern,” Leracian told him coolly. “You two are; now go!”

Elena and Radnire hurried away into the dark, but as soon as they had climbed to the top of the gully, they saw the lights accompanying several groups of people converging from all directions. Elena gasped and took an involuntary step backwards. Radnire reached out to pull her back from falling into the gully, but missed as she slipped over the edge. He heard her squeak of pain as she hit the bottom, several feet below. Looking over the edge, he saw her lying next to a large rock. He climbed back down to investigate.

Elena groaned in pain as she woke up a moment later. “My arm,” she moaned favoring her right arm. The fabric of her heavy shirt had been ripped and she was bleeding, although it was just a scrape, but as Radnire touched her, she cried out in pain and he decided she must have hurt herself even worse. “You need to get away, Radnire,” she told him through gritted teeth.

Radnire looked up and saw over a dozen light-skinned Vieri dressed in military-seeming uniforms and told her, “I think it’s too late.”

“What is wrong with her?” one of the Vieri asked Radnire gruffly.

“I think she broke her arm, sir,” Radnire responded, then added, “when she fell.”

“Move from her side and return to the others,” the Vieri told him. Two Vieri men took Radnire by the shoulders and escorted him away from Elena. When he resisted, several others joined in and lifted him physically off the ground and carried him away.

“Mnierri,” the vari leader ordered a woman in his group. “Conduct an examination of her.”

“She is not a vari,” Mnierri noted as she knelt down next to Elena and unslung a leather bag from her shoulder. “What sort of person is she?”

“That matters little right now,” her leader told her. Miniierri nodded, opened the bag and pulled out several spell tools. Elena was in too much pain to understand exactly what Mnierri did, but she

recognized the casting of a spell. She tried to ask what Mnierri was doing, but the vari shushed her. "Never you mind, big one. This will not hurt. I merely want to know what you did to yourself." Minierrri worked expertly for a few minutes then reported. "The male big one was correct, she has broken this arm. I shall have to splint it for now."

"You have the tools and ingredients that can heal her, don't you?" the leader asked.

"I have the tools to heal one of us," Mnierri responded, "but she appears to have lost her virtue, or at least I think she has. My healing might not work until it has been restored. We would need the Wise for that."

Elena groaned in pain once more. "Can you not do something to ease her pain at least?" the leader asked.

"I can but try," Mnierri responded. She looked through her tools and pulled out a wooden rod and a dull brown polished stone. She cast a quick spell and Elena breathed a sigh of relief. "Better, big one?" Mnierri asked gently.

"My name is Elena," Elena told her almost sleepily. "Elena Carolena."

"Pleased to meet you, Elena. I am Mnierri Kashantu. It appears I shall be your healer this evening. I must put your arm in a sling. I was able to block some of your pain, but the arm is still broken. Does your kind always lose its virtue so easily?"

"My virtue?" Elena asked.

"Your vital aspect," Mnierri tried to explain. "That part of your spirit that helps you maintain your health and vitality. I admit to surprise you cannot feel the difference without it, but perhaps your kind is different." As she spoke, she fashioned a sling from a square piece of cloth one of the others handed her, then she slipped it over Elena's neck and carefully eased the Cilben girl's arm into the sling. "Now," she said once she was finished. "Do you think you can stand? I shall help you to your feet. Do not try to use that arm."

With Mnierri's assistance, Elena got to her feet and allowed herself to be brought back to the circle of adepts where over one hundred military Vieri were watching the circle of adepts. Leracian had been disarmed and kept with his arms tied behind his back, but that did not appear to bother him as much as Elena would have expected.

"We cannot disrupt the spell, sir," a vari reported to his leader as Elena arrived.

"The Wise feared that might be the case," the leader responded. "If that is so, there is nothing we can do, but wait."

Inside the protective bubble Gaenor was once more intoning the Intentional. It was the final portion of the great spell and she had lost all track of what was going on outside the circle. Her entire awareness and that of the other adepts was monopolized by the spell which now was literally saying itself through them. Earlier there was no way to stop safely. Now there was no way to stop at all. They could not see outside the circle, nor could they do anything about the circumstances out there if they could.

As Gaenor continued the repetition of the Intentional she could feel the power of the great spell flowing through her as the bubble grew brighter and brighter. The energy within the bubble became almost solid

and her long brown hair stood out at all angles with sparks shooting from its ends. She looked around and saw the same was happening to Cornellya and to a lesser extent, the men.

Then she began the final passage of the spell; a prayer of thanks to the Gods for their guidance and blessings. The golden light brightened still more to pure white by the end of the spell. They finished the final sentence of the final passage of the final section of the great spell and everything stopped for a brief eternity.

At first Gaenor wondered if something had gone wrong. *Could we have done something wrong?* she fretted. Then the bubble began to expand slowly. When it was twice its original size it paused again for just a moment before exploding outward with a roll of thunder. As her eyes adjusted, Gaenor could see a great wave of light and sound receding in the distance, with cold, star-dappled sky above. It was only then that she became aware of the large number of Vieri that had them surrounded.

The military Vieri were hastily picking themselves up and pointing cudgel-like sticks at the adepts. "You are under arrest," the leader told them, "for the practice of illicit magic."

Seven

Too tired to resist, the adepts obeyed when they were told to drop their ash wands, the only spell tools they still held and walked slowly away from the boulder. Several Vieri rushed in to gather up the spell tools and left-over ingredients. Others retrieved the adepts' other belongings while the adepts themselves were lined up in preparation for leaving the area.

"Who are you?" Gaenor demanded.

"Council Security," the leader told her.

"What council?" Gaenor asked.

"The Council of the Wise, of course," the leader explained.

"But that's who sent us here," Gaenor protested tiredly.

"Impossible," the leader replied.

"Somehow I think there may be two such councils, Gaenor," Cornellya told her.

"Where are you taking us?" Artur asked.

"For now, we'll take you to Dair for interrogation until we get orders from Aliari," came the response. "All right, let's start walking."

"Where's Aliari?" Artur asked.

"What's Aliari?" Faber added, but neither of them received an answer.

Just then Gaenor caught a glance of Elena's sling. "Lena?" she asked worriedly. "What happened?"

“She slipped and fell off the edge of this gully,” Mnierri explained. “I used a spell to deaden her pain until we can treat her properly, but it also sedates her mind as well. My name is Mnierri Kashantu, by the way.”

“Gaenor of Narmouth, pleased to meet you. Thank you for your kindness toward Elena.”

“’Tis nothing,” Mnierri replied. “You are her mother?”

“Her guardian,” Gaenor replied, “and teacher.”

“Then it be my duty to inform you she may have suffered a serious injury albeit not an immediately life-threatening one,” Mnierri told her. “But fear you not. Our Wise will be able to set her to right although we may need to go to Aliari to fully heal her.”

“What sort of injury?” Gaenor asked worriedly.

“Enough talking for now,” the leader told them. “March forth to Dair.”

The Vieri leader was gruff and most of the others were intent on doing as they were ordered, but Mnierri seemed solicitous of the adepts’ welfare. After the first two hours she told the leader to stop for a rest with an authority she had not previously displayed and to Gaenor’s surprise, the leader agreed without argument. Mnierri then ordered food and water brought out for the prisoners. The food, while still obviously travel rations was better than what the adepts had brought for themselves. Gaenor thought it tasted like a sweet cookie made with whole grains and honey and found herself thinking it might go well with tea.

She looked around at the others. Haxmire was having trouble with the speed of their forced march, although Radnire was helping as best he could. The others were just tired and perhaps a bit despondent although there was one she could not see from where she was seated. “Where’s Leracian?” she asked, in Shandi.

None of the Vieri understood her question, but she heard, “I am here, my chief,” from behind a large group of Vieri soldiers who were evidently keeping *thetem* under close guard. They moved aside slightly to afford Gaenor a view of Leracian. He remained standing with his arms tied behind his back.

“Speak a proper language or not at all,” the Vieri leader commanded.

Gaenor bristled, “Shandi is a proper language,” she shot back at him in Old Tongue. Mnierri was likeable, the leader just struck her as bossy. “You should try it sometime,” she continued, then added in Shandi, “assuming you’re capable of speaking more than an archaic form of your own.” The leader glared at her and she matched him glare for glare. After a minute he backed down.

“You live dangerously, Gae,” Artur told her.

“I will not be bullied,” she maintained, “and we are not as helpless as this lot evidently believes.”

“Please, Wise One,” Mnierri cut in. “Do not make trouble here. Soon we will have you in a more comfortable venue.”

“A jail, you mean,” Gaenor snapped at her.

“She is not of the Wise!” the leader said angrily. “You will not accord these people such courtesy.”

“Who else is capable of making such magic?” Mnierri retorted. “And I will accord respect and courtesy as I see fit. It is not your prerogative to tell me otherwise. Do not mind Fennot, Wise One. He is a good leader but was not deemed worthy of the Holy Training. He truly does not understand. It is not his fault.”

“I thank you for the courtesy,” Gaenor told her, “but he is right. I am not a member of the Council of the Wise.”

“You were invited, Gaenor,” Cornellya reminded her. “They sat at your feet to learn from you.”

“You taught the Wise?” Mnierri whispered, awestruck.

“I suspect you and I have two different Councils of the Wise in mind, Mnierri Kashantu. Tell me about your people, please,” Gaenor requested.

“Enough resting,” Fennot decided just then. “We move on now.”

“I’ll tell you more later, Wise One,” Mnierri promised, “if it is allowed.”

“Mnierri,” Gaenor requested. “Please keep an eye on Doctor Haxmire,” she pointed him out. “He is very old and having trouble I think with the pace that is being set.”

“A revered Elder,” Mnierri noted. “I will see he is not unduly stressed.” She rushed off to talk to Fennot. The Vieri leader did not look pleased, but when they started walking it was at a slower pace than before.

It was another two hours, just as the sun was rising, when they reached the city called Dair. Larger than the first town the adepts had passed through, the architecture was similar as was, evidently, the home life. They passed Vieri women sweeping off their front stoops or hanging clothing to dry in the sun, while other men and women tended the gardens or made their way through the streets on business of their own. All stood to the sides, however to watch the Council Security men and women escort Artur and Gaenor’s party through the city streets.

It was not a jail as Gaenor would have thought of one. They were given a comfortably appointed suite of rooms to stay in with private rooms for each of them, but the outer door was locked with a heavy bolt of iron. Gaenor had a bad moment when Elena was lead away but Mnierri assured her, “We need to set her arm, Wise One. I promise to stay with her.”

Once the door to their imprisonment suite was closed, Leracian shrugged and the rope fell off his hands and he was able to stretch for the first time in hours. “Why didn’t you do that hours ago?” Vito asked him.

“To what purpose?” Leracian replied. “I was horribly out-numbered and would not have served my chiefs by dying in such a situation.”

“You don’t know that,” Vito argued.

“No, I don’t,” Leracian told him calmly. “But so long as my chiefs were not endangered, fighting would have only put them in peril. These Vieri are not very good at securing a prisoner. If needed, I could have escaped at any time.”

Vito was not convinced, but Artur interrupted by saying, “Leracian is correct. So long as they were not attempting to harm any of us and from their treatment of Radnire and Elena it was obvious they were not, it was best to wait. As it happened they do not have us trapped very well in here.”

“An iron bolt across the door is fairly effective,” Jimeleo noted.

“But there is an iron platform with a ladder running down from it outside Doctor Haxmire’s window,” Radnire announced, having just put the exhausted professor to bed. “I think it is supposed to be a fire escape. The window opens only partway, but there is nothing to keep us from breaking it, I think.”

“For a people noted for being adept they don’t use much magic,” Faber commented.”

“Very few of us are allowed to be trained,” Tamitt told him.

“He speaks!” Faber commented sourly. “I was beginning to wonder.” Tamitt showed no sign of noticing Faber’s sarcasm, his eyes were fixed on Cornellya.

“But you are all capable of using magic, aren’t you?” Gaenor asked.

“Are we?” Tamitt asked. “I do not know how. It takes the holy training.”

“Holy training” Cornellya asked, puzzled. “All Vieri in the Village are trained from our youngest days.”

“I wish I lived in your Village, then,” Tamitt told her. “I’d like to be one of the Wise, but almost nobody is allowed. Next year they will decide what I am to be. Probably a farmer like my father, although they may decide to train me as a smith or a traveling merchant. That might be pleasant.”

“You should be able to choose that for yourself,” Cornellya told him, “although in the Village we try to learn all occupations as best we can. Our survival depends on it.” Tamitt obviously did not understand what she meant, but he smiled and nodded as though he did.

After a while most of the adepts decided to try sleeping and Cornellya did likewise mostly because she found Tamitt’s adoring gaze disturbing. Eventually only Gaenor stayed awake, waiting for Elena to return, however and out of boredom she looked around the room and found sufficient tools with which to cast a door-unlocking spell. Instead of an opening box she merely slid her pen across the table she was working on to simulate the sliding of the iron bolt. It was with some small satisfaction that she heard the iron bolt slide open as she moved her pen.

The door opened a few minutes later and a female vari stuck her head in the door and asked, “Wasn’t this door locked?”

“It was last time I tried to open it,” Gaenor replied calmly. The vari closed the door again and slid the bolt back. Gaenor waited a few minutes and unlocked it again. The next person to open the door was Mnierri when she returned with Elena.

Together with Gaenor, she helped Elena into a bed and then she sat down with Gaenor in the outer room. “Her injury is almost unheard of in one so young,” Mnierri told Gaenor seriously.

“A broken arm?” Gaenor asked. “It’s not that uncommon, although we probably should have reset it sooner.”

“No, not the arm, Wise One,” Mnierri shook her head. “I speak of the loss of her virtue.”

“Her virtue? Lena ’s a good girl,” Gaenor told her. “You don’t have to worry about that.”

“I do not refer to the way she behaves. If she is fortunate enough to be the ward of a Wise One, I would assume her behavior would be beyond reproach. I but speak of that part of her that facilitates well-being within us all. Perhaps you call it something else. You are not from this land, I know that much, so I suppose our customs differ.”

“We are from the mainland to the west,” Gaenor told her.

“There is land to the west?” Mnierri asked. “I had thought you might be from one of the small islands that surround Ichtar.”

“No, further away,” Gaenor informed her. “Beyond the horizon at least two days away by sea.”

“You can survive the sickness of the sea?” Mnierri asked.

“I might get a bit nauseous in a storm, but I generally acclimate quickly,” Gaenor admitted. “Cornellya has a lot of trouble that way, though.”

“The vari among you?” Mnierri asked. “I am not surprised. I have been taught that the sickness is potentially fatal to us. What town is she from?”

“She is from the Village,” Gaenor responded. “It is also on the mainland in the middle of a large desert.”

“That is not possible,” Mnierri told her. “There are no Vieri, except on Ichtar. To leave the island is to die. If she told you she was from somewhere else, she was not being truthful.”

“I first met her in the Village,” Gaenor informed her coolly. “She is the godchild on my intended.”

Mnierri cocked her head to one side in confusion. Gaenor almost laughed at the gesture, she had seen confused puppies do that, but never a person. “That is not possible,” Mneirri said in confusion at last and quickly left the room. Gaenor heard her slide the bolt back in place. She sighed, unlocked the door once more and then went to see how Elena was doing.

The girl was asleep when Gaenor opened the door, so she closed it again quietly and then went to her own room.

Eight

The adepts were left alone, except for being served meals for the rest of the day, but the next morning Cornellya and Tamitt were escorted from the suite. Gaenor immediately unlocked the door again as soon as they had left. “That’s a bit childish, isn’t it?” Jimeleo asked her.

“I want them to get the notion that I’m only here as long as I want to be,” Gaenor told him. “And I don’t like locked doors.”

“They don’t seem to be getting the message,” Artur told her.

“Maybe they are not as smart as their Parchite cousins are,” Gaenor replied.

A short while later Mnierri entered the room. “Should not this door be locked?” she asked concernedly.

“I would prefer if it were not,” Gaenor told her calmly.

Mnierri looked confused again, then nodded, “as you wish it, Wise One.”

“Where are Cornellya and Tamitt?” Gaenor asked her.

“Downstairs,” Mnierri replied. “Fennot is asking them questions, although I think he is just doing it to mark time until he receives orders about what to do about you all. He is particularly interested in Cornellya’s origins and Tamitt’s parents are here, worried about him, for obvious reasons.”

“You can let him go,” Gaenor told Mnierri. “He just stumbled across us and stayed to watch the magic.”

“Yes, he said as much,” Mnierri replied, “but Fennot is suspicious of everyone. Do not worry, I do not think the Wise will punish Tamitt for his interest in magic. Actually I am here to see Elena. Is she still sleeping?”

“Working on her lessons,” Gaenor replied. “She found it too noisy out here to read.”

Mnierri nodded and knocked softly on Elena’s door before opening it. “Good morrow, Elena,” she greeted the girl. “How is your arm?”

“It still hurts,” Elena complained.

“I know dear. It isn’t fair, but it will take a better healer than I to speed up the healing process. I have sent word to the local Councilwoman for help, however. We should hear soon. Now let me see you wiggle your fingers.”

Mnierri stayed with Elena for another few minutes before finally giving her another of the honey cookies they had eaten while marching to Dair. Then Mnierri left the room. Gaenor heard her start to slide the bolt into the locked position, before obviously changing her mind and sliding it back.

“That one catches on fast enough,” Artur commented.

“She has obviously had some of what they call holy training,” Gaenor replied. “I guess their Council of the Wise found her worthy. She does seem to be one of the few practicing adepts we have encountered here. I haven’t got a straight answer on that yet, but I think that’s what they mean by holy training.”

“They do seem to have a very insular community,” Artur noted. “They are unaware of their cousins in the Parch and they really don’t know what to make of us.”

“Can you blame them?” Gaenor replied. “I don’t think they have ever seen humans close up, although I suspect their Council will know what we are.”

“We’ll see,” Artur told her.

They remained in Dair for another four days. Each day Cornellya and Tamitt were escorted from the suite and questioned in another room. Only once did a vari come into the suite to talk to the party of humans. He asked them what their names were and where they were from and why they were on Ichtar. The humans answered truthfully and he wrote down their answers but did not otherwise engage them in conversation. After he left, Gaenor went back to work in her notebooks and divided her time between continuing Elena's lessons and working on various projects. She wrote several letters before realizing there was nowhere to post them from, then wrote up two short papers she had been putting off while traveling.

At the end of each day Cornellya and Tamitt were returned to the rooms and they were left alone for the night. Cornellya was generally exhausted on her return and Gaenor would help her to her room. Tamitt continued in high spirits and occasionally asked the others about magic. His questions were naive and superficial; mostly the sort a child might ask of a stage illusionist. Gaenor tried to explain how magic was more than just slight-of-hand tricks, but the young vari had a hard time believing her in spite of the view he had of the great spell.

During these conversations, however, Gaenor learned that Tamitt's family had been contacted and that they had been visiting the vari every day which was why he spent the whole day out of the suite. Cornellya, however was being subjected to a tiring set of interrogations. Gaenor feared she was being tortured, but Cornellya told her, "No. They just don't stop asking the same questions over and over. I wish I could tell them what they want to know, but I don't know what it is they want to hear. Not the truth, certainly."

After the first two weeks, Cornellya's interrogations ended and she slowly recovered. Elena's arm began to heal as well and she took an increasingly greater interest in their predicament. "Why can't we just leave?" she asked Gaenor one day.

"I can open that door, but there are three other locked doors between us and the street," Gaenor explained. "It's a time-consuming process and outside this room I would not be doing it in private. We cannot use the fire escape either," Gaenor told her. "Mnierri told me it is alarmed. A loud noise would be sounded if we got on it."

"Can't you disrupt that spell?" Elena asked.

"Not without knowing what it is," Gaenor replied. "Don't worry so much, though. There are things we can do if it's a matter of life and death. So far it is not and except for the way they've treated Cornellya, they have been gentle enough."

It was another week before they left the tall building that served as their jail. A knock came at their door and Mnierri came to their door. "You've been summoned to stand before the Council of the Wise in Aliari," she told them.

Leracian's hands were bound once more and they were herded downstairs to the street where a large wagon, similar to the ones they had seen on the roads, waited for them. Their guards held the same short wooden cudgels they had when the great spell had concluded. By now, Gaenor knew from asking questions of Mnierri they were not clubs, but projectile weapons that would stun the party if they tried to escape. In a gesture of supreme defiance, Leracian shrugged himself out of his bonds and tossed the still tied rope at one of their guards, before calmly climbing into the wagon with the others.

"Well played," Gaenor told him proudly. "They should learn to never attempt to imprison a *Tem*."

“Thank you, my chief,” Leracian replied seriously. “I fear we have not been active enough in this land so they do not understand what the red battle togs mean.”

“We shall have to instruct them gently then, my honor guard,” Gaenor told him calmly.

“Why?” Mnierri asked from the other side of the wagon. “What does the red mean?”

Gaenor spent the next two hours sharing everything she knew about the *Temi*, and the Ridec clan while Mnierri grew visibly paler and more nervous to be near Leracian.

“And you are his chief?” Mnierri asked nervously.

“As is Artur,” Gaenor informed her. Mnierri had no reply to that.

It was a two and a half day trip along the stone-paved roads to the capital of Ichtar. The adepts had all expected another small city, similar to Dair or the towns they had seen on their arrival on the Island, but Aliari was an impressive city on anyone’s scale.

Situated near the confluence of the Nihar and Aliar rivers; Aliari’s buildings averaged over twice as tall as those in Dair. Most of the five to six story-tall structures were faced with pink granite and covered with black slate roofs. However, there were also neighborhoods filled with wooden-faced buildings, as ornately carved as those in other Ichtharian settlements, but also painted in a wide array of vivid colors. In the center of the city, on top of a tall hill, stood a large complex of light gray stone buildings.

“What is that?” Gaenor asked Mnierri.

“We call it the Hall of the Wise,” Mnierri replied. “That is where we are going. We will be able to see to Elena’s injury while some of the Wise speak to the rest of you.”

Mnierri made it sound like a great honor, but if so, being surrounded by wary, armed guards and marched into a large hall to be interrogated by a group of angry Vieri was an honor she would have gladly foregone. Immediately on their arrival, Mnierri escorted Elena away, while the rest of the party was seated before a dozen angry old Vieri.

“Who in the deepest Hell do you think you all are? Coming to our land and disrupting our most sacred spell?” One of the Wise began the questioning.

“I want to know what in the deepest Hell they are,” another muttered. “They are not Vieri. It seems to me that they must be demons.”

“Those two are Vieri,” a third pointed out, gesturing toward Cornellya and Tamitt.

“Leave Tamitt alone,” Cornellya told the elder defiantly. In the preceding three weeks she had a chance to talk at length with the vari and decided she sort of liked him. He was her age even if he did not seem as mature. “He was not part of our party. He just stumbled across us and stayed to watch.”

“And who are you, child?” one of the other elders asked belligerently. “And what town do you come from. Why did you betray your Council of the Wise?”

“I betrayed no one,” Cornellya shot back at him. “My Council of the Wise lives in the Parch, thousands of miles to the west.” The Council of the Wise buzzed among themselves at that announcement.

“Perhaps you should be asking why we disrupted your foul spell,” Vito shouted at the Wise. They glared at him as one. “Well, can’t have been as sacred as you claim since it would have killed hundreds of thousands of people, maybe a million or more and pretty much destroyed the world as we know it.”

“He’s right,” Jimeleo joined in. “If anyone deserves to be called demons it is you.”

There was an angry muttering from both sides until Artur spoke. “Perhaps it would serve us all if we were to calm down and discuss this like adults.”

“Your wisdom is apparent, stranger,” a female vari commended him. “We will accomplish naught here by recriminations. However, oh wise stranger, were you aware that your spell resulted in the deaths of several of our older Council members and that by casting it you have destroyed a spell which can now not be recast for over a century?”

“We killed people?” Gaenor asked, dismayed. “We were here to save people, not kill anyone.”

“Well, you killed several of us in spite of your intentions,” she retorted, then she used both hands to rub her own head, “And left most of the rest of us in great pain.”

“How?” Gaenor asked.

“When you disrupted our spell, did you not think there would be any backlash?” the woman accused. “You should have considered the repercussions of your actions.”

“And you should have considered your own,” Gaenor snapped back at all the ill-tempered Vieri. “What did you think to accomplish by bringing about an ice age that would have killed a million people or more and displaced millions more? And that would have been the least of what you did when your spell depleted the world of magic.”

“It would not have done that,” the female denied.

“No?” Gaenor asked archly, “Talk about not considering the repercussions. You were changing the weather patterns for the entire world and set up a feedback loop that would have kept that spell working until it had nothing left to work on. What did you think you were doing?”

“We were returning the world to its natural state as it was before the cursed ones began their attacks on us,” she replied.

“The cursed ones?” Gaenor asked.

“Her people!” the woman replied, pointing at Cornellya.

“We’re slipping back into childishness, I think,” Artur remarked. “It seems to me that if you just think we are cursed by your standards, you would have had us killed out of hand, but you didn’t, so I imagine we’re here because you have questions. It sounds to me like we’re going to be asking each other questions for a long time to come. Such as why you think my goddaughter is cursed.”

Artur’s calm words once more helped diffuse the situation. The Council of the Wise looked among themselves and finally the first spokesman nodded, adding. “You are correct. That does not mean we may not kill you in the future, but for now that is not our intention. I am Terret Fanchii. At the moment, I

lead the Council of the Wise. This is my wife Lierri Kashantu...”

“Is Mnierri your daughter?” Gaenor asked after the introductions had been performed.

“She is my daughter,” Lierri replied, “by another marriage. You know her?”

“She was with the Council Guards who found us,” Gaenor replied, “and traveled with us to Aliari. She has been as kind as allowed under the circumstances.”

“I did not realize she was back in the capital,” Lierri noted.

“We just arrived,” Gaenor replied, “and she is seeing to the health of my ward. Aside from a broken arm, Elena seems healthy enough, but Mnierri detected a deeper injury and...”

“And I have seen to her treatment,” Mnierri finished from the entrance to the hall. “I greet you, Mother, and rejoice to see you are well.”

“And I greet you, my daughter, and rejoice as well,” Lierri replied. “Have you come to speak for these people?”

“I have spent a good deal of time with them, Mother,” Mnierri replied. “If not I, then who?”

“It appears they are capable of speaking for themselves, especially the cursed one,” Lierri added acidly.

“I am not cursed!” Cornellya snapped.

“Calmly, Cornellya,” Gaenor told her friend, taking one hand in her own.

Cornellya whipped her head around angrily at Gaenor, but calmed instantly. “You don’t understand how insulting that is, Gaenor,” she replied quietly.

“Then they owe you an apology, I think,” Gaenor told her, then turned to the Wise, “and I think someone owes me an explanation as to exactly what is wrong with my ward.”

“I told you, Gaenor,” Mnierri insisted, “She’s lost her virtue. Normally, a broken arm should have been healed by now, but she is only about half-healed. The loss of virtue is a horrendous wound.”

“My daughter tells you the truth,” Lierri agreed. “Many of us could not live without our virtue, it is only your ward’s youthful vigor that keeps her from dying. Without the virtue she could not have been expected to live beyond a century at best.”

“Oh dear,” Gaenor sighed. “I wish I had understood that sooner. Humans are not born with this virtue as you call it, although it is something some few of us acquire. We are not born adept as you are.”

“Adept?” Lierri asked at the sound of the Shandi word.

“With the ability to make magic,” Gaenor replied.

“That is just one part of the virtue,” Lierri corrected Gaenor. “We train only the best of us in the Holy Art, but virtue is what allows us to live out our lives in health.”

“As I said,” Gaenor told her, “we are not born that way. I and Artur have this virtue as you call it only because we were initiated into it by the Vieri of the mainland. The others were initiated into the Holy Art as you call it with a lesser spell. As to my knowledge no human knows the spell that both makes one adept and long-lived and healthy. In general my people do not live as long as yours.”

“And among my people,” Cornellya added, “we are all trained in magic.”

“Yes, that was always the difference between us,” Terret replied, “that is why your ancestors were banished from Ichtar.”

“Banished?” Cornellya asked. “I never heard that. I thought we had always lived in the Parch.”

“No,” Terret corrected her, “although your skin and hair is somewhat darker than ours. It is not unbecoming, but your people must have lived in the sun for a long time. Is it possible you do not know your own origins?”

Nine

“When did my people leave Ichtar?” Cornellya asked curiously. “And why?”

“All Vieri originated on Ichtar,” Lierri began what was obviously an often-told story. “We lived here and developed our civilization. Our studies informed us that as large as our island was, it was just a small part of the world. However, we are not well-suited to a life at sea. We get violently ill whenever the water is rough, so we stayed on land, developing our cities inland. It would have been inconvenient to build on the coast in most places in any case.

“We do carry cargo on the Aliar river system, but even then it takes a very rare vari who can tolerate the motion sickness that develops when we are in a boat,” Lierri continued.

“That explains a lot,” Cornellya commented. “I got so sick whenever we were in a storm.”

“Only in a storm?” Lierri asked. “You’re very lucky. I cannot tolerate even a brief moment on a barge at dock. Still, we do enjoy a modest shore fishing industry along the Bay of Winoiri, but even there we do not often use boats save to hold the fish we catch. There are some few Vieri who can tolerate boating on Lake Hinalo and other small bodies of water, but even they would not go to sea willingly.”

“I’m afraid I do not know where Lake Hinalo and that bay are,” Gaenor admitted. “Would it be possible to see a map of Ichtar?”

“I will have one brought for you,” Terret offered.

“Thank you,” Gaenor told him.

“In any case, even our most water-hardy Vieri will only work in calm conditions,” Lierri told them. “This is how we built our civilization. It was about two hundred centuries ago that the heresy arose.”

“Heresy?” Cornellya asked.

“You have already expounded on the basic tenet of it,” Lierri told her. “Most Vieri are and were content

with the current system in which only the Wise and our appointed trainees are allowed to practice the Holy Art. New candidates to the Council are chosen from the populace on the basis of merit alone after rigorous testing. Children of the Wise are never given preference in the choice, so perhaps you can imagine my pride in Mnierri's having been found worthy of being a Wise candidate.

"Your own ancestors, Cornellya, believed that all Vieri should be trained in the Holy Art," Lierri continued.

"It has worked well for us," Cornellya replied. "There are many spells that only members of our own Council of the Wise are allowed to cast, although anyone might become a member of the council on proving their worthiness."

"Perhaps your ancestors were not as reckless as we have been led to believe," Lierri acknowledged, "or perhaps they learned some hard lessons of their own. On Ichtar the debate over which was the right way split our society right up to the Council of the Wise. In the end, the conservative faction of the Wise was dominant. The dissidents were mostly peaceful, but there was a militant faction. Those militants attempted to overthrow the Council of the Wise by violent means, but the Council Guard was loyal and valiant.

"The surviving dissidents were banished from Ichtar. I imagine the ancients must have thought it was a death sentence," Lierri explained, "but somehow the exiles, your ancestors, survived to reach the shores of your land. We have seen boats and ships from the cliffs that surround Ichtar and always assumed they were sailed by the cursed ones who had been banished."

"No, that would have been our people," Artur replied, "or Gae's people since most of the sailors in these waters are Mishandan."

"Mishandan?" Lierri echoed. "Are you not all of the same people?"

"We are of one species," Gaenor informed her and the rest of the Wise, "but there are a lot of us and the mainland is very large, indeed. There are many nations of humans with almost as many different ways of living."

"Fascinating," Lierri replied. "And do you live in peace with the cursed ones?"

"We have very little contact with the Vieri of the Parch," Gaenor replied, gently correcting her terminology with subtle emphasis. "To most humans they are mythical creatures that mothers tell their children about in bedtime stories. Although most people do not even know they exist. I have met only a handful of other humans who have ever met a vari, at least until Cornellya started traveling with us."

"My people live mostly in isolation in the Parch," Cornellya added. "Only a very few of us ever venture from the Village."

"But how did you survive the crossing?" Terret asked, "And why have you remained within this Parch. That is the great desert in the middle of the continent to our west, is it not?"

"It is," Cornellya confirmed. "How do you know of it?"

"We can detect the great spell that maintains its boundaries," Terret informed her. "It was that spell we were attempting to end."

"I never knew the Parch was created by magic" Cornellya replied.

“We should have known,” Gaenor told her. “No natural desert could ever be so absolute. We knew it was magical in nature, we just assumed it was some natural form of magic rather than a spell that was cast by someone. But why did you want to dissipate that spell?”

“We determined that it was responsible for a great climatic change from the natural state of the world,” Terret replied.

“You almost caused an Ice Age,” Gaenor reminded him.

“That is the natural climate at this time,” Terret explained. “It was not two hundred centuries ago, but it is now. We sought to return the world to its natural state. We did not know that your people had occupied those lands that would have been affected by the change. Is there no place they could have gone?”

“No place where other people are not already in place,” Gaenor replied.

“The displacement would have caused wars, famine and death over at least half the continent,” Vito added.

“But you have not told us how your people survived and why they settled in the Parch, which we assume they created,” Lierri reminded Cornellya.

“I don’t know,” Cornellya admitted, “We’ll have to ask our own Council of the Wise. Kseniya or Borrit or one of the others might know.”

“How do you propose we ask them?” Lierri asked. “We cannot travel there and cannot allow them to travel here.”

“There is a calling spell,” Cornellya replied. “It allows us to talk to one another at long distances.”

“Yes,” Lierri nodded, “We know of that spell, but it is very tiring to use and should only be used at need.”

“Gaenor has improved on the spell,” Cornellya announced, watching for reactions among the Wise. “It’s not quite as much of a drain anymore, although I would still not want to use it for more than half an hour.”

“That is a long time,” Lierri considered. “You say Gaenor improved the calling spell?”

“My friend, Lady Gaenor of Narmouth, crafts new spells with a speed and accuracy never before known,” Cornellya told Lierri proudly.

“The invention of new spells is not something to be rushed into,” Terret replied. “Each spell must be carefully considered and even then there is always great danger until a new spell has been tested and approved.”

“That is the way I was taught as well,” Cornellya admitted, “but Lady Gaenor has also invented a new way to craft spells safely, a way to see how they will work before you actually cast one for the first time.”

“How did you do that?” Lierri asked Gaenor.

“I developed a system of notation that in its subtext you can study the reactions and interactions of the

various components of the spell,” Gaenor replied. “It is by no means complete, I’m still working on it, but to date the system includes all the tools and ingredients we commonly use to cast spells. The more obscure and as yet unknown components are where the real work will be for years to come.”

“Is this system easy to learn?” Lierri asked.

“Like any such system,” Gaenor replied, “it is easy to understand simple applications with it. The deeper you get into it, the more complex it can get, but the Council of the Wise in the Village did not have an inordinate amount of trouble understanding what I showed them.”

“And will you show it to us?” Terret asked.

“If that is what you want, of course,” Gaenor replied.

“Even though we are your enemies?” Terret pressed.

“Are you our enemies?” Gaenor countered. “So far it sounds to me as though there has been an unfortunate misunderstanding between our peoples. Surely people of good will can put aside such differences to forge a strong friendship.”

“Perhaps,” Terret admitted grudgingly.

“I am more interested at this time in what became of the cursed ones,” one of the other Councilors announced, “and why these strangers who are not born with the virtue somehow learned the Holy Arts for themselves.”

“We can call to the Village,” Gaenor replied. She looked out the window and saw the sun was just setting. “I estimate it is about noontime there, but I will need my spell tools and ingredients.”

“Have them brought,” Terret commanded Mnierri.

Mnierri left the Council’s hall for a few minutes and soon returned, followed by a number of Vierri, carrying the entire party’s bags and packs. “I’m sorry I took so long, but I stopped into see my patient,” she apologized.

“Lena!” Gaenor gasped. “How could I have forgotten? She may as well be here with us, since she does not need her virtue restored.”

“There are three of the Wise already instilling the virtue into her,” Mnierri informed Gaenor. “Once begun, the spell cannot be stopped.”

“But she is not ready to be initiated yet,” Gaenor protested. “We rarely initiate an adept with less than four years of study, and she knows just enough now to be dangerous especially to herself.”

“I am sorry,” Mnierri apologized contritely, “but I did not know.”

“Young Vieri are born adept,” Cornellya reminded Gaenor. “It doesn’t hurt us. We’ll just have to explain to Elena that she must not make magic unless supervised. She’s a good girl, she won’t disobey. Well, she won’t disobey you anyway.”

“I live in interesting times,” Gaenor muttered.

Cornellya laughed loudly. "You mean after everything you've done, a little thing like this makes you nervous?"

Gaenor thought about it and then nodded. "Yes, it does." She got up and found her pack and the tools she needed inside. She also found the notebook with the calling spell she had revised inside.

"What is that?" Lierri asked, seeing the notebook. Gaenor explained the notation within. "Do you not have this spell memorized?"

"I have only cast it a few times before," Gaenor replied. "Reading it from my notes keeps me from forgetting an essential gesture or phrase."

"May I see that?" Terret requested, reaching for the notebook. "Hmm. You compose spells in our language? You speak it well, but it is obviously not your native tongue."

"It isn't," Gaenor admitted, "but among human adepts it is customary to cast spells in a language other than the local one. Artur was my teacher and he used Old Tongue, so it was natural that I do the same."

"Old Tongue is it?" Terret asked, sounding amused.

"So we call it," Gaenor replied.

"Is it not dangerous to cast a spell in a language not your own?" Terret asked.

"Not really," Gaenor shrugged. "If your intention does not match the words you use, nothing will happen. Magic, as I am sure you know, is an exacting discipline. You call it the Holy Art, and I agree that shows the proper care and reverence one must have when practicing magic, but to me it is more than an art. It is a science. There are solid rules that must be adhered to in casting any spell, and all results are predictable and reproducible when you understand how you got them in the first place. That is why my notational system allows adepts to craft new spells safely. You will note there are three lines that go together; the incantation, the ritual, and the subtext. The subtext is not strictly necessary to the casting of a spell, but it does explain the inner workings of any spell. It is basically an analysis and commentary on the spell above it. It's how we were able to create the spells that countered your own so quickly."

"Spells?" Terret echoed.

"Yes, we cast one spell here on Ichtar, but it was supported by another spell cast in two locations on the mainland," Gaenor replied.

"You did plan your assault well," Terret replied grudgingly. Then he took a closer look at Gaenor's version of the calling spell, even as she started to lay out her tools and ingredients. "Yes, from the incantation I can recognize the calling I am acquainted with, but what is the rest?"

"When I learned how much energy the calling spell takes from the caster, I looked for a way to ease the strain. It is still a strain but not as bad as the original spell and there's another added bonus to this version of the spell," Gaenor added.

"What is that?" Lierri asked.

"Just watch," Gaenor smiled. She did not wait for permission but picked up the tools she needed and

quickly cast the spell. As it had before, a bright blue light formed between her and the western wall of the large room. The light grew until it filled a large area and then rapidly resolved into a glowing image of Kseniya Keshayu. "Good evening, Kseniya," Gaenor greeted her.

"Gaenor!" Kseniya greeted her happily. "You did it! Even now the rain over the Parch has stopped. Who is that?" she added suddenly seeing the others in the hall.

"Kseniya," Gaenor told her sternly, "you did not tell me we would be killing people."

"Would it have changed what had to be done?" Kseniya replied hesitantly.

"Maybe," Gaenor replied. "Maybe we could have resolved this conflict, by talking to your counterparts here on Ichtar."

"I doubt that," Kseniya disagreed. "They have been attacking us for decades. This recent great spell was just their latest attempt."

"They believe you have been attacking them," Gaenor pointed out. "I want, I need to know the truth."

"We have only attacked in retaliation," Kseniya admitted after a long pause.

"Is that in keeping with the Way?" Gaenor asked pointedly.

"No," Terret interrupted, "your Kseniya is correct. You did what had to be done. We would not have negotiated had you been unable to stop our spell first and if we had been aware of you, we probably could have stopped you. I would be interested in hearing about this Way you mentioned, but for now, we are considering another matter."

"I will be most willing to teach you the Way," Kseniya replied. Terret and Lierri nodded. Gaenor performed what introductions she could and let the other members of the Ichtar Council of the Wise introduce themselves. While that was taking place, Borrit, Kseniya's mate, appeared in the room and quickly left to assemble the Parch Council of the Wise.

"We have come to call your tribe the cursed ones," Terret admitted even as others arrived on the Village end of the call. "No doubt you have equally insulting things you call us. It has been some twenty thousand turnings of the seasons since your people left us. Even among Vierri that is long enough for some things to change. We told the humans and this vari, Cornellya Vasylya, the story of how and why your people were cast out of Ichtar, but young Cornellya was unable to tell us how you managed to survive the crossing."

"It's not something we like to talk about," Kseniya admitted, "so it is not a story we tell our young. Only the members of the Council of the Wise know that."

"*We are* the Council of the Wise," Lierri pointed out with a tight smile.

Kseniya considered that carefully. She looked at the other members of her own council and when several nodded their heads she replied with a thin smile, "I suppose you are. Well, if you are willing to listen to a bunch of cursed ones, we should be willing to talk."

"The crossing, according to the stories, was a frightful experience. So many sick Vierri, so many lost at sea in small boats that ought never to have ventured on a small lake, never mind the ocean. Of the fifty

boats that left Ichtar only twenty arrived on the mainland. Just barely over two hundred survivors. That is why I worried about you, Cornellya, but I was not allowed to warn you of the dangers to our kind on the sea.”

“It wasn’t so bad,” Cornellya replied. “Well, that that’s not true, it was terrible, but the ginger wafers and limeade helped a lot.”

“The chocolate would have taken your mind off the seasickness as well,” Gaenor chuckled.

“Chocolate?” both Kseniya and Lierri asked.

“There is a confection native to the people of the southwest coast of the mainland that turned out to have certain erotic effects on Vieri metabolism,” Gaenor explained. “Cornellya could have ridden out a hurricane without noticing.”

“Perhaps,” Cornellya blushed, “but I could never have sailed a boat in that condition.”

“Sounds interesting,” Lierri opined with a sly look at Terret.

“I suspect it would be addictive as well,” Cornellya warned her.

“So your ancestors eventually landed on the mainland,” Terret brought the conversation back to its original subject.

“We would not have been surprised to find people on the mainland with a civilization not unlike the one we had left,” Kseniya continued at last, “what were found were scattered bands of humans who made their living by hunting and gathering. We taught the ones we found how to farm and chose promising children to teach magic to. It was in that period that we began to formulate the Way. You see merely being free to practice magic is not enough as our ancestors learned. It must be done responsibly. So we developed our basic philosophy and guide to proper behavior.

“We were few in number and well accepted by the humans we befriended, but after a few generations the shamans we trained began to resent us. They felt we were holding back, not sharing the more advanced knowledge. Well, we were, I’m sure,” Kseniya admitted, “but they were not ready for the advanced magics. Our forebears believed everyone should be allowed to learn, but not without proper training,” The Ichtharian Vieri nodded at that and Kseniya continued. “So while we were powerful, we were also few in number. I realize some of our ancestors tried to depose your ancestors of the Council, but most of the militants died in the crossing. The survivors were pacifists who were expelled from Ichtar because of their sympathy with the militants’ cause. Fighting was not our way, nor was it necessary

“We moved on, traveling from place to place, leaving tales of magical creatures behind us. We also left much of our language behind as well. Many mainland languages were influenced by the Old Tongue. In each place we settled we would befriend the local humans and teach what we felt they were ready to learn. This was in keeping with the Way. Primitive human religions were influenced by the Way as well although each chose what they found of value or what fit their beliefs best, but never our entire philosophy.

“I’m afraid another attitude that rubbed off on our humans friends was our ancestors’ antipathy with the Vieri of Ichtar. They heard our stories and decided you all must be demons. We did nothing to abuse them of that belief, I’m afraid.

“In time,” Kseniya continued, “we no longer felt safe among the human tribes. Too many resented our long lives and great power. So we devised and cast a great spell that changed the weather patterns of the world, warming it up ever so slightly. Then we cast another great spell to create the vast desert known as the Parch. The spell keeps it far too dry to support life naturally, so we were safe from the surrounding humans. That spell is renewed each year by our own Council of the Wise.”

“It was that spell and its renewal that we detected and interpreted as an attack on us,” Lierri commented.

“No,” Kseniya shook her head. “Until these most recent great spells, that was never our intention.”

“We too, cast a spell each year to maintain our climate,” Lierri told Kseniya. “We tried to disrupt yours so that we wouldn’t have to.”

“The spell that maintains the Parch should not have affected Ichtar so badly,” Kseniya replied, “or so I was taught.”

“Do you also maintain the spell that warmed the world?” Lierri pressed.

“No,” Kseniya replied. “Once the Parch was established it was no longer needed.”

“It is possible that the mere existence of the Parch affects the weather on Ichtar,” Gaenor commented. “For the most part wind usually blows into the Parch during the day and out again at night. It’s a very large area. I wonder if anyone has ever studied global weather systems.”

“It would be something to look into,” Artur replied, “when we get back. I’ve been studying the weather wherever I’ve been for years except during this recent quest, and noting it in notebooks.”

“Notebooks?” Vito asked. “You?”

“Where do you think Gaenor got the habit from?” Artur countered. “So The Vieri of the Parch are trying to preserve their home and the Vieri of Ichtar are trying to restore the world to its natural state. Do I have that right?”

“That does seem to be a fair assessment of the situation,” Terret commented. There were nods and sounds of agreement from both sides of the spell.

“Then perhaps we can come to an understanding,” Artur replied. “For now, however, Gaenor appears to be starting to grow tired. Why don’t we allow her to rest and we can meet like this again tomorrow?”

“Wait!” Gaenor told them all. “Kseniya, I am still angry with the Wise of the Parch. The Wise of Ichtar may agree that you did what you had to, but you really should have told me exactly what was going on. I do not like being used this way. I’m not even sure it is forgivable.”

“I do hope you will forgive us in time, dear Gaenor,” Kseniya told her. “We still want you to join us among the Wise.”

“If I do, there will be full disclosure, Kseniya, and no more secrets kept from your people of their origins. Having come from Ichtar is hardly worth keeping secret after all. But I am most upset about having been given a killing spell to use without being told.”

“It need not have killed our people,” Terret interrupted. “In all fairness, they were killed by the backlash when our attempt at a counter-spell failed.”

“Even so,” Gaenor replied. “It is not in keeping with the Way, is it, Kseniya?”

Kseniya turned away looking embarrassed. “We did not all agree as to what we should have told you, Gaenor. Nor did we agree that the full implications of the spell should be kept from you. You did help craft it, after all, but in the end it was necessary to bow to the will of the majority. The Council of the Wise must never appear to be divided.”

“It is even more important for the Council of the Wise to never be wrong,” Gaenor retorted. Then she sighed and told her, “We’ll call back tomorrow. Be at peace, Kseniya.”

And you, dear,” Kseniya replied.

Ten

As the blue light contracted and faded out, Torret commented, “I think we can come to an agreement.”

Gaenor slumped into her chair and looked at him. “I’m glad,” she told him tiredly. “What made the difference.”

“It was when Kseniya said, ‘The Council of the Wise must never appear to be divided,’” he replied. “It is an important point of commonality. Cornellya’s people are not so different from ours. Their ancestors may have been at odds with ours, but Kseniya sounds like quite a reasonable vari to me. It will take some time, but this is a promising start.”

“And it would be proper to reunite the Vieri again if we can,” Lierri added.

“Would you be willing to allow all Vierri to learn magic?” Cornellya asked pointedly.

“We would consider the matter,” Lierri replied. “If it turns out that teaching the Holy Art to all has worked well in the Parch, we would probably try it, at least with a larger range of Vierri. Eventually if it worked for us we would open such training to all who are interested. We will want to know more about the Way, however. I suspect that is why your society is not chaotic.”

“I will be honored to teach what I know, but I am not one of the Wise,” Cornellya told her.

“I want to learn of the Way too,” Tamitt told Cornellya sincerely.

“The Way is of Life,” Cornellya began, “and Life is of the Way,”

Tamitt frowned at that, but continued looking at Cornellya in hopes of dawning comprehension. The assembled members of the Council of the Wise looked only slightly less confused. Cornellya shook her head slightly then slowly began the first lesson on the Way ever given on Ichtar.

“Are you all right, Wise One?” Mnierri asked Gaenor solicitously as Cornellya continued her lecture.

“I’m just very tired. The calling spell is a very difficult spell to maintain especially for as long as I did,”

Gaenor replied. "But you know I'm not a member of either Council of the Wise. Why do you still call me 'Wise One?'"

"My daughter accords honor where she finds it appropriate," Lierri told Gaenor. "She may be correct. Certainly Kseniya thought you should sit among the Wise."

"Maybe when I've lived a few centuries," Gaenor replied, slurring her words slightly.

"My chief is very tired," Leracian spoke up for the first time since their arrival. "Would there be a place for her to rest?"

"Yes, of course," Lierri replied. "Mnierri, will you see to Gaenor of Narmouth's comfort and that of our other guests, please. I believe our study of the Way will go on for quite some time to come."

Cornellya and Artur stayed to continue telling the Council about the Way and Tamitt stayed to listen closely to Cornellya, while Mnierri escorted the others to guest rooms within the Hall of the Wise.

"We appear to have lost our guards," Gaenor noted as they made their way through the corridors of the large complex of buildings. The other adepts were given rooms on the first floor of the residence wing, but Gaenor had been led upward to the next floor. Leracian, as ever, trailed quietly behind.

"You did not notice, Wise One?" Mnierri asked. "They were dismissed over an hour ago. You speak most persuasively."

"That was probably Kseniya speaking persuasively," Gaenor told her. "I don't recall saying much that might have persuaded anyone of much of anything."

"My mother always says it's not so much what you say, but how you say it or how you don't say it," Mnierri told her, then giggled. "It always sounds so pedantic, doesn't it? But you see it really wasn't so much what you said, but the way you presented yourself. You were serene and calm..." Mnierri led Gaenor into a small suite of rooms. The rooms the other adepts had been given were comfortably furnished, but these rooms were even more so. There were three bedrooms that shared a common room with six comfortable chairs situated around a large dining table. In the far corner next to an open window was a small desk. Gaenor and Mnierri sat down together at the table, while Leracian, installed himself in one of the bedrooms.

"Serene and calm?" Gaenor laughed mirthlessly. "I've never been so nervous in all my life."

"You hide it well, Wise One," Mnierri told her. "I only hope I am able to behave as maturely when I reach your age."

"Mnierri, I'm only... oh dear, I've lost track, I haven't celebrated my birthday since all this began... Uh, I'm only twenty-five years old. I suspect you're far older than I am."

"By a century, Wise One," Mnierri admitted, awestruck. Then, shyly, she asked, "Will you teach me?"

"What?" Gaenor asked, taken aback. "What can I teach you? You must have been studying longer than I have."

"I have spoken to Elena and Cornellya," Mnierri told her. "Elena speaks highly of you, of course. I would expect as much from someone you have adopted. But Cornellya tells me that you have taught not

only the Wise Ones of your own kind, but the Parch Council of the Wise as well. For one so young, that is an amazing achievement. Please, Wise One, will you accept me as your student?"

"On one condition," Gaenor told her, with a slight smile. "Stop calling me 'Wise One.' My name is Gaenor and my friends mostly call me Gae, although I understand Vierri do not feel comfortable using nicknames." The last word was in Shandi. As far as Gaenor knew there was no such word in Old Tongue.

"Nicknames?" Mnierri repeated. "You mean like diminutive pet names used between friends? We have those. To my friends I am Rie."

"Pleased to meet you, Rie. I guess that's another difference between you and your cousins in the Parch," Gaenor observed. "They feel that to change a name is to change the person. It's a part of the Way, although a very small part. It does not bother Cornellya to hear me called Gae, but she does not do so herself."

"That is silly," Mnierri laughed. "It is not how I think of you that makes you who you are, it is how you think of yourself. But right now I can tell you're thinking tired thoughts. Why don't you get some sleep? We may begin my training later."

"How much do you know about the chemical elements, Rie?" Gaenor asked as she started toward a bedroom.

"The elements?" Mnierri asked. "Fire, water, earth and air. Right?"

"And you're one hundred and twenty-five years old?" Gaenor asked. "So much to relearn! Oh, well, I promised, didn't I? Oh! What about Elena?"

"She is fine, Gae" Mnierri assured her. "Three of the Wise are renewing her virtue... no, they are instilling it in her for the first time. Does your kind really live without it?"

"It is natural for us," Gaenor replied. "When may I see her."

"You may see her now, if you wish," Mnierri replied uncertainly, "but she won't see you for hours to come."

"The initiation spell," Gaenor commented. "It takes a full day, doesn't it?"

"It does," Mnierri confirmed. "When you were... uh, initiated..."

"I was more than half dead of dehydration and hyperthermia," Gaenor remarked. "The Vierri there found Artur and me and nursed us back to health. Instilling me with the 'virtue' as you call it was part of their care. It also enabled me to cast spells, where before I could only invent them. Rie, I've only been adept for less than two years. Are you sure there's something I can teach you?"

"Oh, yes!"

Eleven

They spent another five weeks on Ichtar. Gaenor and Mnierri were with Elena when the Wise finished their spell.

“How are you feeling, Lena?” Gaenor asked.

“Better,” Elena replied. “My arm doesn’t hurt at all now, although it itches a lot.

“That will pass, Elena,” Mnierri told her. “When the itching goes away we can remove the splints.”

“Lena, dear,” Gaenor told the girl seriously. “There’s something you need to know. The spell they cast so you could heal quicker... it has also made you adept.”

“Really?” Elena asked delightedly.

“Really, but I’m very worried about it,” Gaenor confessed. “Your training has just started, and you can hurt yourself very badly if you aren’t extremely careful. That is why we do not initiate students for years.”

“I’ll be careful, Gae,” Elena promised.

“I want you to promise not to use magic without my supervision until I think you’re ready,” Gaenor told her firmly.

“I promise, Gae,” Elena replied. “But you will allow me to cast spells sometimes?”

“Yes,” Gaenor nodded. “In fact, when your arm is healed, I have a very special spell for you to perform.”

A few days later, Tellyndar, Vito and Jimeleo were allowed to return to the *Tern*. They sailed her up the Aliar River to a city in southeast Ichtar called Slairi where they stayed for a few days while Tellyndar carefully checked the Vieri’s charts of the river before continuing carefully upstream to Aliari.

It’s amazing the river is navigable this far upstream,” Tellyndar remarked on their return. It’s a shame so many Vieri have seasickness problems. That river would be perfect for all sorts of traffic. As it was we only saw a handful of boats on it.”

“I think the Vieri would be more interested in a railroad,” Vito remarked.

“What is a railroad?” Tellyndar asked. They spent the rest of their walk to the Hall of the Wise as Vito and Jimeleo described the steam trains of Nimbria.

Most of Artur’s and Gaenor’s month, however, was spent mediating between the two groups of Vieri. The others helped, but it was Artur’s political skills that made the talks so successful. He was able to smooth over basic disagreements by getting both parties to agree to disagree. “You’ve been two different societies for twenty thousand years,” he pointed out fairly often. “You have to understand there will be some things you may never totally agree on. All you need is to respect each other’s differences.”

Midway through the third week, Gaenor realized that aside from her friends in the Village, no one on the mainland had any notion what had happened on Ichtar. “Would anyone mind if I called a friend in Misha?” she asked Mnierri.

“Probably not,” Mnierri replied, “but we should probably ask first. Would your calling interfere with the

one between the two councils of the Wise?”

“It might,” Gaenor admitted, “but I can wait until they are done for the day. I was just heading back to the Council Hall anyway. I can ask there.”

It turned out that two calling spells so close to one another would interfere with each other. “We have experimented with them in the past,” Borrit admitted from the Village. “Two such spells if cast too closely together will tend to merge so that all involved parties will hear each other.”

“That could be useful,” Gaenor pointed out. “if you wanted to hold a conference between people in many sites.”

“The power needed for such conjoined spells increases in proportion to the number of sites involved,” Borrit pointed out, “and of course such conversations can never be guaranteed to be private as an adept can use the spell to tap into a conversation.”

“That’s why Kseniya was so shocked when I called from Ichtar just after we landed,” Gaenor concluded. “Yes, I thought as much. So I will wait before calling Relle in Misha.”

“Relle?” Artur asked. “not Marlie?”

“There are so many people I want to let know we’re okay, but Relle is in the best position pass the word on to everyone including Marlie,” Gaenor replied.

“Gaenor, you appear to have stolen my daughter,” Lierri noted.

“I’m sorry, Lierri,” Gaenor replied quickly, “She asked me to teach her. I did not realize you wouldn’t approve.”

Lierri held up her hand and smiled, “On the contrary, I do approve and most highly. From what Kseniya tells us, Mnierri will learn more about the Holy Arts from you than she could in a lifetime here on Ichtar. You will help her on the crossing, won’t you?”

“You’re coming with us, Rie?” Gaenor asked, turning toward her.

“Of course,” Mnierri replied, nodding. “It’s the only way I can learn enough. Elena’s promised to loan me her science textbooks when we get back to Narmouth. I also want to visit the Village to more closely study the Way.”

“That will all take some time,” Gaenor remarked.

“A century or two, I imagine,” Mnierri nodded, “but I’m young yet and by the time I return I’ll be better equipped to teach my own students when the time comes.”

When Gaenor explained Elena’s first spell, it was Elena who decided it would be best to wait for the right moment. That moment came just a week before the adepts left Aliari when the two Councils of the Wise announced they had come to an agreement of armistice. It wasn’t the formal declaration of peace between the two populations of Vieri Gaenor might have hoped for, but it was an agreement to cease hostilities in which the spells to maintain the Parch and the environment around Ichtar would no longer be seen as attacks on one another. The Vieri of the Village also promised to send two teachers of the Way to Ichtar as a trade for Mnierri and Tamitt who were going to the mainland.

“You and Tamitt seem to have become quite attached,” Gaenor noted to Cornellya one afternoon.

“Well,” Cornellya blushed, “he is sort of cute. We’ll see, of course. Maybe it will work out once he grows up a bit. These Ichitarian Vieri have much longer childhoods than we of the Parch. That seems like quite a waste of time to me.”

“It seems to work for them,” Gaenor pointed out.

“So does having lived without the Way,” Cornellya pointed out, “but that doesn’t make it right. I think Tamitt will grow up quite quickly in the Village, just as the Vieri of both the Parch and Ichtar will rapidly adapt to the new recognition of each other. We’d better if we want to keep up to you humans, you know.”

“Us?” Gaenor asked.

“Definitely,” Cornellya nodded. “In case you haven’t noticed you’re advancing far more rapidly than we are, especially with all the new magic you’re coming up with. And even without your genius, look at the technological improvements in the deep southern lands. We’re going to need all of us working together just to keep up, don’t you agree?”

“Well, Elena?” Gaenor asked, turning toward her ward. “Are you ready?”

Elena looked around her at the assembled members of the Council of the Wise and the humans and nodded nervously. When Gaenor had performed a similar spell in the Village, she had done so on the spur of the moment, but Elena had far less training, so Gaenor had insisted on having the spell written out. Elena swallowed nervously, then placed her hand on one of the pillars at the entrance of the Hall of the Wise. Then she sent a quick word of prayer to the Cilben gods, Jube and Sellae and invoked their names to bless Ichtar and its people.

A shimmer of green light enveloped Elena’s hand and then ran up the column until it too was entirely the green of a spring leaf. Then after a moment, it spread outward and away from the Hall of the Wise and kept going until the entire island had been blessed.

Just as Cornellya had done in the Village with Gaenor, Mnierrri hugged Elena, whispering warm words of thanks, while the Wise nodded their heads in profound respect.

Epilogue

The *Tern* arrived at the docks of the Royal Navy in Mishaport with no fanfare. It was a cold and cloudy day and there was a hint of snow in the air, although nothing more than a few flakes had been spotted. However, by the time she had been lashed to her cleats and Artur’s and Gaenor’s party began to disembark, three Navy carriages could be seen rolling down the pier, the one in front bore the pennon of Admiral Brenton. “Welcome home!” he called to them. “His Majesty has been asking if there were any sign of you lot for weeks.”

“We got held up by the peace negotiations,” Artur explained.

“Peace negotiations?” Brenton asked. “I was not aware we were at war with anyone.”

“Peace between the two Vieri nations,” Artur replied. “Although you may have noticed that the weather has improved of late, or at least returned to what we think of as normal patterns.”

“Yes,” Admiral Brenton nodded, “It has been much drier this month than last. A good sign, I take it? Are they all right?” he asked as Cornellya, Tamitt and Mnierri were helped up to the pier by Gaenor and Faber. Cornellya was able to wobble her way up on her own, but Tamitt and Mnierri were still looking green.

“Just a bit of seasickness,” Artur replied, as Cornellya gave ginger wafers to the other two Vieri. “We hit a squall yesterday and I’m afraid they didn’t react well at all. They’ll improve rapidly now that we’re on firm land. Kind of you to bring these carriages down to the dock.”

“It’s like I said,” the admiral replied, “His Majesty and Lady Ibbet have been most insistent. It only seemed wise to be able to convey you all directly to the palace.”

“She’s a fine boat, Admiral,” Tellyndar told him as he approached a few minutes later, nearly everyone had boarded the carriages by then, but Tellyndar had finished closing up the boat’s cabin and inspecting how well the sail had been furled. “Treat her well. She certainly treated us well. Will it be possible to use her to return to Ichtar next year?”

“You’re going back?” Admiral Brenton asked, surprised.

“Yes, for the summer break if I can,” Tellyndar told him as he tossed his duffle into the back of a carriage. “There’s a lot I can learn from the people there and I hope to bring some of my students along. Besides, we need to return for Vitautis of Senne. He decided to stay on over the winter to learn more about the Ichtarians. The study of non-human intelligent creatures has always been his specialty and now he has the chance to be the first to study an entirely new people.”

“The demons?” Brenton asked.

“Demons, it appears,” Tellyndar chuckled, “are just people too; Vieri, in fact.”

“A few months ago I would have doubted the existence of Vieri,” Brenton admitted as they both boarded the front carriage.

Their arrival in Mishaport may have been quiet, but there was a brass band to welcome them at the palace. King Pawlen and Lady Ibbet came down the steps to greet them with a crowd of courtiers including Lord Tallur and Lady Relle directly behind. Lining the courtyard appeared to be all the palace servants, although many of them were hanging colorful bunting over as many surfaces as could be tastefully arranged.

“It’s so good to see you home, Gae!” Ibbet told her as they hugged. Relle greeted her similarly.

True to Artur’s prediction, all the Vieri were looking and feeling much better by the time they reached the palace.

“Is all this music customary, Gae?” Mnierri asked, looking around in wonder at the palace courtyard.

“It’s a first for me, Rie,” Gaenor admitted.

“Oh good,” Mnierri sighed with relief. “I was wondering how you could ever get anything done.”

“And who are your new friends?” Ibbet asked Gaenor, even as Pawlen began to press Artur for all that had happened.

“I am a demon,” Mnierri told Ibbet in halting Shandi. There was a crooked smile on the vari’s face, however.

“A demon, hey?” Relle chuckled. “You seem to have left the horns and tail at home. You’re not even breathing fire.” It took too long to translate that and then explain it for the joke to be funny, but Mnierri smiled and shrugged anyway as though she had understood Relle’s words from the start.

Finally Gaenor had the chance to introduce the two Vieri from Ichtar and to Cornellya’s relief especially, they entered the palace and went to a small sitting room with a warm fire in the hearth. The women sat in chairs near the fire and the men sat at the other side of the room, except for Tamitt, who stayed close to Cornellya.

“All those decorations can’t be for us,” Cornellya noted once she had ensconced herself by the fire.

“Why not?” Ibbet laughed cheerfully. “You deserve it.”

“Actually, they’re for the royal wedding,” Relle explained. “The date was set as soon as we heard from you almost a month ago.”

“So, how soon?” Gaenor asked Ibbet.

“Another two weeks,” Ibbet replied, smiling, “but guests are already starting to arrive.”

“And it’s a good thing we still have two weeks, Gae,” Relle told her, a bit of excitement in her voice. “The men can wear their usual formal suits, but we have got to get gowns for the lot of you.”

“The dressmaker is ready for you,” Ibbet told them calmly, “but tomorrow, perhaps we should go shopping for the right cloth.”

“I have the right cloth,” Gaenor replied, “but it’s in Narmouth. I sent quite a bit home from Cilbe and other stops along the way.”

“The Noble Purple silk you sent me!” Relle exclaimed. “That would be perfect. You sent me enough for several dresses and my gown for the wedding uses it. We’ll all match. It will be wonderful!”

“Did I really send you that much?” Gaenor asked.

“About twenty yards, Gae,” Relle told her. “It was a princely gift.”

“It’s much cheaper in Wahton,” Gaenor admitted. “I just put a few coins on the counter and asked for as much as they would buy.”

“Of course it would be cheaper in the Cilben Empire,” Relle laughed. “They don’t have to ship it to the other side of the world before they can get it. The price goes up each time a different merchant handles it, you know.”

“Well, we still need to do a bit of shopping,” Gaenor told Relle, thinking she should buy a token for Mnierri just as she had for Elena. She wondered if she could find another Thirinese cat’s eye garnet.

“Of course,” Relle agreed for entirely different reasons. “That purple is too intense to use by itself. I’ll bring samples of the other cloths in my dress so we can match completely.”

The next two weeks passed quickly and as more guests arrived, Ibbet’s and Pawlen’s time became monopolized with rounds of teas and other social gatherings. After a while it even became too much for Relle, so when Earl Mnoster arrived in Misha eight days later and invited them over for a quiet dinner, Relle jumped at the chance to get out of the palace for a few hours.

“Very well done, Gae,” Mnoster told her after she and the others had described their adventure on Ichtar, “and who would have thought that a demoness could be so beautiful,” he added to Mnierri, who by now understood Shandi enough to blush at the complement without having it translated for her.

“It’s good to be back, Mnoster,” Gaenor admitted. “There’s just so much to do. Did I tell you Ellie Nyima is coming north next month? She wrote me a letter saying she had just too many questions to handle them all by mail so she’s taking a sabbatical so we can spend a few months together working on our joint projects.”

“And you really must come to the palace tomorrow afternoon,” Relle informed him. “Gae, I forgot to tell you in all the fuss, but your self-propelled carriage is ready. They’re delivering it tomorrow morning. I can’t wait to see you make it go!”

“I’d almost forgotten that,” Gaenor admitted. “You haven’t told me how the search for a printer is going.”

“Oh that,” Relle laughed, “I found one a month ago and get this, he’s in Narmouth!”

“Would that be Petre?” Gaenor asked.

“I thought you might know him,” Relle replied. “Anyway, he didn’t have a suitable press for a journal, so I’ve already had Mnoster’s press and other equipment shipped south and arranged to rent a building near his shop.”

“But why in Narmouth?” Gaenor asked. “Wouldn’t it have been better here in the capital?”

“Gae, the press can be anywhere. Oh, we’ll need an office in Misha. In fact I’ve found one, but I’ll want your approval before we go ahead and sign the lease. And we already have letters of interest coming in from all over the northern world,” Relle told her. “Besides, I do have an ulterior motive for putting the press in Narmouth.”

“What’s that?” Gaenor asked.

“To give me an excuse to have Tallur build a vacation home there. We already bought a parcel of land just outside town. So far we only have one neighbor to speak of, a nice adept couple, you might have heard of them?”

“We’re going to be neighbors?” Gaenor asked delightedly.

“For part of the year anyway,” Relle nodded. “You know, Misha is really starting to wear me down.

Parties are fun every so often, but they really get in the way of being able to curl up with a nice book.”

As new royal and noble parties arrived, Ibbet insisted on introducing them to Gaenor. As it happened, Gaenor had already met most of the arriving kings and queens at the coronation in Firdan. Queen Ymanya greeted her with a warm hug and was delighted to hear that Gaenor would be conducting Ibbet’s binding ceremony. “This will make us closer than sisters, you know,” Ymanya informed Ibbet. “How many other queens can say they were bound by the same adept?”

Gaenor felt like a young girl with a new doll when the carriage arrived. She had it rolled into an empty stall in the carriage house where she had already set out her spell tools for the occasion. Cornellya watched with mild interest, but Elena and Mnierri were almost as anxious as Gaenor herself. Tellyndar, while invited to the Royal wedding had already returned to his home on the University campus and Jimeleo and Faber had joined Haxmire and Radnire for a seminar on their trip to Ichtar so Artur and Tamitt were the only men present when Gaenor started working. Relle, of course, joined them, claiming the honor of being one of the first to ride in the carriage since it was she who had seen to its manufacture. Gaenor had promised to deliver another lecture the next day, but for now all her attention was on the carriage.

Before charging the vehicle with the complex of spells, she checked out the mechanisms and found they all worked perfectly. The carriage had a canvas top that had been folded down and had been painted a traditional glossy black. “Next time, let’s make it a two-seat job and paint it bright red,” Artur suggested.

Gaenor laughed, “Yes, dear.”

Then she pulled out her notes and went to work. In all, the process took three hours to fully enchant the vehicle although Gaenor told them, “I’m fairly sure I can make the process simpler next time.”

Elena and Mnierri opened the carriage house doors to discover that all the guests had come out to the courtyard in anticipation of seeing the “Miracle Carriage.” Then Elena and Mnierri joined Gaenor, Cornellya and Relle in the back, while Tamitt sat next to Artur on the front seat. At a soft, “Go ahead, dear,” from Gaenor, Artur pushed an activation knob into its down position, then gently pressed down on the acceleration lever and the carriage slipped soundlessly out of the carriage house. He drove the carriage sedately around the courtyard while the assembled nobles and royalty applauded enthusiastically. Then he honked the airhorn and headed for the main gate.

He headed north out of the city and ten minutes later they were traveling along a country road at the dizzying speed of thirty miles per hour. “Wheel!” Relle shouted enthusiastically. “I have got to have one of these! How fast will it go?”

“On this road,” Gaenor replied, “This is as fast as I want. The roads in Nimbria, Corinia and other kingdoms in the deep south were paved and smoother. We could probably double this speed on a smooth road.”

“Gae! That would get us across the kingdom in a single day! This is going to change everything!” Relle assured her.

“Building roads is expensive, even for a king,” Gaenor replied.

“Give one of these to Pawlen and Ibbet as a wedding gift and they’ll get those roads built just so they can see more of their kingdom each year.”

“I don’t know if everyone would want to travel so rapidly,” Gaenor commented, taking a look at Cornellya and Tamitt. They were both looking pale, although Mnierri and Elena were as excited as Relle.

“To each his or her own speed, Gae,” Relle laughed.

Their return to the palace an hour later brought inquiries from many as to where they might purchase such a vehicle. Gaenor was uncertain what to tell them, trying to explain that this one was a prototype and there were still a lot of unknowns about it. “Better have Pawlen issue you a royal patent, Gae,” Relle advised. “Otherwise you’ll have every adept in the north stealing your ideas.”

“I don’t need the money,” Gaenor pointed out.

“No need to make others rich with your idea, though, and you can always found a few charities with the income,” Relle told her. “That’s what the truly rich folks do, you know.”

“I don’t think of myself as rich,” Gaenor retorted.

“I know, and that’s why everybody loves you,” Relle laughed, “but right now you are the richest woman in Mishanda.”

“I am?” Gaenor asked, surprised.

“Do you have any idea of just how much your share of the settlement with Cilbe was?” Relle asked. “Even if you tried giving it away on street corners, you would have enough to last the rest of your life.” Gaenor refrained from telling Relle just how long that life might turn out to be.

“I’ve already hired you as my publisher,” Gaenor commented at last. “maybe I need you as a manager too.”

“What are friends for?” Relle laughed.

The final royal party to arrive took both Gaenor and Artur by surprise. As far as Artur knew, it was the first time the Emperor of Cilbe had ever visited the realm of a monarch who was not a client of the Empire. Emperor Colchicus arrived with his wife and son and his sisters and their families just two days before the wedding ceremony.

“You make an impressive parade with the hundred Imperial Guards,” Artur noted after greeting his son. “But who’s minding the store?”

Colchicus laughed, “You know that might be why the emperor has almost always stayed in Cilbe City. Most of my predecessors were afraid to let the Senate know they could live without an emperor breathing down their necks. I, on the other hand, had a special legacy from my father. I left Leracus in charge.”

“What an original solution,” Artur marveled. “None of the senators would dare move against you in your absence when they know they would have to deal with the Temi.”

“And the Temi are probably the only people in Cilbe who don’t want to wear the oak wreath,” Colchicus added.

“So have you and the girls reconciled yourselves to my choice of retirement in Mishanda?” Artur asked.

“So long as we don’t have to think of you as a rootless vagabond, father.” Colchicus replied.

“Just a tourist of the world,” Artur laughed, “although I think I’ll pass on visiting the Southlands again soon. A thoroughly depressing part of the world if you ask me and the hospitality of the Arch Priest of Vohn leaves a lot to be desired. I’d tell him so if he was here. Fortunately while he did attend the coronation in Firdan, he declined this invitation.”

“You’ll have to explain that remark sometime,” Colchicus told his father dryly. “Speaking of Vohn, however, did you hear Martius was found dead there a few months ago?”

“Yes, Leracian paid him a social call one night after Martius arranged to have us arrested by the Holy Guards. By then it was a Temi matter and as the honor guard for two chiefs...”

“Yes, yes, I understand,” Colchicus nodded. “I would have liked to have the lout brought before me in chains, but I suppose I owe Leracian for saving me the indignity of having to stoop to Martius’ level. Simply paying him seems so crass. Do you think he’d be amenable to being declared a “Hero of the Empire?”

“You could ask,” Artur suggested. “With the Temi you never really know, of course, but I suspect he’ll be polite about it regardless.”

“I’m sure he will,” Colchicus nodded. “They’re a strange people, aren’t they?”

“Not really,” Artur disagreed. “When you come right down to it, they are the perfect Cilbens; all our honorable ideals with few of our shortcomings. There are times I wonder if the Temi were the tribes of Cilbe who refused to sacrifice their honor in the name of conquest. They’re good people in spite of what our countrymen have tried to turn them into.”

Finally the day of Ibbet’s and Pawlen’s wedding arrived. Gaenor was up early but by midmorning the entire palace was humming with activity. The royal couple and their guests arrived in a preset order at the Temple of Nua, while a crowd of thousands congregated outside the temple. The wedding ceremony was held inside the sanctuary of the temple with the assembled royalty and nobility as witnesses. It was a long ceremony including a formal service dedicated to Nua and the other gods of Mishanda. Relle served as Ibbet’s matron of honor and Cornellya, Elena and Mnierri were among the large number of bride’s maids. Gaenor’s part however was far more important.

She was dressed identically to the bridesmaids, but she stood between the high priest of Nua and the Chief Priestess of Hannor throughout the ceremony. When the Priest and Priestess had finished their parts, Pawlen and Ibbet were officially man and wife, but the ceremony was not yet over. Gaenor then led the way out of the temple to the wide porch that overlooked the city of Misha. Pawlen and Ibbet marched behind her, followed by the Priest of Nua and the Priestess of Hannor. Pawlen wore the crown of Mishanda, but the Priestess carried the queen’s crown. For this brief interval, Ibbet was the wife of the king, but not the Queen of Mishanda.

This was not normally the way a royal wedding was conducted, but Pawlen and Ibbet had decided that her official coronation as Queen should be done before the populace. Once outside the sanctuary, Gaenor stepped to one side as Pawlen, Ibbet and the priest and priestess followed. The rest of the wedding party left the temple sanctuary and arranged themselves on the long, wide steps below the temple. Finally, Elena and Mnierri brought out a small table with Gaenor’s tools on it and Gaenor stepped to it and picked up the oak wand. She smiled as Ibbet and the priestess stepped forward,

remembering coronation day in Firdan almost two years earlier.

How far she had come since then. She had been a small town girl - more than a day's ride from home for the first time in her life - nervous and a bit shy, but determined to cast the binding spell on Queen Ymanyia with flawless perfection and worried she might do something wrong. Now she was as calm and serene as she had pretended to be that first time and her spell tools - mere props two years earlier - felt like extensions of herself. This was who and what she was; an adept, a maker of magic and a scholar of the world. The priestess formally raised the crown over Ibbet's head and Gaenor began to chant the Intentional of the spell.

The spell was not identical to the one used in Firdan. The use of the wand of oak was Gaenor's addition to the spell and different gods were invoked and there were different nuances of meaning of the various gestures and spell ingredients, although no one but another adept would have noticed the differences. Just as in Firdan, once begun, the spell took an active part its own casting. It would have taken an act of supreme will for Gaenor to have stopped or even varied the ritual or incantation from what was written before her. As she began to scatter pinches of earth gathered from the counties of Mishanda, Gaenor marveled that it was much like the great spell she had been a part of on Ichtar, in that the spell itself took on a life of its own. She wondered why she even needed the spell written out before her since she was now casting the spell without needing to think about it and then with a flash of insight, she realized that the written spell was actually one of her spell tools even though she did nothing but read it. She decided it would be an interesting subject for Elena and Mnierri to study in the coming months.

The spell continued with flashes of light, shimmering sounds and other aural and visual effects until they reached the middle of the spell. It was a deliberate pause, a way of making time part of the spell. Moments earlier Gaenor, Ibbet and the priestess had been within a bright green aura, but the aura had been absorbed by their bodies and now the spell waited until Ibbet whispered, "I'm ready, Gae."

"And so am I, Ibbet," Gaenor replied before continuing on. She smiled to herself remembering that Ymanyia had worried if there was something wrong at that point, but Ibbet had such confidence in Gaenor and her abilities she never doubted that all was well.

The binding spell continued with the use of a lamp lit from the holy fire of Nua just inside the temple. The spell continued on and on and then suddenly it was over and the priestess of Hannor lowered the crown on to Ibbet's head.

"Your Majesty," Gaenor murmured and curtsied to her friend and monarch.

The wedding celebration lasted all night, but Gaenor spent most of the time in Pawlen's Caroms room with Cornellya, Elena, Mnierri and several others. It was a quiet time for them and it gave Elena and Mnierri an opportunity to ask the dozens of questions they had about the binding spell. For Gaenor it was a chance to just relax and play Caroms. Earl Mnoster joined them in the middle of the afternoon and returned to the room as frequently as he could.

It was mid-evening, however, when Relle finally found their haven and urged Gaenor to join the party. "Ibbet's asking for you," she told Gaenor. "Best we make an appearance before she remembers she can make it a royal command."

"Just for a bit, Relle," Gaenor pleaded. "The quiet time has been nice."

"Just for a bit," Relle promised, but it soon turned out to be an ambush of a pleasant sort.

As Gaenor and her companions entered the ballroom, the orchestra stopped and everyone present turned to face Gaenor and applaud her. At the end of the hall Gaenor could see Ibbet beckon to her, so she continued forward. She curtsied as she approached the throne, but Ibbet quickly got to her feet and lifted Gaenor back to hers.

“Gaenor, dear Gaenor,” Ibbet told her as the assembled court listened quietly. “You’ve done so much for me that I’ll never repay the debt.”

“Not so, Your Majesty,” Gaenor disagreed. “You gave me your friendship when I was just a poor commoner from a small town in a remote corner of the realm. That friendship is worth more than anything else you might offer.”

“Perhaps, but there is one more thing I would offer, although it will leave me ever more deeply in your debt,” Ibbet told her. “I know you have met Sir Harlan, the Court Wizard, but his official title is the King’s Wizard. I think it is high time the queen of Mishanda had her own court adept. Gae, would you please consent to be my wizard?”

Tears welled up in Gaenor’s eyes and words failed her, but she did manage to nod her head emphatically just before she and Ibbet threw their arms around each other in a warm hug.

Haxmire and Radnire left for Mita with Jimeleo, who had accepted Haxmire’s invitation to teach there the next day. Faber joined them for that part of the journey. He was on his way back to Aston to visit family and attempt to rebuild his life. As they left, Haxmire was still trying to convince him to join the school in Mita.

Most of the royal and noble parties left Misha over the next few days, and finally Artur and Gaenor decided it was time to return to Narmouth. “We have our own wedding ahead, after all,” he told Pawlen, “and I know Gae wants it to be there with all her friends and family around her.

“That includes us,” Pawlen declared. “Give me a few days to make the arrangements and we’ll all sail south on the *Dauntless* .”

“Is Captain Trobur still in command of that ship?” Artur asked curiously.

“Probably,” Pawlen replied. “Why?”

“Oh, just wondering if he had managed to out grow his tendency for flashy maneuvers in tight harbors. Narmouthport can be even trickier than Dana.”

“I supposed we’ll just have to wait and see,” Pawlen shrugged.

In the added time available, Gaenor modified the spells on the self-propelled carriage so that a single power spell would need to be cast to keep the vehicle going. “It suddenly occurred to me that the frame of the carriage itself could hold the charge adequately so there was no need to create a general purpose battery amulet,” she explained to the others.

In the end, she gave the vehicle to Pawlen and Ibbet along with a copy of the spell that would be needed to power it. “You may want to only drive around the city for now until we know how far you can travel between recharges,” she advised Pawlen.

“This is really too much,” Pawlen told her. “Are you sure you don’t want to keep it.”

“This was just the first,” Gaenor shrugged. “I’ll have another made in Narmouth, maybe two. I know Artur wants a smaller one with only room in it for two. And eventually maybe I’ll work on that flying machine we keep talking about, although I have too much work planned before I can get to that.”

Emperor Colchicus and the rest of his party joined them on the trip to Narmouth as did Marnoric and Ymánya. There was not room enough even on the *Dauntless* for all of them, but since the King and Queen of Firdan and their entourage had traveled on a Firdani ship of the line, there was room for all on the two ships.

To Mnierrí’s intense relief, the larger ship combined with calmer conditions enabled her to enjoy the short voyage. They left early one morning, sailed all day and night and arrived in Narmouth just after breakfast the next morning.

Gaenor could see her home town was all decked out with bunting in the royal colors as the two ships sailed serenely into the harbor. “How did they know we were coming, especially in time to arrange to decorate the town?” she asked Relle.

“Pawlen sent a harbinger, I think it was Sir Chasur, ahead as soon as he knew you were planning to come home to marry,” Relle explained. “See that other ship in the harbor? It came equipped with bunting and enough large pavilions to house us all and more besides. By now, I’m sure everything is set up.”

Sir Briscard, the mayor of Narmouth, had been beside himself at the surprise prospect of a royal visit not only by his own king and queen, but by the monarchs of neighboring Firdan and the Emperor of Cilbe of all people! Fortunately Sir Chasur had taken the matter in hand. “No need to worry, Sir Briscard,” Chas had told him. “His Majesty is paying for everything. It’s not everyday the Queen’s Wizard gets married, you know,” he added with a laugh.”

“There have been so many changes in the city these past few months,” Sir Briscard commented nervously. “First the heir to Senda County then those three Cilben couples purchased land just outside of town, then that great printing press got shipped in and nobody will even talk about that, and now we’re to host the royalty on just a few days notice?”

“Oh, I’m sure Sir Artur and Lady Gaenor will be happy to fill you in on all that,” Chas told him. “Right now we need to prepare for Their Majesties’ visit. Now I have all the bunting, pavilions and even food for the wedding banquets and other meals besides, although we need to purchase some food locally – good for your merchants, I expect. However, I will need help from your townsfolk in putting everything up.”

“We have a Public Works Department,” the mayor told him.

“Excellent!” Chas nodded, “although any other assistance we can get will be good. This isn’t just for Their Majesties, but for Sir Artur and Lady Gaenor, you know.”

“And when will they arrive?” Sir Briscard asked.

“Anytime now,” Chas shrugged. They eventually decided to erect the pavilions just outside of town within sight of Artur’s house.

Narmouth boasted a small brass band that was hastily assembled and rushed to the harbor area when the two royal ships were sighted in the harbor. They had used up most of their repertoire, however by the

time both ships had been lashed to the docks and the passengers began to disembark.

While Sir Briscard fussed and fawned over the visiting royalty, Gaenor and Artur managed to slip away along with Elena and the Vieri so they could greet Marlie and her family. Relle, torn between waiting on Ibbet and following Gaenor, eventually followed Gaenor and was included in the introductions. A few minutes later, however, Gaenor asked her, "Aren't you supposed to be with Ibbet?"

"She has her ladies in waiting," Relle shrugged. "I turned down her offer on that count, you'll recall. You gave me a much better offer, besides I want to see if our press is ready yet."

"I don't think we can slip quite that far away from everyone today, but maybe tomorrow or in a few days after the wedding," Gaenor replied. "Oh, I hope this warm weather keeps up. An outdoor wedding would be nice. I had hoped for one in the spring, but after all this..."

"Spring weddings are over-rated," Relle told her. "Tallur and I were married in the spring and it rained for the entire week and a few days after as well. Take what you have, I advise you. The trees are looking beautiful in their fall foliage, although it seems odd to me as the trees have been bare around Misha for over a month."

"Summers last longer here, my lady" Marlie told her, "and the winters are much shorter."

"I knew there was a good reason to build here," Relle laughed. "Sounds like just the opposite of Senda. I'll be staying around to supervise the building of the new house for a few weeks anyway, so it's just as well I can enjoy a second autumn."

"Senda?" Marlie asked. "Then you're married to the earl's son?"

"Yes, why?" Relle asked.

"I just wanted to say, 'Welcome to the neighborhood,'" Marlie laughed.

Marlie tried to convince Gaenor there was no time to check out the new press or to order a new carriage the next day; there were just too many preparations to be made for the wedding, but Gaenor responded, "Nonsense! The new carriage is my wedding gift to Artur and both Relle and I want to see the press. It won't take long. It's not like we're going to start using it today!"

"But your wedding, Gae!" Marlie protested.

"Everything is taken care of," Gaenor assured her. "Chas had the tents put up and hired cooks for the banquet and Ibbet had her dressmaker take my measurements when I was being fitted for the gown I wore for her wedding. Frankly I'd wear that one, if it wouldn't scandalize the town because I wasn't wearing white, but that's the one you'll be wearing. The ceremony isn't all that complicated, in fact. All I have to do is answer a single question and kiss Artur. The priest of Nua will be doing all the work. I don't even have to cast a spell this time. Now am I forgetting anything? No? Then we'll go talk to the carriage maker. I'm going to need one of my own if I'm to go back and forth between here and Misha."

Gaenor was delighted to discover an hour later that the carriage maker had been experimenting with new designs all incorporating the suspension systems she had sketched for him. There was already a carriage that he could modify to her specifications within the week, although it took a while to convince him to build her design for a small two-seat carriage. In the end he just sighed and replied, "It's your money, Miss Gaenor. Just don't complain it's too small when I'm done."

In spite of Gaenor's assurances about the wedding, however, there were a few last minute problems, such as when her father protested that he was supposed to pay for his daughter's wedding, but King Pawlen stepped in and explained, "It's really the least I can do, sir. If it had not been for your daughter, I might never have found my queen."

"Well," Gaenor's father admitted, "I must say I never counted on entertaining three sets of royalty, Your Majesty."

Pawlen laughed, and told him, "Me neither. That's why royalty have all sorts of people around doing the little things for them. We'd never get anything accomplished if we tried doing everything ourselves."

Even though she had been warned about the appearance of three Cilben-appearing couples who had purchased land near the house she shared with Artur, the presence of three houses on the far side of the road, each with a few acres of ostensible farm land, still surprised her. When two of the neighbor women nodded their heads formally to her, Gaenor's suspicions were aroused.

"You're Temi, aren't you?" she asked them.

"Yes, my chief," they chorused.

"I really don't think we'll need an honor guard here, you know," she told them.

"Of course not, my chief," one of the women replied. The other nodded, agreeing. Gaenor just rolled her eyes.

"Well, don't expect Artur to be pleased," Gaenor told them, "but after things settle down, we'll all have dinner together and see if we can come to an understanding. You'll tell the others?"

"Yes, my chief," they assured her.

The entire town was uncertain how to treat royalty who actually stopped to pass the time of day with them. It had been some years since the old Queen had visited Narmouth and the older residents remembered a long, loud parade in her honor with an invitational banquet in the evening, but almost nobody had actually spoken to her at the time. But Ibbet and Ymanyia decided to go shopping on the day before the wedding. It was traditional to give a visiting monarch anything he or she admired in a shop, but Ibbet would have none of that. "You work hard for your money," she told a toymaker whose window caught her eye, "and I won't steal it from you in the guise of a gift." In the end, she not only paid for Ymanyia's purchases and her own, but also had a lady-in-waiting make note of all the shops they visited that day so she could send thank-you tokens to each of the merchants for their hospitality. In later years those tokens became some of the most valued possessions in Narmouth.

Gaenor became concerned about Cornellya that afternoon. The vari who had shared so much of her adventures had been behaving shyly for the first time in months and Gaenor knew her well enough to recognize it as a sign that something was troubling her. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing really," Cornellya told her, failing to look her directly in the eyes.

"I know you better than that, Cornellya," Gaenor told her. "Come on; fess up."

"It's all over, isn't it?" Cornellya replied, finally.

“The quest is over,” Gaenor replied, “but our lives are still just beginning.”

“But you’ve already replaced me,” Cornellya told her sadly.

“Replaced you? Who could ever replace you?”

“Well, there’s Elena and Mnierri, they’re your students and of course there’s Relle, you and she are in business together working on the journal. There’s no place for me in that, is there?”

“There is if you want there to be,” Gaenor replied, “but I thought you ached to return to the Village.”

“I do,” Cornellya replied, “and I want to bring Tamitt there and train him in magic.”

“But you also don’t want to leave, do you?” Gaenor asked. Cornellya nodded. “Then I guess you’ll just have to come back every once in a while. And I’ll have to come visit you as well.”

“I’d like that,” Cornellya replied.

“And I don’t want to hear anymore about you being replaced,” Gaenor told her with obviously mock severity. “You are my maid of honor. That is a bond between us that will never be broken.”

“I’m maid of honor?” Cornellya asked. “But I thought, Relle or your sister, Marlie...”

“Cornellya,” Gaenor told her, smiling. “You’ve been my constant companion for almost two years now. You’ve shared in everything that happened since we left the Village. Who else would I have as my maid of honor, but my very best and closest friend?”

Tears streamed down Cornellya’s face as she and Gaenor hugged for several long minutes. After that, however, Cornellya was back to her more normal ebullient self.

Finally, the day of Gaenor and Artur’s wedding arrived. For the first time, Gaenor felt nervous about the prospect of marriage. She knew she was being silly, after all she and Artur had been through there could be no doubt they belonged together, but there were still a few jitters rolling back and forth in her mind.

It was entirely unfair that Artur was not showing any signs of nervousness at all when Gaenor spied him from a distance. She found the old superstition about the groom seeing the bride before the wedding as silly as any superstition, but Relle was insistent and it was easier to go along than fight over such a small point. So even though Gaenor had been sleeping beside Artur ever since they had declared their love for one another, she had been in her old loft with Elena and Mnierri since their return to Narmouth. The loft, barely large enough for one, was utterly cramped with three and Gaenor made a mental note to help the other two clear out the other half of the loft area that Artur had used for storage, so there would be room for them both there. Anything worth keeping could be stored in the loft of the main house instead of the barn, or maybe they should add a new wing on the house itself.

It was still early morning when Relle, Cornellya, Elena and Mnierri whisked Gaenor off to one of the smaller pavilions where, with assistance from Ibbet and Ymanya, and several maids, they helped her get dressed and ready for the ceremony. Gaenor would never have believed it would take three hours to get dressed especially since the ceremony itself would be considerably shorter. But they not only got her into the special gown Ibbet had commissioned for her, but fussed with her hair and makeup repeatedly until everyone, but Gaenor herself, was satisfied with the results. Gaenor’s discontent lay mostly in the fact

that she wasn't given a chance to voice her own preferences.

"That's because if you had it your way, you and Artur would have eloped last night while we weren't looking," Relle laughed.

"Is that why I haven't been left alone in days?" Gaenor asked. The others just chuckled.

Soft music began outside the small pavilion and they rushed to get into position. Ibbet and Ymanya rushed to join their royal husbands while Elena, Relle and Mnierri left the tent to take their places in the procession, leaving Cornellya with Gaenor for a few moments.

"Well this is it!" Cornellya told Gaenor. "Frankly I think you two should have done it the Vieri way. Just live together until you have your first child."

"People would talk," Gaenor chuckled.

"You humans are crazy, you know that, don't you?" Cornellya told her.

"I know," Gaenor replied, smiling. "You had better hurry to your place now. I'll see you in the big pavilion." Cornellya nodded and hurried out, leaving Gaenor with her own thoughts. She considered the previous two years and marveled at all that had happened. When they first left for Misha, all she hoped for was to be initiated as an adept, but now she was a respected expert on modern magic. She had lectured at several prestigious schools and in several ways helped to make the world a better place, and she suddenly remembered what she had told Cornellya the day before. Her life was still just beginning.

As the music in the next tent changed to the tune they had chosen as her processional, she left the small pavilion and took her first step toward the rest of that life.

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