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Dry Dock: A Story of Maiyim

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Foreword

Sometimes it is hard to let go of a series. I have written elsewhere of how, while planning the final story of *The Maiyim Tetralogy* I came up with the idea for the next series, *Ars Nova Magica*. At the same time I felt that there should be a third series, but wasn't sure if there would be anything left to write about the world of Maiyim. So I put that idea aside for a while and plunged on into planning the *Ars Nova Magica* stories.

A lot had happened on Maiyim during the time between the two series and to help explain or indicate

some of those changes I wrote a series of stories that featured the characters from the first series as they first encountered the people who would form the core of Maiyim's troubles in the next series.

And while writing the second series, other side stories occurred to me for various reasons. Those stories helped develop some of the secondary characters and, in one case, tie up a few loose ends. There's just something about Maiyim that pulls more stories out of me.

So I went on and wrote the four planned stories of *Ars Nova Magica* along with the various side stories they inspired and somewhere in there I came up with something new for the third (and probably final) series, *Ars Scientiaque Magicae*. And since it will have been some two hundred or so years since the end of *The Book of Candle* a lot, once again will have changed on Maiyim. What sort of changes? Well, no fair dropping spoilers, but some of them start here.

Dry Dock shows the beginning of some of Maiyim's future problems. Not all of them to be sure - two centuries are a very long time – but there are hints and, in some cases, outright statements of what is to come. The story also serves to set up some other situations that will exist in the next series. Basically there was a lot to set up.

My only complaint about this story is that I had to leave some issues unresolved. Couldn't help it, really. If they were resolved, I'd have had to make up still more problems for the future Maiyim and those problems would have had to appear here instead...

Jonathan Feinstein
Westport, MA
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Dry Dock: A Story of Maiyim

Prologue

"Why is the world so much more complicated these days?" His Royal Majesty Helm, Sovereign of Emmine, complained. "Surely my father never had problems like this to deal with."

"And I'm certain he felt the same about the world of his father's time as well, dear," Queen Maia told him gently.

"Perhaps, but problems really were simpler back then," Helm replied.

“Were they?” Maia asked, “or were we just not in a position to see everything that was involved?”

“I was the crown prince,” Helm argued. “Of course I was in a position to know what was happening.”

“But the decisions were not yours to make, dear,” Maia pointed out patiently. “Problems are always so much simpler when they are someone else’s. Your father had to work with parliament the same as you do. He had to convince nearly a score of prime ministers to do as he wanted, just like you do. Be thankful we have Jollin to deal with these days. She consults us more frequently and is more in tune with you than her predecessors.”

“She is not trying to be a queen without a crown,” Helm admitted, “and she is more pleasant to deal with than Mister Troughton was.”

“Prettier too,” Maia laughed.

There was a knock on the door to their private chambers. A servant came in and announced, “The Prime Minister is here, Your Majesties.”

“Thank you,” Maia told the man. “Please have her wait in the tea room.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he replied and left quietly.

A few minutes later Helm and Maia joined Jollin Smith in a modestly-sized room downstairs from where they had been. Technically, this was still in the private wing of Randona Palace, but the lower floor was where Their Majesties entertained guests and parts of this floor were even on the official tour of the palace most days. The tea room was both where tea was formally served and where the palace’s large collection of tea pots and the attendant cups, saucers and other dishes were kept on display.

Jollin rose from her seat as Helm and Maia entered the room and then curtsyed gracefully. Maia smiled at the gesture, recalling how some thirty-five years earlier or so, Jollin’s curtsy was hardly as graceful or well-practiced as it had become. Jollin’s hair had always been moderately short. It was sensible to keep it that way while working in a forge and a machine shop, but now it was exquisitely styled.

“Please, Jollin,” Maia told her, reaching out to help Jollin back to her feet, “Let’s dispense with formalities for once.”

“Glad to, Maia,” Jollin replied smoothly. It had taken her a long time to be able to address either Helm or Maia by their unadorned names, but these were people beside whom she had picked up the pieces of Medda after the disaster there many years earlier. They were friends. “It would be even nicer to just be able to visit for a change.”

“It would at that,” Helm agreed, “but there are a number of matters we wished to go over before you leave the capital.”

“Parliament will be on break for the next few weeks,” Jollin commented. “That has got to make life a bit easier.”

“One never knows,” Helm replied. “How go the preparations for Sutheria?”

“I believe it will be a smooth transition from protectorate to province,” Jollin replied. “In another generation or two they may well be a sovereign nation.”

“They could be so now if they wanted,” Helm noted.

“They do not want to,” Maia commented. “Sutherians still think of themselves as citizens of Emmine. Having a queen from Sutheria is probably part of that.”

“A very big part of it, I would say,” Jollin put in.

“Now, about Saindo,” Helm changed the subject.

Jollin sighed. “What can I say, that I haven’t said before? The only way we’re going to establish peace in Saindo is by military force and we really shouldn’t do it alone. We don’t want Saindo as a part of the kingdom. We have enough problem children as it is.”

“We have already conferred with Granom, Bellinen and the other nations,” Helm told her, “but the operation is likely to cut your vacation short.”

“If that’s the case, Your Majesty, I’m sure I can cope. However, Bellinen is recommending a blockade and is being quite insistent on it, so I suspect we won’t see real action there for months. It may not be much of a vacation for me anyway. There’s something going on at home I intend to look into while I’m there.”

“Something we need to know about?” Helm asked.

“Just a local matter, Your Majesty,” Jollin shook her head, “and for all I know it may not even be a real problem.”

“What I wouldn’t give for an unreal problem,” Helm sighed. “With the Saindo matter at hand we have to balance our alliances carefully. As you said, Bellinen wants to blockade, but Granom thinks we should just move in. Ellisto is offering us her best wishes but is trying not to send any aid while the Isle of Fire is warning us all that she won’t tolerate anyone attempting to annex Saindo.”

“Does anyone want Saindo?” Jollin asked.

“I don’t think so,” Helm admitted, “and if anyone does, it would be the Isle of Fire herself. It would account for all her warnings on the subject. I just wish more of my advisors weren’t so ready to tell me what they think I want to hear.”

“That’s the danger of being the king, you know,” Jollin reminded him.

“Perhaps it is time to call them back to Randona,” Maia suggested.

“Them?” Helm asked, then corrected himself, “Oh, yes. Well, I hate to impose. It’s not like they live here anymore.”

“I doubt they would see it as an imposition, dear,” Maia told him. “You hardly ever call them, unlike your father.”

“And it would be nice to see Sir Sextant and the Lady Oceanvine again,” Helm admitted. “But let’s hold off until we have had time to discuss the matter with Granom. Countess Ksanya should be here in a couple days. Too bad neither Ksaveras nor we have the time for a summit meeting.”

“And Bellinen would feel left out if her Senate President were not invited,” Jollin pointed out.

“That’s why Ksanya is in Merinne right now,” Maia remarked. “If she came here first, Bellinen might pull out of the alliance and without Bellinen, it’s unlikely we could accomplish anything lasting in Saindo.”

“I am still not convinced we can in any case,” Jollin sighed. “The moment we turn our backs Saindo is likely to slip right back into anarchy, unless they can come up with something worse, but I suppose we have to try. I can’t help but feel, however, that Saindo is distracting us from worse, but less noticeable, problems here at home.”

“Such as?” Helm prompted her.

“That’s the problem, Your Majesty,” Jollin replied. “With Saindo staring us in the face, we can’t see any other problems.”

Rallena

One

The receiver, set to a classical music station, was distracting Oceanvine as Saltspray urged, “Aw, come on!” The phone call had started out as a simple, “Happy birthday” wish, but evidently the former apprentice had more on her mind. “A cruise around the islands on the *Maiyim Bourne* ? It will be just like old times.”

Oceanvine signaled to Sextant to turn down the volume. "It has been a few years since we did more than sail for a day or two," Oceanvine admitted.

"Closer to a decade," Saltspray laughed, "and not from this side of the decade at that."

"Has it really been that long, Sally?" Oceanvine asked wonderingly.

"Well, none of our kids have the time or inclination to sail, Vine" Saltspray replied. "The grandkids might, I suppose but they're with their parents. Look, I'm in Randona, just putting a few things in order before my sabbatical and you have four months before the winter session of your school in Olen. Why don't you and Six drive down and pick me up? We'll spend a few days on a leisurely trip to Keesport and then an even more leisurely cruise."

"And where do you want to go?" Oceanvine asked, already halfway convinced.

"I'd love to pop in on Methis," Saltspray replied with a note of mischief in her voice.

"It's too far," Oceanvine replied. "We'd spend more time sailing there and back than we would in visiting. Besides, She's promised to teach here this winter."

"That's been a while too, hasn't it?" Saltspray remarked.

"She wanted to take a few years off in case some of the regulars noticed she didn't seem to age," Oceanvine explained.

"Methis is a goddess," Saltspray laughed. "She can appear however She likes."

"I think the way we know her is how She really looks," Oceanvine replied, "and I get the impression She doesn't like disguises."

"Sounds about right, I guess," Saltspray conceded.

"How about we circumnavigate Rallena?" Oceanvine suggested. "I've always wanted to do that."

"Why?" Saltspray asked. "You've been just about everywhere anyway."

"Just to be able to say I've done it," Oceanvine chuckled.

"It's just as far as going to Methis' Forge," Saltspray pointed out.

"One way," Oceanvine corrected her, "and we'll end up where we started."

"Well, okay," Saltspray agreed. "So when will you and Six be here?"

"We'll leave in the morning and meet you for lunch," Oceanvine told her.

"Great!" Saltspray enthused. "Happy Birthday, Vine."

"Where?" Sextant asked his wife a while later when she told him about the call.

"Just sailing around," Oceanvine shrugged. "Around Rallena, that is. It should be fun."

"I don't have the time, dear," Sextant replied. "I'm in the middle of a big propulsion project. If we crack this one, colonies on Midbar will be a snap."

"Oh, I hadn't thought of that," Oceanvine admitted sadly. "I suppose I'd better call Sally back and let her know."

"Why?" Sextant asked. "You two can handle the *Maiyim Bourne*. Go have an extended girls' night out. Parliament is out on its autumnal break so Jollin will be on Kern."

"It's been too long since I visited the Smiths and Coopers," Oceanvine agreed.

"And we saw my family just last week," Sextant pointed out, "so it's their turn." The phone rang.

"All right," Oceanvine agreed and turned to pick up the phone. "Hello? Oh, hi, Maia! Thank you. What's new in palace politics? No, I hadn't heard anything, why? Uh huh? Really?" she paused a long time then replied, "Of course. We can be there sometime tomorrow morning. See you soon."

"Didn't sound like your usual birthday greeting, Vine," Sextant observed.

"I must admit my sixtieth is not turning out to be anything near normal," Oceanvine chuckled. "It's been a while for this too, but we've been summoned to the palace. It appears His Majesty has a problem he would like to consult with us on."

"Must be quite a problem," Sextant agreed. "Helm hasn't made a practice of inviting us for tea on the same regular basis Hacon Ancel did."

"King Hacon Ancel did it more for the social occasion than to really ask my advice," Oceanvine pointed out, "and he missed my great-grandmother's scoldings."

"You never scolded him," Sextant noted.

"I didn't feel it was my place," Oceanvine replied, "but you know as well as I do that I did occasionally argue with him, and Helm has allowed me that same freedom at least while we're in private. Maybe in public too, but I would never argue with the king in public."

"Well, I may not have the time to sail around the archipelago," Sextant remarked, "but I suppose I can take a day or two off from my studies to attend His Majesty. It's not as if I really have a choice, is it?"

"I could tender your regrets," Oceanvine offered. "I'm sure Helm would understand."

"He might," Sextant nodded, "but there's no need. I'll use this as an excuse to work in the University Library and Sally's been pestering me to conduct a seminar for the last two semesters."

"She's on sabbatical this semester," Oceanvine pointed out.

"I know," Sextant agreed, smirking, "but I can fit in a one-day session anyway if the department still wants."

Two

“Ksanya!” Oceanvine exclaimed on entering the palace tea room. As she often did, she kept a pearl circling her head by telekinesis. “I didn’t know you were in town.”

“You haven’t been watching the news then, cousin,” Countess Ksanya laughed. “You would have thought Veras had just popped in to say, ‘Hi!’ the way they went on last night.”

“I didn’t watch the news last night,” Oceanvine admitted.

“No, I’m sure there were more important things on your and Six’s minds,” Ksanya laughed. “Happy belated birthday, by the way. Did you get my present?”

“I did, thank you,” Oceanvine replied. “Where ever did you find it?”

“Believe it or not it was hiding in the vault among the rest of the crown jewels,” Ksanya replied. “Orya never knew your pearl had a twin, but she agreed that you ought to have it. That’s not the one I sent, is it?”

“This?” Oceanvine asked. “No, it’s the original. It’s slightly bluer in color than the new one. I’d have brought yours along had I known you were here, though.”

“I half-expected you to try keeping them both in orbit together,” Ksanya remarked.

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Oceanvine admitted. “I could send them in opposite directions or have them revolve around each other. Maybe I’ll do that for the Winter Ball this year. There are so many others doing that trick with bits of jewelry these days I ought to give them a challenge, don’t you think?”

“I find it enough of a challenge to wear a tiara,” Ksanya laughed.

“Thank you all for coming,” Helm greeted them as he and Maia entered the room. “No, sit. I think an afternoon without formality would be nice for a change, and just like old times,” he added with a sigh.

“Uneasy lies the head and all that?” Ksanya asked.

"I would normally reply that you have no idea," Helm retorted, "but you are a rare exception, Ksanya."

"Let's have the tea first," Maia suggested practically. "Otherwise we're just as likely to have empty stomachs and cold tea."

"Interesting choice of clothing, Maia," Oceanvine observed. Her old friend was wearing a mid-length cream colored skirt with a silk blouse on which a vivid floral pattern had been printed.

"The old school uniform," Oceanvine identified the combination that had first been worn by her great-grandmother.

"It's back in style," Maia smiled, "although the younger women are wearing shorter skirts or slacks.

"I'll keep that in mind," Oceanvine smiled.

Helm was in a rush to get to business in spite of Maia's counsel for patience and only gave his guests time to take a sip and a nibble before he started, "Oceanvine, my father gave you leave to speak your mind in his presence and I have always done the same."

"Reminding me of that is never a good sign, though," Oceanvine replied.

"Perhaps not," Helm shrugged. "Tell me, are you keeping up on current events?"

"That depends on how current," Oceanvine replied. "I rarely have time to just sit and watch TV although I do make a habit of browsing several newspapers each day on Netmaiym." Netmaiym was a worldwide network of computers that anyone could log on to. It had its humble beginnings a few years after Oceanvine and Sextant had been declared wizards and was originally intended for facilitating international academic discussions, but as it grew, business concerns began to find uses for the Maiym-wide network. It was originally entirely unregulated, but as governments, criminals and other elements began to grasp what could be done in the on-line world, various agencies began to demand consumer protection, security measures to keep children from the less savory side of the Net and various other restrictions on how Netmaiym could be used. In short Netmaiym was as complex and potentially dangerous as the real world. However among the good sides were a means of speedy written communication, fast and economical shopping outlets and access to both conventional and alternative news media.

"How up-to-date are you concerning the Saindo Archipelago?" Helm asked.

"Probably not very," Oceanvine admitted. "I understand they blame us for most of their problems."

"Except for the ones who are blaming Granom," Ksanya pointed out.

"So nice to know we made peace just to gain a common enemy," Sextant remarked.

"It didn't happen right away," Maia corrected him. "At first the people there appreciated the help Emmine and Granom extended."

"And that assistance only improved after the Cold War ended," Ksanya added. "But these days they resent our aid and think we have used it to keep Saindo weak."

“So instead they have resorted to terrorism to attack both Granomish and Emmine targets,” Helm continued. “Most disturbing has been the recent trend to set off suicide bombs in various public places. Last week there were explosions in the central squares of Carlifa and Endertone.”

“Last month someone attempted to poison the water supply of New Querna,” Ksanya added, “and let’s not forget that mysterious explosion in the sewers of Adda.”

“There were electrical lines running in those sewers,” Helm commented. “It’s a silly place to put them, if you ask me, but nobody asked me. Anyway the insulation gets old and brittle and sometimes it breaks. Methane and other flammable gasses build up sometimes and it only takes a spark to set them off.”

“Well, there’s no way you can call piracy an accident,” Ksanya pointed out.

“Piracy?” Oceanvine asked.

“It’s not all conducted on wooden ships, cuz,” Ksanya replied. “These modern pirates have speed boats with mounted guns and rocket launchers. They attack unarmed and lightly armed cruise liners and cargo ships and can generally get out of the area before help can arrive, although there’s a cruise liner that was captured and brought to Saindo City. The passengers have been captive now for six months.”

“Why hasn’t that been on the news?” Oceanvine demanded.

“The Emmine Security Force didn’t want anyone to panic,” Helm replied, “so the news was suppressed.”

“So more people can go happily on threatened ships?” Oceanvine asked pointedly. “Somebody didn’t think it through, did they?”

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” Helm replied somewhat sheepishly.

“What?” Oceanvine asked. “Are my ears playing tricks on me in my old age?”

“Helm didn’t order it kept from the press,” Maia came to his defense.

“I did approve it when it was reported, however,” Helm admitted. “It was a mistake, but the capture of that ship was the first major problem we had with Saindo. Since then there have been attacks and attempted attacks in Midon, Northport, Querna, Farmist, Barneport and just today a terrorist plot was foiled right here in Randona.”

“And you expect us to stop something like that?” Oceanvine asked.

“Of course not,” Helm replied shaking his head vehemently. “No one person can stop that sort of thing. We just want advice.”

“It may be,” Oceanvine considered, “that we went at Saindo all wrong right from the start. The Friendship Corps was and remains a great force for good but in Saindo we worked with the warlords.”

“We had to,” Maia pointed out.

“I disagree,” Oceanvine replied. “I was there briefly, you’ll recall. The warlords control everything

and each is a law unto himself. We had to deal with one in Mati... What was his name? Went?"

"Wrent," Sextant supplied.

"Oh yes," Oceanvine nodded. "He was fairly urbane and sophisticated. You could almost forget his first move was to shake us down for protection money."

"I thought he said it was his flunky that did that," Sextant recalled.

"He said that," Oceanvine agreed, "but in retrospect I doubt any of his people did so much as breathe without his permission. Then we ran into various warlords and their people while out rescuing that team of Friendship Corpsmen. Most of them were barbaric.

"We didn't have to treat with the warlords," she repeated. "We did not have to go into Saindo at all. Most of our humanitarian efforts masked our attempts at gaining position during the Cold War anyway, just as those of Granom were. Saindo was really just a pawn in the game. But we did go in and told ourselves that by helping the people they would somehow find the guts to stand up to the warlords. Helping them was a good thing, but we never gave them anything but a little temporary help. All the schools and bridges and hospitals were just a way for the warlords to put money in their pockets as though they needed more. I've heard that half of every crown we sent to improve Saindan infrastructure was directly stolen by one warlord or another. What a waste."

"We may have improved the people's quality of life," Sextant added thoughtfully, "but we did not change their society. We should have taken out the warlords. Failing that, since we were not willing to move in militarily..."

"That would have been politically suicidal," Ksanya reminded him. "Cold War, remember?"

"Oh, right," Sextant nodded. "Then we should have forced the warlords to work with us on our terms, not the other way around."

"Now," Oceanvine took up the argument, "You'll have to put an end to this with an invasion."

"I would prefer to call it an intervention," Helm replied.

"I'd rather call it liberation," Maia added.

"We all would," Ksanya agreed, "but that's just a word game. Six and Vine are right. It will be an invasion."

"So are you going to bring Bellinen into this or just Emmine and Granom?" Oceanvine asked.

"How did you guess that?" Maia asked.

"Why else would my cousin be here at this time?" Oceanvine countered.

"I could just be playing tourist, you know," Ksanya replied. "I haven't been the ambassador here in almost twenty years"

"Yeah, right," Oceanvine snickered. "You should also try to involve the Isle of Fire, Ellisto and the former colonies as well."

“Coordinating something like that would be difficult,” Helm told her.

“Perhaps,” Oceanvine nodded, “but it would mean the Saindan terrorists would have fewer places to hide. I wonder if Wennil could be convinced to join in on this.”

“Not a chance,” Ksanya laughed, “but then most of them wouldn’t allow refugees from Saindo to use Wennil as a base of terrorist activity. The Wennilians have a very sensible attitude toward violence. They believe that the initiation of violence is never justified regardless of the cause, but that if attacked there’s no reason to give the attacker a second chance.”

“I know that,” Oceanvine replied. “I’ve been to Castelon for their wine festival every year for decades. Quite a bit of their attitude was bound to rub off.”

“So what brings you into town, Vine?” Ksanya asked, “or was it just by royal invitation?”

“Royal invitation,” Oceanvine smiled, “but Sally and I are going to take the *Maiyim Bourne* out and sail around Rallena for the next two or three months, so I would have been passing through Randona about now anyway.”

“Sounds pleasant,” Maia replied, smiling.

“Yes,” Oceanvine nodded, “and given our schedules these days the Gods alone know when we’ll be able to do it again.”

“Well, I don’t want to hold you up any longer,” Helm remarked. “Your insights have been helpful as always.”

“I want to hold you up though,” Ksanya told her. “Or rather, I want in.”

“Huh?”

“I’ve never been on the boat for more than a short sail out and back in to Keesport harbor,” Ksanya reminded her. “Let me come along for part of the way.”

“What about your husband?” Oceanvine asked.

“What about him?” Ksanya answered. “He’s back in Querna. Larv’s a big boy, he can amuse himself for a week or two, and the kids are as grown up as yours are. None of them will mind if I spend a couple of weeks with you.”

“Aren’t you here, planning an invasion?” Sextant asked.

“I was,” Ksanya replied, “and I’ve done it. This was just a planning session anyway. We’re still waiting to hear from Bellinen and the others. Ideally we’d like the Bellinen fleet to play the key role since everyone knows they’ve been traditionally neutral in most military incidents in the past century. So, mind if I tag along?”

“We do have an extra cabin,” Oceanvine shrugged.

Three

“So how are your children?” Oceanvine asked Ksanya as they walked across Randona Main Campus.

“They’re fine,” Ksanya replied. “They’ve both been pressed into the Diplomatic Corps. Lyaksandr is a deputy legate in Bellinen and Oktaviy is stationed in Rjalkatyp. He’s still a junior, but I doubt either of them will make a career of it. I expect they’ll return to Querna as soon as their kids are ready for school. Oh, and Oktaviy and Nadezhda are expecting again in about three months.”

“Wonderful!” Oceanvine enthused. “Give them my love.”

“As always,” Ksanya nodded. “How about your kids?”

“Concert’s teaching and working on his Wizard’s Degree in Querna,” Oceanvine replied. “Lakeside and the kids are with him, of course.”

“You have three grandchildren on that side, don’t you?” Ksanya asked.

“That’s right,” Oceanvine agreed. “Anton, Natan and Emily. Anton’s of school age and attending an elementary school there, though Concert plans to move back to Olen to conduct his dissertation research next year. And Astilla is a geologist right here.”

“Does she find many notable stones in Randona?” Ksanya laughed.

“Just in the students’ heads,” Oceanvine retorted, “but I meant she is right here. That’s her on the other side of campus.” Oceanvine waved.

“Hi, Mom!” Astilla greeted her as they got closer. “Auntie Ksanya! I didn’t know you were in Randona.” Astilla was a serious looking young woman with medium length hair and rimless glasses. From her outward appearance she might well have been one of the students, albeit somewhat older than most, and she had an obviously heavy backpack slung over her shoulder.

“Business,” Ksanya shrugged. “How are Morris and the kids?”

“Morris is fine. He’s out of town for a few days, conducting a survey in Kornedd,” Astilla replied. “Devora and Elinor are in school and probably anxiously awaiting recess. Oh, Mom, I think Elie is going to want to follow in your footsteps. I caught her pushing one of her big plastic balls around the room the other day by telekinesis.”

“Should have been more careful when you named her then,” Ksanya laughed. “Next thing you know, the kid will decide to call herself Oceanvine III.”

“Hopefully she’ll be more creative than that,” Oceanvine smiled. “Dear, there are children’s classes for magic these days. Maybe you should ask if she would like to try one. It will be a lot safer than letting her just try stuff on her own. Has Devi tried anything like that?”

“Not on her own, Mom,” Astilla replied. “She’s had the usual homework assignments but I don’t think magic interests her all that much.”

“Well, there’s more to life than magic,” Oceanvine shrugged. “I’m sure she’ll find something she likes.”

“So far it seems to be math,” Astilla smiled, “but she’s only eight. I’m sure she’ll change her mind a lot before she chooses. So what brings you to town?” Oceanvine told her, adding that she and Saltspray planned to go on an extended sail. Astilla shivered at the thought of sailing, “Better you than me. I get seasick just looking at boats.”

“That’s got to be in your mind, dear,” Oceanvine remarked. “Especially on the *Maiyim Bourne* . Inside the cabin she barely rocks at all.”

“But she still moves,” Astilla pointed out. “Oh dear, I have a class to teach in a few minutes. Come to dinner?”

“We’ll be on the road to Renton in half an hour,” Oceanvine predicted.

“Then call when you get back,” Astilla insisted. Oceanvine agreed, hugged her daughter and allowed her to hurry off.

Saltspray was busy in her office when they finally met up with her in the Onestone Building. “I thought you were supposed to be on sabbatical,” Oceanvine accused.

“So did I,” Saltspray replied. “I came in to straighten out the office – I’d hate to come back and find it in its usual shambles – and got immediately dragged into a squabble between two of my first-year instructors. Hold on a sec.” She typed furiously at a computer keyboard and finally hit the send key and shut the machine down. “There. I got an emergency call from Pyrite in Merinne.”

“I must say that’s a better name than some of the ones he considered when he was a student,” Oceanvine remarked.

“Yeah,” Saltspray nodded. “It took us months to talk him out of Jetstream. Anyway, someone discovered a group of miners in the hills of central Orente had been enslaved using the Hook and it took me a while to look up Granddad’s cure. I just e-mailed it off to Pyrite.”

“It’s been a long day,” Oceanvine remarked. “Maybe we should stay in Randona overnight and leave first thing in the morning?”

“No,” Saltspray replied immediately. “If we do that, I’ll only get dragged into something else. Let’s get on the road before that happens. Maybe we’ll make it to Renton tonight and can sleep in tomorrow morning.”

“Renton is at least nine hours away,” Ksanya pointed out.

“Far better than the twelve that trip used to take when we were kids,” Saltspray retorted. “As I recall, my parents insisted we take two days to make the trip to Randona when I matriculated. However, even if we only get an hour out of town,” she continued as she shooed the other two women out of the office and locked up, “I still won’t be around to get dragged into departmental politics again.”

“Now you know why Six and I only teach in Olen these days,” Oceanvine laughed as they left the department. On their way past the receptionist’s desk, Oceanvine spotted the old ceramic bowl with hex nuts in it. There were a few less nuts in it these days, but she was pleased to see the tradition had persisted. Absently, she willed one of the nuts to rise up out of the bowl and start circling her head, just as they left the department offices.

“Oh, now it really is like the old days,” Ksanya laughed. “Why not the pearl?”

“I just felt like it,” Oceanvine laughed.

“There aren’t too many students doing that old exercise these days,” Saltspray remarked. “I’m surprised the nuts haven’t rusted together.”

“Really, I saw a lot of women floating jewelry around their heads at the Winter Ball last year,” Oceanvine remarked.

“I see the same in Querna,” Ksanya added.

“That’s why,” Saltspray explained. “The students no longer see it as a true mage’s exercise. Nearly anyone with a trace of talent can do it and it’s become fashionable.”

“Most women are buying kits to do it for them,” Oceanvine remarked. “It’s as I once predicted; magic techs figured out a way to make it a self-casting spell, an amulet that can be turned on and off.”

“They still don’t work for me,” Ksanya pointed out. Ksanya was a rare individual for whom magic had no direct effect. Such people were called Magic Nulls and they emitted an aura that nullified all magic in their immediate vicinity. In extreme cases it could be a crucial handicap in a world where magic was the basis of technology, but Ksanya had learned how to control her null magic field, turning it into an occasional asset.

“I could probably make an object orbit your head if you kept your field under control,” Oceanvine remarked, “but I’d have to concentrate and keep you in sight at all times to pull it off. The spell uses the person it is centered on to determine the center of its orbit. In your case it couldn’t detect you and it would just go flying off the moment I turned my head or got even slightly distracted.”

“Well, I think I would look silly with a pearl floating around my head,” Ksanya laughed. “Remember the time you disguised yourself as me at Hacon Ancel’s Ball? The floating objects look natural on you two, but somehow it just didn’t look right on me. Besides, I’m very fond of my great-grandmother’s tiara, even if I don’t get to wear it very often these days.”

“Are you going to spin that thing around all the way to Renton?” Saltspray asked.

“It’s always good practice,” Oceanvine replied, “but I can stop if it annoys you.”

“It doesn’t annoy me, but I feel left out ‘cause my crystal ball is somewhere at the bottom of my pocketbook,” Saltspray replied as they finally reached Oceanvine’s car. “Oh, you brought your staff?” inside the vehicle was a long, carved staff of ash wood with a brass shoe at the bottom and a finial in which the Lady Oceanvine’s personal arms had been carved in three dimensional splendor.

“Of course,” Oceanvine replied. “I never travel without it and the boat keeps it perfectly charged up while it’s on board.” She reached up and retrieved the hex nut, slipped it into her purse, then opened the car door and got in. The others followed suit.

“I left mine in Renton a few years ago,” Saltspray replied. “I don’t really need it very often these days and it’s just as easy to use any nearby object to store energy in, if I must.”

“Really?” Oceanvine asked, starting the car and easing it into traffic. “Maybe it’s just me, but I’ve found that spells seem to work better when I use the same staff to assist me. Other staves and random objects hold energy, but it just seems more comfortable and natural when I use this one.”

“That might just be in your mind,” Saltspray argued.

“It could be,” Oceanvine admitted easily, “but it might make for an interesting study this winter if I can find a way to quantify the results.”

“But your physical and mental comfort affects your ability with magic too,” Saltspray argued. “How would you differentiate those factors from any possible effect the staff might be contributing?”

“By trying it with different people in a blind test, of course,” Oceanvine remarked. “I’ll try to study the effects of acclimating to new staves, ones that appear outwardly identical.”

“It will be interesting, but I wonder if your results will be reproducible,” Saltspray remarked.

“You can do the follow-up study,” Oceanvine told her, “and maybe we’ll see if Balance wants to try the same thing with his students in Rjalkatyp.”

“Too bad Misana never kept up her studies beyond the Journeyman level,” Saltspray commented. “It might have been interesting to see if Merinta reacted differently from other Orenta.”

“Misana’s been busy enough as her people’s emissary to the Senate of Bellinen,” Oceanvine pointed out, “but we can contact Pyrite about it if the study gets that far. So if you hate departmental politics so much,” she brought the conversation back to an earlier subject, “why do you stay in Randona?”

“Oh, I like teaching well enough to put up with the politics,” Saltspray replied, “but maybe it’s time I let someone else run the department.”

“I thought you liked that too,” Oceanvine commented.

“Ten years ago it was good to be the boss,” Saltspray told her, “but now I’m just happy when no one tries to tell me what to do. You know, granddad had it easy in a way. He was a one-man

department and even the Dean back then had stopped caring about the Magic Department. Now that it's a full and popular department again everyone wants a say in how I run it. I'm wasting too much valuable time in just keeping funding where it's supposed to be and preventing it from being siphoned off into other departments. Did you know they actually tried to reallocate the Onestone grant into Sports last year?"

"I hadn't heard," Oceanvine admitted.

"I let the Dean know that if he even thought of doing it, he'd better be prepared to have my students playing in the games from the stands. He replied that would be ruled as spectator interference and I told him that if he was going to use Magic Department money to pay for it, we sure as hell were going to get our money's worth out of it. He eventually backed down and stole the money from the Chemistry Department instead."

"And was the water barrel spiked?" Ksanya laughed.

"You heard about that?" Saltspray asked.

"No, it just seemed like a logical outcome," Ksanya replied. "What did they use?"

"I'm not sure," Saltspray admitted, "but it had an interesting, but colorfully disturbing effect when the players went to, uh, relieve themselves."

"So how's your family doing?" Ksanya asked Saltspray.

"Lampblack is visiting his family in Silamon," Saltspray referred to her husband. "I told him we might try to join him in watching the Silamon Cup races this year. Now that they hold it in early fall rather than summer, there's a chance we might make it in time. Tsunami is still single and playing the field while teaching in Rjalkatyp, but his sister Vapor took a year off to take care of her daughter, little Sally. They plan to be at the Olen winter session this year, of course."

They continued talking for the next few hours and only fell completely silent by Midnight when they were just an hour outside of Renton.

Four

Candleston's Inn remained a popular local restaurant and bar, although the hotel section of the establishment was now affiliated with a nation-wide chain. "It takes a lot of the workload off me," Saltspray's sister, Jilandette, admitted over breakfast. "We haven't actually been living here since just after Sally went to school, so this way we manage the hotel, but the chain pays an accountant to keep the books and the restaurant and bar is still entirely ours. So are you here for a bit or just passing through?"

"Passing through, I'm afraid," Oceanvine replied. "We plan to visit the graves because it's been a few years and then it will be straight on to Keesport."

"Well, I hope you'll stay a little longer next time, Vine," Jilandette told her. "It's been ages since we had a chance to chat and Sally barely knows her nephews."

"Maybe on the way back," Oceanvine half-promised. "So how's your brother? Sally almost never mentions him."

"James?" Jilandette asked. "He's fine. He's worked his way up to president of the First Bank of Midon. We only hear from him a few times each year. Busy, I guess, but he stops in on his way to somewhere else depending on where he's chosen to vacation that year. Did you ever meet him?"

"Just the once," Oceanvine recalled, "at Uncle Candle's funeral. He didn't even come back for the reading of the will, did he?"

"No, he was too busy as I recall," Jilandette sighed. "He still is, I guess. Oh, here comes Madame Ksanya."

"Feeling better?" Oceanvine asked her. Ksanya had never been able to sleep in a car and had not been in Emmine long enough to acclimate to the time change. Consequently she was exhausted by the time they reached the inn.

"Much," Ksanya smiled. "Sorry if I held up the trip."

"Not at all," Oceanvine replied. "Saltspray is still sleeping."

"She was up late," Jilandette explained. "After you two went to sleep she came over to my place. We talked until it was time for me to go on duty. I'll pay for that tonight, I fear, but it was worth it."

"And how fares Tamollen?" Ksanya asked.

"The island?" Jilandette laughed. "I haven't been there in years. I went once, just to see the place. It's what passes for Dad's barony after all, but being a dry and uninhabited island we receive no revenues from it. It gives Dad the right to sit in Parliament, of course. He calls it his retirement hobby."

"And James inherits the title?" Oceanvine asked.

"He doesn't want it," Jilandette sighed. "He has, in fact, already signed a statement refusing it."

"Then who will inherit?" Ksanya asked interestedly.

"I will," Jilandette replied softly.

“The law was changed two decades ago,” Oceanvine added. “A woman may inherit a barony and sit in the House of Lords.”

“You don’t seem very happy about it,” Ksanya noticed.

“Happy?” Jillandette echoed. “Why should it make me happy? First of all, I’m the heir because my brother can’t be bothered and second, I’ll become Lady Tamollen because my Dad will die. I’m in no hurry for that.”

“Of course,” Ksanya agreed. “I should have thought of that.”

Saltspray finally joined them half an hour earlier, carrying her old staff, one Oceanvine had given her decades earlier. “I picked it up from Jill’s place last night,” she explained. After eating a light breakfast they left to make their usual visit to the graves of Silverwind, Oceanvine, Candle and Jillanda.

The small, but well-maintained graveyard had not changed much in the last thirty-five years or so. It still stood behind the Renton High School and just a little downslope from the former home of Silverwind and the elder Oceanvine. The double stone that marked the graves of Oceanvine’s great-grandparents still boasted two golden lights, one of which shone from within a special mage stone and the other continued to shine from a spot just in front of the stone. And the miniature rose bushes the younger Oceanvine had planted so long ago continued to grow and flower, although to her eye they needed shaping badly.

Saltspray knelt at the graves of her grandparents for a few minutes, then as she always did when here, she took a deep breath and casting one of the most difficult spells imaginable, created two roses, one red and the other pink, and left them on the graves. Oceanvine and Ksanya said prayers at all the graves and Oceanvine pulled a pair of sheers out of the air and trimmed the two rose bushes until their shapes were more pleasing.

“They aren’t as bad as I feared,” Oceanvine remarked as she continued to prune away unsightly branches.

“Jill comes here each spring to keep everything neat,” Saltspray remarked.

Just then a busload of school children arrived and thirty elementary students approached the small cemetery with two teachers. Oceanvine listened while one of the teachers lectured about her great-grandparents, but when one of the children asked about Candle’s grave, the teacher had no answer.

“They were my grandparents,” Saltspray told the students.

“And our uncle and aunt,” Oceanvine added, indicating herself and Ksanya.

They spent the best part of the next hour telling the students about all four of the people who had been buried there, answering questions and telling them stories most people never heard, but when the teachers decided it was time to tour the old house, Ksanya prodded Oceanvine and Saltspray back toward the car so they could continue their own journey.

Five

Keesport had nearly doubled in size since Oceanvine's first visit to the city and the reason for that all came down to its position as a port city. It was the northernmost port on Rallena with a harbor deep enough to accommodate even the new supertankers. The Kee River was navigable for several miles and there were docks public and private lining both banks.

In the process of growth the city had suffered a tremendous urban sprawl and had absorbed a dozen smaller towns in the process. The business center of the city had migrated two miles upstream to an area where the ground could support the huge sky scrapers that housed the vast majority of Keesport businesses. Carter Imports, however, remained in the historic district of the city and that was where Saltspray drove the car.

"I expected you here earlier," Marisse Carter commented after greeting them warmly. She was Gerry's daughter-in-law, married to Gerry's son, Terry. "I hope you didn't have trouble along the way."

"Not really," Oceanvine shrugged. "How's Gerry?"

"He should be coming home tomorrow," Marisse replied. "The doctors wanted him to stay in the hospital just one more night."

"Hospital?" Ksanya asked. "Why? What's happened?"

"Just getting old, I fear," Marisse sighed.

"What's wrong?" Oceanvine pressed.

"One of his kidneys has failed and the other is having a hard time keeping up," Marisse explained. "His heart is operating at a reduced capacity, forcing him into a less active lifestyle and you can just guess how he's taking that."

"And he's coming home tomorrow?" Oceanvine asked. "Well maybe we should go visit him now

and stick around another day or two to help out.”

Gerry’s skin color wasn’t good when they entered his hospital room, but he greeted the women cheerfully, told a few jokes and flirted with the nurses. Saltspray conducted a few diagnostic spells of her own, but decide the doctors’ prognoses were all correct. Gerry at best only had a few years of life left.

The next day they helped Gerry go home. Oceanvine and Marisse helped him into the house, but Ksanya and Salspray disappeared for half an hour and returned with one of the computers from the Carter Imports office next door.

“The neat part,” Ksanya enthused, “is that your grandson, Geraint, recently installed a wireless access point, so we won’t even need to run a cable next door to connect you to Netmaiyim.”

“Now what use could I possibly have for a computer?” Gerry complained.

“There’s all sorts of things you can do with it,” Saltspray explained. “It’s not just for business these days, you know. You can play games on it, for example. The games are getting pretty impressive these days.”

“Games?” Gerry asked. “Chess is good enough for me.”

“You can get a chess game,” Saltspray told him. “Play against the computer or other players all over the world.”

“It’s not the same if you can’t handle the pieces,” Gerry grumbled.

“Oh, but wait until you see the graphics,” Saltspray told him cheerfully.

“Nothing’s better than real life,” Gerry countered.

“True enough,” Ksanya agreed, “but this box can help you do things you’ve had to give up. It’ll help you keep up with the Eight Base season. Yes, yes, I know you can watch TV and read the newspaper, but the TV doesn’t show you all the games, but you can watch any game you like on Netmaiyim.”

“Well, I am a big game fan,” Gerry admitted.

“It’ll also help you keep in touch with your daughter and her family in Tarnsa,” Saltspray informed him. “I’ll talk to Geraint and see about setting up a camera here and there so you can see them too.”

“That would be nice,” Gerry admitted.

“And you can continue to keep an eye on the books too, Dad,” Terry Carter told him from the door way. “You’ll have to learn how to use the spreadsheet program, but viewing a spreadsheet is simple enough. Programming some of the functions and calculations is trickier, but you won’t have to do that. Mostly you’ll just be reading, but if you want, adding data is just a matter of punching in the right numbers. I’ll have Geraint come by tomorrow morning to show you.”

“Hi, Terry,” Oceanvine greeted him. “How have you been doing?”

“Quite well,” he replied, “thanks. How’s life on the far side of the island?”

“Quiet at the moment and that’s generally a good thing,” Oceanvine replied. “What’s new around here?”

“We’re building a new warehouse,” Terry informed her. “I never realized what a project that could be. It’s taking up all my spare time, but it should be open for business in another two months or so. Maybe then I can catch up on my sleep.”

“Terry’s been running the business most of this past decade,” Gerry told them, “And doing a great job of it. That new warehouse should triple our storage space.”

“Too bad we’ll have to demolish the old one,” Terry admitted, “but it’s an old building and not in good shape.”

“Do you have plans for the space?” Saltspray asked.

“A shopping arcade,” Terry replied. “I’m already getting store owners anxious to move in.”

“Sounds good,” Oceanvine told him, and then signaled they should step into the next room. “Terry, I want to pay for the *Maiyim Bourne*’s storage and dock fees.”

“Sorry, Vine,” Terry smiled. “Your money’s no good here.”

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous,” Oceanvine told him. “Keeping her and carting her back and forth from the harbor has to have cost you a bundle over the years.”

“Not really,” Terry replied. “One of our acquisitions a while back was a boat yard. It’s not like we have to unstep the mast every year. We just put her up on a stand in the late fall and put her back in the water in the spring.”

“But the port fees,” Oceanvine argued.

“Negligible,” Terry replied, especially when you compare them to the cost of owning a wharf. Really, Vine, Dad never took your money for this and neither will I.”

Oceanvine thought about that for a long moment before simply replying, “Thank you.”

Kern

One

“So where are we headed first?” Saltspray asked as they cleared the mouth of Keesport harbor. Just as in the old days, both she and Oceanvine kept hex nuts orbiting their heads as they sailed.

The *Maiyim Bourne*, like many sailing yachts on Maiyim, had a pair of hydrofoils attached to her hull and when the wind was strong enough and the foils were extended, she could literally fly over the water. As they came about to head southwest through the Quarna Strait, the conditions were perfect and the boat rose up on her foils and shot out over the waves like a bullet.

“Medda,” Oceanvine replied. “I figure it will be nice to stop in and see Jollin. I understand I just missed her when we were in Randona.”

“So did I,” Ksanya added. “She doesn’t stay in the capital any longer than she must once Parliament goes on break. Can’t say as I blame her. Politics is a high stress occupation.”

“High stress, but with even more vacation time than I get,” Saltspray remarked. “I sometimes wonder if the press of work would lessen if politicians kept more regular hours.”

“It might,” Ksanya considered, “but I doubt it. Of course a lot of the work is self-inflicted. I’ve always thought politicians had to be at least a little unbalanced to choose to be politicians in the first place.”

“So speaks our resident politician,” Oceanvine laughed.

“Well, international politics is different,” Ksanya replied a bit defensively, “and actually I’m a diplomat, not a politician. I don’t have to run for reelection and go around making speeches and raising money. Not that diplomacy isn’t enough to drive one crazy, but it’s a different sort of crazy.”

“Face it, Ksanya,” Saltspray laughed, “You’re addicted to the challenge.”

“I enjoy my work,” Ksanya admitted, “but really I could quit at any time. Uh... Oops, that’s what all the addicts say, isn’t it?”

“Only in the sitcoms,” Oceanvine remarked. “You could be right about politicians, although I wonder sometimes. So many at least seem to start out idealistically, only to get caught with their hands in the cookie jar ten or twenty years down the line.”

“They say power corrupts,” Saltspray added.

“Sometimes,” Ksanya told them, “but most truly successful politicians get into that game, and sadly, they do think of it as a game, by being part of the “Old Boys” network. Someone completely independent isn’t likely to serve more than one or two terms because he or she won’t be able to raise the necessary funds to get reelected against someone with the backing of an established political party. That sort of system breeds cynicism and, just as in evolution, it naturally selects candidates who will do and

say anything they think will get them elected. That's why you see so many candidates saying one thing in front of some audiences and something else in front of others. It's harder to get away with that than it used to be, of course. The news media watches every word they say, just like they used to follow me around in the hopes I'd do or say something scandalous."

"You know, I never actually saw that happening," Oceanvine recalled.

"Well, it died off rather abruptly after the Counterrevolution," Ksanya admitted. "Then I was a hero of the kingdom and apparently behaving myself. It became unpatriotic and boring to most people so they went looking for targets who really wanted the attention, like movie stars. Of course, had they been watching what Maia and I got up to my first few months in Emmine, they'd have had a field day, but by the time anyone knew about it, I had just saved Their Majesties' lives. I got lucky, I guess.

"Anyway," Ksanya continued, "most of the politicians who seem to go bad were probably tending toward amorality to begin with. Exceptions like Jollin are exceedingly rare, but even she's had to bend to the will of the political machine from time to time. Politics is always a dirty business, probably because there's always a winning side and a losing side, or many losing sides depending on where you are. So some people get things the way they want it and everyone else is forced to go along. Democratic republicanism seems like a really bad system of government until you consider some of the alternatives. Monarchies and benign dictatorships can be good for the people, but it's too easy to make them go bad. I'd like to think Granom did well all those years before Veras reopened the House of Commons and ceded much of the legislating to Parliament, but while he was a good king, there were always problems with the individuals he had to delegate various duties to. Graft is prevalent in any system, I fear, and can be hard to catch. Veras has had to rebuild several governmental departments over the years when it turned out someone was on the take. The worst case involved our Customs Service a couple of decades ago."

"I remember that," Oceanvine recalled. "It made international headlines."

"It did," Ksanya nodded, "but did you know that about the same time the Customs Service of Bellinen got caught out in an even larger crooked operation? I didn't think so. The Granomish affair pretty much got everyone's attention, so no one even noticed the Orenta at the time. Dumb luck is all."

"But not all politicians are crooks," Saltspray argued.

"If I was feeling more than normally cynical today, I'd challenge you to point out an honest one, or an honest one in his or her second term," Ksanya laughed, "but, yes they do exist. Jollin is one. Probably most of them are honest by their own lights, but the devil is in the details, as always. Even the honest ones have constituencies to represent. It doesn't matter if they're free to speak for their people or owned by corporations and political action committees like you have here in Emmine. Who came up with that idea, by the way? I've never seen a notion more designed to benefit corrupt politicians anywhere on Maiyim, and by now I've been almost everywhere."

"Parliament came up with it as part of a campaign finance reform," Saltspray replied.

"A reform?" Ksanya laughed. "Some reform! So you institutionalized the whole concept of the special interest group. These so-called PACs have no real definition. They can be a group in favor of nuclear disarmament or an MP's back pocket. And they're anonymous."

"They aren't really," Saltspray argued. "The names of PAC members must be on file."

“But you need a court order to see those files,” Ksanya shot back. “I know. I tried to look into one just before I retired as ambassador. The court ruled against me, by the way. Foreign interests are not entitled under your Freedom of Information Act. Fortunately my inquiry sparked off several others by Emmine citizen groups, but I didn’t like having to play it that way.”

“What was the issue?” Saltspray asked.

“It was a special interest group that wanted to drill petroleum in what Emmine defined as international waters, but which Granom defined as part of the territory of Methis’ Chain,” Ksanya replied. “We were willing to let the oil companies drill. We just wanted our rightful share of the licensing fees. The PAC in question turned out to be exceptionally shady, owned and run by a cartel of organized criminals, and in a subsequent case the court ruled that Granom had the right to declare her own reasonable territorial boundaries. Well, that’s long past, but the whole affair left me skeptical about the whole PAC concept. Vine, what’s that you’re eating?”

“Chicken sandwich,” Oceanvine replied. “I got it out of the food box while you two were chatting about politics.”

“When?” Ksanya demanded. “You never left the helm.”

“I do have a few advantages, remember?” Oceanvine smiled. She let go of her sandwich and it floated in place.

“That’s cheating,” Ksanya grumbled. She reached out and touched Oceanvine on the shoulder. Against most mages her null magic field would have interrupted the spell, but Oceanvine was exceptional and the sandwich remained airborne. “So is that,” Ksanya added. She reached out and grabbed the sandwich and took a bite. “Not bad though.”

“Hey!” Oceanvine protested. “Get your own sandwich.”

“I just did,” Ksanya told her smugly.

“You two!” Saltspray laughed. “I’ll go get a whole tray of them, and a jug of coffee too I think. It’s not as warm out here on the water as it was back in town.”

“It never is,” Oceanvine commented.

They were in no particular hurry and spent an extra day in Southport and Adda before finally heading out for the Island of Kern. Along the way, Oceanvine noticed that the commercial traffic in the strait was heavier than it used to be. Most of it appeared to be headed in or out of the Quarna Canal which had long been the shortcut into the Great Bay. As they passed a large passenger ship she recalled the incident on her first passage through the canal when the Queen Otillia had been struck in the side by a smaller ship and the two remained entangled until Uncle Candle had come along to assist in the separation of the two vessels.

In spite of the heavy commercial traffic, there were also hundreds of pleasure craft on the Inner Seas, all enjoying late summer vacations in the subtropical waters.

There were more airplanes overhead than she remembered as well. On her first trip, she hardly saw any aircraft in these skies. There were a few, but they were mostly high up and probably military flights. Now there were aircraft of all sorts littering the skies of the Quarna Strait. There were commercial flights

headed directly for Granom and the Isle of Fire and dozens of private planes, flying low just for the sheer joy of flying, in the same way Oceanvine enjoyed sailing. There were even a few military helicopters in the air from time to time and Saltspray opined they were there to keep an eye on the water traffic heading into the canal. Oceanvine decided she must have been right when the number of helicopters fell off as they continued on past the sea lanes that led to the canal.

Finally, nearly a week after leaving Keesport, the Island of Kern came into view and Saltspray, now at the helm, steered the *Maiyim Bourne* around the southern cape of the island.

"Vine," Ksanya reported, "I just contacted the harbormaster of Medda and let him know we'd be in port in half an hour or less. Is Willon Smith a cousin of ours?"

"Jollin's brother," Oceanvine replied. "I know you've met."

"I have a terrible memory for names," Ksanya admitted.

"A bit of a handicap for a career diplomat, isn't it?" Saltspray asked.

"I generally have juniors to brief me," Ksanya explained. "I can remember stuff soaked up in a briefing long enough to conduct a successful negotiation. Years later, though, not so much. Nobody's perfect, but as imperfections go, this one doesn't show very often."

Willon and Jollin were both waiting on the dock as the boat arrived. "If I'd known you were coming I'd have thrown a party," Jollin called out as she lashed the *Maiyim Bourne*'s painter to a cleat.

"I'd rather have a quiet little trip," Oceanvine replied. "You know. Sit and chat with old friends and family, meet the latest generation and all that. Quiet time."

"Well, you came to the right place for that," Jollin laughed and she stepped down onto the boat's deck. She hugged each of three women, while going on, "To tell the truth, it's why I return as soon as possible whenever Parliament is out. Randona is fun for a week or so, but I have to stay there for months at a time."

"Well, it's break time for you now," Saltspray told her, "Want a drink?"

"You too, evidently," Jollin remarked. "Shouldn't you be in school, young lady? Um, iced tea, if you don't mind."

"Sabbatical," Saltspray explained as she led the way into the galley. Oceanvine turned and beckoned to Willon to join them. "I'm taking the next semester off. Supposedly I'm writing a book, but I wrote it last spring and put it aside so I could really take some time off."

"How do you manage to find time to write?" Oceanvine asked her, crossing toward her cabin.

"You write tons, Vine," Saltspray pointed out.

"Sure, but I only teach while the rest of you are on break. I have plenty of time," Oceanvine replied. She ducked into her cabin and came out with the money bag that had been sitting on her dresser. The gods had built the *Maiyim Bourne* a century earlier in order to assist Silverwind on a quest they had demanded of him. The boat had been enchanted to provide anything he and his companions might need, but just in case They had overlooked something vital, They included bags of coins that could never be

emptied.

“So I write very fast,” Saltspray shrugged.

Oceanvine replied, “I wish I could. I have to struggle over every word.”

“It doesn’t show in your published work,” Saltspray opined.

Oceanvine waved that away and turned to Willon. “Will, what are the port fees these days?”

“I’m not going to charge you, Vine,” Willon replied. “I’d get lynched.”

“Nonsense!” Oceanvine scoffed.

“He’s not kidding, Vine,” Jollin supported her brother. “Everyone here remembers what you did after that attack by One Maiyim. Not only that, but you’re kin.”

“Not to everyone,” Oceanvine pointed out. “Just the Smiths and Coopers.”

“Vine,” Jollin disagreed, “even after all this time you just don’t understand Meddans. Your great-grandmother was Meddan, therefore, as far as folks here are concerned, so are you and you proved it when you came unbidden to our aid. Then you endowed a foundation for the benefit of the children here and just to put icing on the cake, you asked us not to raise a statue in your honor.”

“I didn’t want a statue, Jollin,” Oceanvine replied. “I know what pigeons do to them.”

“Right,” Jollin nodded, “but what was modesty to you was seen as acknowledgement of your kinship by most townsfolk. You’re a daughter of Medda every bit as much in their eyes as I am.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Oceanvine replied.

“It’s the way it is,” Jollin replied calmly. “So Will can’t take your money. The nice part is that everyone knows you don’t like to be made a fuss over, so they won’t... well, not too much.”

Two

They left the *Maiyim Bourne* at her slip and traveled to Jollin's home just to the south of the city. "I really would rather live in the center of town, but the Security Service wouldn't hear of it," Jollin remarked as she and Oceanvine sat down on a shady patio.

"Since when do they have a say in where you live?" Oceanvine asked.

"Well, okay," Jollin conceded, "if I insisted on living in town, or better yet, above the New Forge, they would be forced to install check points all around the block and regularly survey the surrounding neighborhood as well. It would wreak havoc with traffic and really annoy my neighbors. So it was practical to build a place on the outskirts of town that was planned for whatever security measures they wanted, but could be kept subtle and non-intrusive."

"So that parade out here," Oceanvine began to ask.

"My least favorite way to travel," Jollin replied. "Tell me, does Maia ever get to drive that hot little two-seater Uncle Candle left her?"

"Not since the coronation," Oceanvine chuckled. "I see what you mean. Security might have to do what you want, but they don't have to do it in a way you're comfortable with."

"Something like that," Jollin nodded. "They also don't have to do it without protest and after a while you tend to go along just to shut them up. I really hate how it keeps me apart from my own townsfolk, though. This isn't Randona. I can walk down these streets safely even in the dead of night, but try telling Security that. Ah well, I won't be prime minister forever. I have the right to keep my bodyguards after if I want, but I'll probably dismiss them. I'll probably sell this mausoleum as well. It was too large to begin with and since Arnon died, I feel like I'm rattling around in here. Hey, don't you want to see your room?"

"I'll see it soon enough," Oceanvine laughed. "Let Sally and Ksanya get unpacked, I'd rather get caught up with you. So how are John and the rest of the family?"

"Both John and Mara are fine. Hmmm, maybe I should invite them to move in here. Amee and Henry love the place."

"They're your grandkids, right?" Ksanya asked as she joined them.

"Right," Jollin nodded. "Last time they were here Amee asked me why I never changed my name when I got married. She thought I should have hyphenated it, but Smith-Black doesn't really have the right ring to it and Black-Smith might have been appropriate to me, but it sounds silly and it's the wrong way around in any case."

"Well, heck," Ksanya laughed, "you already had a political career building by the time you got married. I never changed my name either."

"You're Countess Granova," Jollin pointed out. "Larv's just a baron."

"Like that matters," Ksanya scoffed.

"Maybe not," Jollin allowed, "but no one in Granom calls you by your surname anyway."

“There is that,” Ksanya agreed. “So if Amee wants to be a Black-Smith, she’ll just have to marry one of her cousins.”

“I’m fairly sure she’ll do just that,” Jollin admitted, “but it won’t be a Smith. She and Jamis Cooper have been seeing each other lately.”

“How closely related are they?” Oceanvine asked curiously.

“Sixth cousins,” Jollin replied, “and I only know that because I took the time to look it up. You and Six are probably more closely related.”

“About the same, give or take a removal,” Oceanvine replied.

“Wow!” Saltspray remarked, entering the patio area. “This is quite a place you have here, Jollin.”

“Thanks,” Jollin replied, “but I’d gladly trade it for your granddad’s old faculty apartment.”

“A pity it isn’t mine to trade anymore, then,” Saltspray replied. “Lampblack and I bought a place off campus just after we got married. It’s only a mile from the campus but it’s a quiet suburban neighborhood, and no one can beat Ksanya’s place.”

“I live in the Wurra Palace most of the year,” Ksanya pointed out. “It’s not exactly my place. Vine has the largest home of her own.”

“I have an apartment in the school,” Oceanvine argued.

“You have the entire wing, Vine,” Saltspray pointed out, “and the rest of the place is all yours when there aren’t any students.”

“There’s always someone there these days,” Oceanvine replied. “Mages come from all over the world to use the library and the labs, of course.”

“And to consult with you too,” Saltspray added, “but do you really have that many mages there when school isn’t in session?”

“There were a dozen in residence when I left,” Oceanvine replied. “We’ve come a long way since that first session with only ten students, including you.”

“That was a great summer though,” Saltspray recalled. “Even better than the one we spent with Methis.”

They chatted away the rest of the afternoon then spent the next day trying to ignore the security guards that tracked them everywhere they went in Medda. The city was a new one. There had not been much left after the explosion some decades earlier. Where the old city had been a quaint collection of twisty streets that locals had jokingly called paved cow paths made by exceptionally drunken cows, the new city had been designed on a grid plan with streets that only strayed from straight lines where geography prevented them.

There were a few old buildings left although not in the center of town where the buildings were all steel and glass with the sole exception of the city hall which Jollin, as mayor, had arranged to have built using red brick and sandstone, similar to the old city hall, although larger with room to grow inside.

The heart of the city, however, the spot in which the magic explosion had been centered, had been transformed into a park. Many survivors had wanted to make the area a stark memorial to the loved ones they had lost that day, but Jollin had gradually convinced the people of Medda that filling the area with life would be a far more fitting memorial. The names of the victims could be found engraved on stones that marked the perimeter, but within that ring of names there were picnic areas, three Eight Base fields, swings and slides for the younger children and a duck pond with boats that could be rented by the hour.

Jollin brought the others there for a relaxed lunch before embarking on a whirlwind tour of Oceanvine's relative's homes and finally back to Jollin's by midnight.

"You don't have a billiards table, do you?" Saltspray asked as they arrived.

"No," Jollin replied, "Why do you ask?"

"Because I've had so much coffee today I'm probably going to be awake for a week," Saltspray replied.

"You could always create one," Ksanya remarked after stifling a yawn.

"No," Saltspray shook her head, "I don't think I could. I may be awake, but to cast spells you have to both relax and concentrate. Right now I doubt I could do either. I don't think I ever realized coffee could affect a mage's performance."

"Under normal circumstances it wouldn't," Oceanvine told her. She yawned. "Well, you can stay up reading if you want, but I think I'd better get some sleep. I didn't have anywhere near enough coffee to keep me awake."

"And I have a plane to catch in the morning," Ksanya remarked.

"Must you leave so soon?" Jollin asked.

"Sorry," Ksanya replied, "I need to stop in on Chastigon. There's a Granomish trading enclave there with a small official legation. I need to conduct a quick survey and then scoot off back to Querna. Life in the fast lane, don't you know."

Three

“Three fishing boats?” Jollin asked into the telephone handset. “Were they in the same vicinity? I see. When did this happen? Oh, all right. I’ll be here.”

“What’s happened?” Oceanvine asked, looking up from a notebook she had been writing in.

“Medda, as you know is one of Emmine’s largest fishing ports,” Jollin explained.

“It’s kind of hard to miss all those boats in the harbor,” Oceanvine agreed.

“Well there are three less of them now than there were a few days ago,” Jollin replied grimly. “It’s a mystery. The weather has been fine on the banks, unusually fine if I’m to believe what I just heard, but one by one three boats have disappeared and when the Coast Guard went to investigate there was nothing left but debris and a small oil slick. One vessel might take on water and sink, but not three. Also, none of them have had time to radio for help. Sinking in a calm sea rarely happens that fast. If there is a storm it can be instantaneous, of course, but...”

“What about a rogue wave,” Oceanvine asked. “Mariners talk about them all the time – walls of water ninety or a hundred feet high.”

“But not three such waves in a single week,” Jollin shook her head. “The Coast Guard is sending some men here to brief me on the situation. After that, maybe I’ll be able to tell you more.”

Oceanvine and Saltspray both sat in on the briefing, but aside from details such as last known locations, there was not much else to be learned. “So they were all along the northern edge of Harron’s Bank?” Oceanvine asked.

“Yes, but that is still a large area,” Captain Lees replied. “An arc two hundred miles long, in fact.”

“Still,” Oceanvine remarked, “It’s something to go on. Jollin, would you like Saltspray and me to look into this? I can’t say we’ll find anything more than the Coast Guard, but maybe a spell trace or two will be evident.”

“That’s not a bad idea, my lady,” Lees remarked, “there aren’t many mages in the Coast Guard, but don’t you think we should get someone... uh...”

“Someone what, Captain?” Oceanvine asked with dangerous politeness.

“Well, younger,” Lees finished.

“I’m only sixty years old, Captain,” Oceanvine retorted coldly. “I’m not decrepit just yet.”

“And if you can find a better mage on all Maiyim,” Jollin remarked, “It’s only because Saltspray here thought up something first. Vine, I’ll pay your usual fees.”

“No need,” Oceanvine shook her head. “We’re on vacation, and this is the least I can do for family.”

“Sally is only family by courtesy, though,” Jollin retorted.

“But family, nonetheless,” Saltspray argued. “I’ll do this on the house as well.”

“But I’m the house,” Jollin shot back.

“You look more like a woman to me,” Saltspray snickered.

“There are two cutters in the area already,” Lees told them. “They’re the *Neria* and the *Kemalart* . I’ll radio them to let them know you’re coming and see that you have their frequencies and current positions. Will you be leaving at dawn?”

“We can leave within the hour and be out on the banks by this time tomorrow,” Oceanvine replied.

“I’m sorry to ruin your vacation, Vine” Jollin apologized.

“Vacations are fine, but not when there’s work to be done,” Oceanvine remarked.

True to Oceanvine’s word, they were on their way out of the harbor by the end of the hour. “I wish Jollin had come to see us off,” Saltspray remarked as she started hoisting the mainsail.

“She was too busy contacting others about this,” Oceanvine told her.

“Not really,” Jollin’s voice came from inside the cabin. “Your plans to leave so suddenly just didn’t give me much of a window through which to duck my guards. Good thing you didn’t ward the hatch this time. I was able to stow away in the bow cabin.”

“What are you doing here?” Oceanvine demanded.

“Life these days is entirely too safe, Vine,” Jollin griped. “I decided it was time to be a little more hands-on about something.”

“Not exactly your wisest move,” Oceanvine told her. “Your guards will probably chase us down on a Coast Guard cutter.”

Jollin laughed, “I’m the prime minister, not their pet, Vine. Besides, you know as well as I do that all this security idiocy is a holdover from the bad old days of the Cold War with Granom and One Maiyim. Who’s left to attack me these days?”

“There’s always some random nutcase to worry about,” Oceanvine reminded her. “Some unhinged individual who thinks he or she has a gripe against you or the world in general.”

“And if I were you,” Saltspray added, “I’d worry a bit more about the Saindans.”

“The Saindans?” Jollin repeated. “I spent two years in Saindo, remember? That lot is only a threat to themselves. They have no real organization.”

“Doesn’t seem that way to me,” Saltspray remarked. “That new cult comes out of Saindo, doesn’t it?”

“What cult is that?” Oceanvine asked.

“You must be referring to the Eldists,” Jollin told Saltspray. “No one takes them seriously.”

“Who are these Eldists?” Oceanvine asked.

“Hold on and let me get something to drink and I’ll tell you,” Jollin replied.

“Better yet,” Saltspray told her, “help me with the jib and then we’ll both get coffee and something to nibble on out of the galley.”

They did so and then brought pizza and beer up from the food box. Along with the *Maiyim Bourne*’s other gifts, the galley boasted a box that outwardly resembled a small refrigerator, but which was capable of delivering any sort of food and drink whether hot or cold according to the preferences of the person who opened it.

“Okay, so we’ve eaten,” Oceanvine observed a while later. “So tell me about these Elders.”

“Eldists, Vine,” Jollin corrected her. “They’re a strictly fundamentalist religion based on the Elder Gods only. They discount the Younger Gods and make Aritos appear even more evil than most religions in the world do.”

“How much more evil can you get than the ultimate evil?” Saltspray asked.

“Maybe I put that badly,” Jollin admitted. “Most people, even the most devout, do not really take the threat of Aritos very seriously. The Eldists pray to Aritos.”

“Must be refreshing to Aritos,” Saltspray remarked. “Hardly anyone ever prays to Him.”

“More likely He finds it annoying,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“I wonder if that’s why the Eldists do it then,” Saltspray wondered.

“I doubt it. Like most fundamentalists, they take their religion very seriously,” Jollin replied. “They are pretty much an extra intense mirror image of the religion practiced on the Isle of Fire, where they only actively worship the Younger Gods.”

“One extreme to the other, I suppose,” Saltspray commented.

“Well, the Isle of Fire religion doesn’t actually deny the basic divinity of the Elder Gods,” Jollin pointed out. “They just prefer to worship the gods they believe created their land. The Eldists deny the existence of the Younger Gods.”

“Good thing none of them are hot tempered,” Saltspray remarked, “Well, Wenni can be a little intimidating...”

“None of the Gods have chosen to have an active role in the religions of Maiyim in millennia,” Oceanvine told them. “Tell me more about these Eldists, though. I wish someone had mentioned them sooner.”

“Why?” Jollin asked. “They’re not all that important.”

“If they’re fundamentalists, there is a good chance a small segment of them, at least, are fanatics,” Oceanvine pointed out. “Fanatics might do anything to support their beliefs.”

“They’re all fanatics, but there aren’t all that many of them,” Jollin told her.

"I heard the cult is spreading to the rest of Maiyim," Saltspray commented. "There was something on the telly the other night about Eldist churches being established in Emmine and Bellinen."

"And there's one in Querna too," Jollin admitted, "but we're talking about congregations of less than two dozen each. How much harm can they do?"

"It only takes one assassin to kill a king," Oceanvine pointed out soberly, "or his prime minister."

"We are talking about fanatics," Saltspray agreed. "How much say does this new religion have in Saindo?"

"That's a good question," Jollin admitted. "It didn't even exist when I was stationed there. My best guess is that it is just another small group of people on that archipelago even if the percentage is higher there. None of my briefings have indicated much concern over the matter."

"If your informants all think like typical Emmine humans they won't see a problem," Oceanvine replied. "We don't take our religion that seriously here. Oh we go to the temples and churches and swear by our favorite gods and in our own way I suppose, most of us are devout enough, but compared to the people of the Isle of Fire we're practically godless. We prefer to think of ourselves as sophisticates, but they laugh at our lax attitude. Even the Granomen take their religion more seriously than we do. If Ksanya was here she'd tell you as much."

"I don't think religion is the point, though," Saltspray opined. "Fanatics of every stripe are always a potential threat and with churches of this new religion on all three major archipelagos they're in a good position to start attacking the infidels... us."

"I don't feel threatened by Eldists or anyone else, if you want to know the truth," Jollin decided.

"Well, you always have been action-oriented," Oceanvine remarked. "I still think I ought to turn this tub around and drop you back on the pier."

"I won't go," Jollin told her stubbornly.

Oceanvine lifted her cousin telekinetically until she was at eye level with the top of the mast. "Say again?" Oceanvine chuckled. "I said I think I ought to take you back, but I'm not going to." She let Jollin back down gently.

"Well at least you didn't resort to reminding me you're the captain of this boat," Jollin admitted, "and, that as such, your word is law while we're at sea."

"No need," Saltspray laughed. "If Vine really wanted you off the boat, you'd be treading water right now. You're a fair mage for someone who never had more than a few lessons, Jollin, but there is no way you could parry one of Vine's spells."

"Can you parry a spell?" Jollin asked interestedly.

"Some," Oceanvine replied, taking another slice of pizza. "Wards can block any number of attacks, you know that and that's the usual way, but telekinesis can be blocked by more telekinesis, but eventually one mage will prove stronger than the other or else the subject will get squished. But it's simpler to just distract your opponent. Tickling does a fair job of that most of the time."

“I like to use bright lights and noise,” Saltspray commented.

“Do you have to fight magically very often?” Jollin asked.

“Hardly ever,” Oceanvine replied. “And to tell the truth, when you’re fighting you don’t tend to think of distractions. You think of defeating your opponent as quickly as possible. It’s not always the strongest mage who wins, it’s the fastest.”

“What about using magic to shoot a high-powered laser beam?” Jollin asked.

“What about it?” Oceanvine asked.

“How do you block that? With a ward?” Jollin pressed.

“An opaque one if you know it’s coming, I suppose,” Oceanvine replied. “It’s just a light spell – a highly concentrated and dangerous light spell. Six and I saw Theodorus do it on Arithan Island, but we never actually tried to duplicate the feat. Do me a favor and don’t try it on-board.”

“Why not?” Saltspray asked. “The *Maiyim Bourne* is indestructible.”

“I’m not,” Oceanvine retorted, “and neither is Jollin.”

“Oh, yeah. Good point,” Saltspray nodded. “It does seem odd though. We use tech magic to produce lasers. Why not do it directly?”

“We use tech magic to produce laser generating equipment,” Oceanvine corrected. “It’s the equipment, crystals, I guess, that produce the laser light itself.”

“But if I can produce a lot of very directional light, it ought to be a laser,” Saltspray argued.

“Maybe. To tell the truth, I don’t really know how laser light is produced,” Oceanvine admitted. “Maybe you should talk to Six about that.”

“I will,” Saltspray decided.

Four

A wide area roughly one hundred fifty nautical miles west of Mifde, Holm and Tolla, called Harron's Bank, was one of the richest fishing areas in all Maiyim. It was closest to the territorial waters of Emmine, but fishing boats from nearly every nation in the world sailed there to feed the people of their lands.

"The water is very shallow here," Jollin warned Oceanvine and Saltspray, "and this boat has a deep keel. Keep the buoys in mind wherever we maneuver or we could get stuck on the bottom."

"We can raise the centerboard and probably should," Oceanvine remarked.

"We might still run aground," Jollin warned her. "I've heard that during an extreme low tide the water can be only knee deep in places."

"Are we in a period of extreme tides?" Saltspray asked.

"We're nearing a monthly peak," Jollin replied, "although I don't know how extreme the tide will be."

"There's probably a tidal chart in the chart room," Oceanvine commented. "It's getting late though. We should probably drop anchor for the night."

"We'll have to sleep in shifts," Jollin told her. "One of the missing boats disappeared at night. I know we're suppose to rendezvous with the *Kemalart* in the morning, but we'd better be prepared to move out at any time.

"Well if at least one of us is awake, we won't need to use the anchor," Oceanvine decided.

The *Kemalart* arrived for their rendezvous around midnight, allowing everyone to get a full night's worth of sleep before meeting with the personnel on the Coast Guard ship. *Kemalart* had a full complement of scientists and tech mages who had been on site for over a week investigating the disappearances.

"We've considered a large number of possibilities," Doctor Ricard Glanore told them when they met with the scientific team on the cutter. "We've been scanning for electro-magnetic anomalies, testing the air for methane..."

"Methane?" Saltspray asked. "Why?"

"Submerged pockets of frozen methane can sometimes form on the ocean floor," Doctor Glanore explained. "If it heats up just a bit, it can become gaseous and rise to the surface as a foaming mass of bubbles in which a ship might sink."

"Frozen methane," Saltspray commented cynically.

"Yes," Glanore nodded.

"On the floor of the ocean," Saltspray continued.

"Yes." Glanore sounded slightly less sure of himself.

"Have you bothered to look and see how shallow the sea is here?" Saltspray asked. "Is there any chance in the world there could be frozen methane at this latitude at a mean depth of approximately

twenty feet?”

“Well, not here precisely, there’s a submarine cliff on the west side of Harron’s Bank,” Glanore told her. “The depths at the bottom of that cliff are nearly as great as in the Niriliand Trench.”

“Except none of the boats were lost in that vicinity, were they?” Saltspray asked. “So what else do you have?”

“We looked for evidence of rogue waves,” he replied. “They can occur in even relatively calm waters and there can be a fair amount of shoaling as ocean waves reach the bank.”

“That sounds a little more promising,” Oceanvine remarked, “but unless you have something new, we’ve already heard that wasn’t the case.”

“Yes, we ruled that out fairly early on,” Glanore admitted. “We even considered piracy, but we have yet to find any suspicious vessels in the area. The thing is, all three boats were operating normally when they had last called home.”

“How do they call home from out here?” Saltspray asked. “We’re out of cell phone range.”

“Satellite phones are considered a necessity by fishermen these days,” Jollin told her. “There are still marine band radios, but they get a lot less use than they used to.”

“Pardon, Prime Minister,” an ensign interrupted, “but there’s a ship-to-shore call for you.” He handed her a satellite phone and added, “There’s a small room just next door if you’d like privacy.”

“I can always walk there,” Jollin waved him off. “Thank you. Hello?” She was silent for a while and continued. “Yes, I understand the position I put you in, now I want you to understand the position you put me in every bloody day. You and your people give me less privacy and freedom than the average prison inmate. Up until now I have tolerated it, but keep in mind that I’m going to take all the so-called risks I want to and I am not going to be hampered by a bunch of gun-toting goons with bad fashion sense. No, I will not wait here until you can get agents on the scene. Are you telling me you are more qualified to protect me at sea than the Coast Guard? No, I didn’t think so. Yeah? And my responsibility is to keep all the people of Emmine safe. Guess whose priority comes first. No, you don’t have to like it and yes we will discuss it on my return.”

“Trouble on the home front?” Oceanvine chuckled when Jollin hung up the phone. “I warned you the Security Force wouldn’t appreciate your new-found sense of independence.”

“Which is why I had a ready answer for everything he said,” Jollin replied. She turned to the scientists and Coast Guardsmen, “I’m sorry, gentlemen. You didn’t really need to hear that. So where do we go from here.”

“We continue to search for the cause of the missing boats, of course,” Oceanvine replied. “Now that we’re on the scene we can look at spell traces around the sites of the last know locations of those boats, at least to start.”

“It’s a good idea to look, Lady Wizard,” Glanore agreed, “although we do have instruments that scan for magic traces and so far none have been found.”

“Can they diagnose those traces?” Oceanvine asked curiously.

“No, only the human mind can do that,” Glanore replied, “but they can detect traces of spells where they exist, usually. I’m not sure if water might, uh dampen the instrument’s abilities.”

“I’m sure a device that detects magic could be programed to diagnose specific sorts of spells,” Oceanvine commented, “but I wasn’t aware there were even devices that did what yours does.”

“It’s very new,” Doctor Glanore told her, “and there still may be a few bugs in the system. This is the first time I’ve used it in the field, in fact.”

“So we won’t rely on it completely then,” Oceanvine decided. “Too bad, really. Such a machine could make my job a lot easier.”

They decided to go back to patrolling the northern third of Harron’s Bank but to keep in radio contact at least once each hour. Oceanvine, Saltspray and Jollin went back to staggered watches so at least someone would be awake at any time, but after a few days of the intensive vigil, the strain was beginning to tell.

“Maybe we should have taken up the captain’s offer and allowed a couple of his men to sail with us,” Oceanvine remarked over her second cup of coffee one morning.

“It would have been a bit crowded,” Jollin remarked, “and I’ve gotten too used to not sharing a co-ed bathroom.”

“There is that,” Oceanvine agreed. “It was a novelty when we were young. Now it’s just a hassle. Six and I even use separate sinks these days.”

“Oh, that’s a good idea,” Jollin agreed. So he can keep his stuff next to his sink and you can keep yours next to yours?”

“Pretty much, though all he has next to his sink is a toothbrush and a cup. Everything else he has piled in a drawer or in the medicine cabinet,” Oceanvine replied.

Just then a distress call crackled urgently on their radio. The frantic voice rattled off a set of coordinates , adding, “We’re under attack from...” and was abruptly cut off.

“That’s to the northwest of here, I think,” Oceanvine remarked, “and I don’t think it’s too far away. Jollin, will you check the chart and give me a heading?”

“Not exactly my specialty, Vine,” Jollin replied. “I don’t have your sailing experience.”

“Right,” Oceanvine sighed. “Ready about!” she called the traditional command. Even though Jollin was the only one likely to hear her, she called it as though on a ship. “Hard alee!” She spun the boat’s wheel around as quickly as she could and nearly reversed their course. The long boom swung by just in front of her face, and Jollin had to duck. Then, after Jollin had finished walking the large jib around the front of the mast, Oceanvine instructed her, “Take the wheel, and hold to the current course until I come up with the corrections. Damn! We’re not making enough headway to use the foils. I may have to do something about that.”

“You’re going to increase the wind, Vine?” Jollin asked as Oceanvine disappeared into the cabin.

“Don’t talk dirty,” Oceanvine snapped back. “Sally! Wake up! We’re headed into trouble.”

“I’m up,” Saltspray grumbled, stumbling out of the doorway of the small cabin. “I nearly fell out of my bunk on that last maneuver.” She was just pulling on her blouse and, absently, Oceanvine noticed that all three women were wearing the same sort of Orentan floral silk blouses over cream-colored jeans this morning. A modified “Old School Uniform.”

“Sorry,” Oceanvine apologized quickly as she unrolled a random chart on the table. After several decades it had ceased to amaze her that the first chart she grabbed onboard was always the right one. Their destination and their current position was already marked and it was a simple matter to measure the course and distance. “Jollin,” she called back up on deck, “Adjust our heading to three thirty-six degrees, please.”

“Done,” Jollin replied a moment later. “How far off are we?”

“About thirty nautical miles,” Oceanvine replied. “Why?”

“Then we’re closest by a long shot,” Jollin remarked, “although the *Kemalart* might get there faster.”

“I’ll see about that,” Oceanvine retorted. “Sally, grab your staff.”

“No breakfast?” Saltspray complained.

“No time,” Oceanvine replied. “We need to get the *Maiyim Bourne* aloft and there’s not enough wind to do the job. Once we’re up on our foils you can probably take the time to eat.”

“Good thing we brought the staves then,” Saltspray remarked, ducking back into her cabin. Oceanvine did likewise and a moment later both women were up on deck with their staves. “Are the foils deployed?” Saltspray asked.

“Not at the moment,” Jollin replied.

“I’ll get them then,” Saltspray decided, “Vine, you start pushing.”

Oceanvine concentrated and aided by the power stored within her staff, she used an old spell formerly used by professional pilots, whose job it had been to guide ships in and out of crowded harbors. The boat started moving faster and a moment later, as Saltspray joined in to help “push,” the *Maiyim Bourne* suddenly rose up out of the water and flew along with only her foils and rudder actually touching the sea.

Jollin adjusted the sail so that it didn’t impede their progress, but the jib was now catching wind from the wrong direction.

“Vine?” Saltspray asked, “Can you keep the boat aloft now?”

“It’s much easier now,” Oceanvine confirmed as Saltspray slacked off a bit.

“Good,” Saltspray nodded. “I’m going to strike the sails. We won’t need them for a while and right now they’re slowing us down.” She did so and then quickly went below to grab a jug of coffee and some pastry. After she had a bite, she told Oceanvine, “I’ll take over for a few minutes. Have some coffee at least.” Oceanvine ate and drank quickly but then went right back to work in guiding the boat at high

speed.

According to the wind gauge they were traveling at nearly thirty knots and after a while Jollin estimated, "We should be there in another half an hour. Oops, does this boat have radar?"

"Sometimes," Oceanvine replied, "Why do you ask?"

"We're headed into a fog bank," Jollin informed them.

"I've been too concentrated on this piloting spell," Oceanvine remarked. "I should have seen it coming." The fog bank was like a great white wall and in a few seconds their visibility dropped down to less than one hundred yards. "There's a small hatch to the right of the wheel," she told Jollin.

Jollin opened it and discovered not only a radar screen, but a small global positioning unit as well. "When did you install a GPS, Vine?" she asked.

"I didn't," Oceanvine replied, "but this boat does keep up with the times. And is it telling us where it is and where we're supposed to be going?"

"It is," Jollin confirmed. "Now all we need is a fog horn."

A moment later a loud, low horn sounded for a full second and then started repeating itself every five seconds. "Ask and we receive," Jollin remarked. "She's an obliging little craft, isn't she?"

"Always has been," Saltspray chuckled. "Had you forgotten?"

"I guess I had," Jollin admitted.

They continued on until they had passed back out of the fog banks and found themselves in clear air again. "That seems like an amazingly sharp transition from fog to clear conditions," Jollin remarked.

"It's not all that unusual," Oceanvine replied. "You see it a lot when sailing, although it's generally a more gradual change. You can see it on land often enough as well, especially if you're driving through the mountains."

"So there's nothing magical about the fog?" Jollin pressed.

Oceanvine looked back at the fog bank, rapidly receding behind them. "Not that I can see," she told her. "We should be coming up on those coordinates soon."

"I think we're there, Vine," Saltspray told her. "There's flotsam and jetsam all around us and a small oil slick to starboard. I don't see any survivors, though. No life vests either. Maybe they got away on a raft or something?" Both she and Oceanvine brought the boat to a full stop. It fell abruptly back into the sea, splashing salt water over everyone.

Oceanvine closed her eyes to take a more magical look around. It was not something she did often, but since Doctor Glanore's devices had found no magical traces, she wanted to be absolutely sure. "I'm picking up some spell traces," she noted. "Rapidly fading ones, though."

Saltspray looked for herself, "A compulsion spell of some sort, I think. It's not the Hook, but something that works like it, a little."

"It doesn't seem attached to any of the debris around us though," Oceanvine remarked. "It must be a very sloppy spell. I think these traces were shed by the victims, like the spell was over-powered but constantly falling apart."

"Or else it was meant to degenerate quickly," Saltspray pointed out.

"That's a good point," Oceanvine admitted, "but on whom was the spell cast? The crew? I think I can make out a command to attack, but... no, it's gone now. Well, let's assume it was a compulsion to attack. Who was attacking?"

"Um," Jollin struggled to come up with an answer. "Pirates using others to attack for them?"

"That seems a little farfetched," Saltspray replied. "Why not just attack on their own? Fishing boats aren't armed, are they?"

"Not even with harpoons these days," Jollin admitted, "at least not in these waters. They're looking for flatfish here; flounder and sole mostly. Sometimes they catch cod and haddock, but it's the flatfish they're really after in these parts."

"Here comes the *Kemalart*," Saltspray announced, spotting the bright white cutter coming into view from out of the distant fog.

"And two other fishing boats," Jollin pointed to the east.

A few minutes later, when the other vessels were just a quarter of a mile away, there was a sudden massive roar from just beside one of the fishing boats and a large triangular-shaped head loomed briefly over its deck. The head, attached to a long greenish-gray serpentine body at least two hundred feet long, contained two glowing red eyes and a gaping mouth filled with saber-length fangs.

"What the hell is that?" Jollin shouted.

"Magnificent!" Saltspray breathed. "I thought serps were extinct." The giant sea snake's head shot downward as it bit deeply into the side of the boat, tearing plates of steel out of the hull. "I didn't know they were capable of attacking a steel vessel though."

Oceanvine, however, while just as fascinated as her former apprentice, shot a warding spell between the serp and its target. Immediately it turned away from the stricken boat and started heading toward the *Maiyim Bourne*.

"Is that thing venomous?" Jollin asked.

"Now is hardly the time for a zoology lesson, Jollin," Saltspray admonished her.

"It is," Oceanvine answered anyway. "They need the venom when attacking whales and sharks, but as you can see against humans it's not necessary."

"No, with a mouth that huge none of us are more than a morsel," Jollin agreed.

"Sally," Oceanvine commanded. "Keep the boat moving, but not too quickly."

Saltspray immediately started piloting the boat, but asked, “Why?”

“You’ll see,” Oceanvine told her as the serp raised its great rubbery neck up and out of the water. Instead of attacking the *Maiyim Bourne*, however, it fell back into the sea and started swimming after the *Kemalart*. “Oh no you don’t, darling,” Oceanvine crooned at the serp. “Come back here. Those bad men will only try to shoot you.”

The creature roared once more and it raised its head still higher out of the water, although it was now struggling against Oceanvine’s summons. “Sally, look at the spell on him.”

“It’s a him?” Saltspray asked.

“Definitely,” Oceanvine chuckled. “You can see for yourself.”

“I don’t see anything,” Jollin commented.

“You’re not looking in the right way,” Oceanvine smiled.

“Oh,” Jollin shook her head. “Magic again. Maybe I should have been a mage after all.”

“You are a mage,” Oceanvine reminded her. “You can do things in a forge no one else can.”

“Kind of limited then,” Jollin noted.

“Not as limited as Ksanya,” Oceanvine remarked, “and she does okay. Now let me work on this serp. He isn’t as easy to handle as he looks.”

Jollin privately felt the serp did not look easy to handle at all. Serps, she began to remember had never been particularly common, but had been known to attack and destroy ships on the open seas several times each year a century ago.

Finally, Oceanvine announced, “There. He’s free of that compulsion spell. Too bad there was no string leading back to the mage who cast it. Now, how to get rid of him safely?”

“Vine, you can’t kill him,” Saltspray insisted. “He’s an endangered species.”

“I’m not going to kill him,” Oceanvine replied. “With luck, just the opposite.” She struggled to both hold the serp relatively still while rummaging through her memory for a datum she had once read. Then she remembered what it was and cast a spell she had only ever seen in writing.

The serp suddenly made a strangled sound deep within his throat and Oceanvine released him. With a deep roar that shook the air and sea, the serp suddenly dived into the water and started swimming north. “Hey, it worked!” Oceanvine marveled.

“What did you do?” Saltspray asked.

“It was something I read in that book your grandfather left me,” Oceanvine explained. “Serps are powerful but not particularly intelligent. They are entirely instinct-driven. Something in their reptilian brains compels them to attack ships and boats. Maybe they think vessels are whales or porpoises? Anyway, because they are so closely ruled by their instincts, you can fool them into thinking it is their mating season, which is what I did. Right now that boy is headed for the north polar ice cap in search of a mate.

As far as I know, he'll stay there until one shows up too, so unless he's the very last of his kind, maybe there's hope for his species. I don't think he was very old, however."

"How could you tell?" Jollin asked. "By the color of his scales?"

"No, well maybe," Oceanvine replied. "I'm not a serp expert, I doubt anyone is these days, but he felt young to me. There's no other way to describe it. When handling animals like that, you can kind of feel if they have much experience and he felt like an adolescent to me."

"Have you ever examined a reptile like that, Vine?" Saltspray asked.

"No, that's why I can't be certain, but I hope I'm right," Oceanvine replied. "It could mean there have been serps breeding within the last few years."

"You really want to bring those monsters back?" Jollin asked.

"They are a vital part of this world's ecology," Oceanvine replied, "and it's fairly easy to discourage them from attacking. Just install a simple sonic device that emulates the sound of another serp. They navigate by sonar and that's the sound you need to emit, but once you do, no serp will attack. The *Maiyim Bourne*'s keel makes a similar sound as it slices through the water. That's why I had Saltspray keep the boat moving. Actually I thought all boats and ships were required to carry those sonic devices."

"The law was repealed world-wide about twenty-five years ago," Jollin informed her, "when the species was declared extinct. Those sonic devices that mimic a serp's call cost money to make and run, you know."

"Well, I'd suggest you do something about that," Saltspray advised. "For that matter I think I'd better put serp control on the curriculum when I get back. It's likely to take years for the World Congress to agree on anything and the more mages who know how to handle the problem the better."

"And maybe someone will work out a cheaper way to produce that sound," Jollin remarked.

"Copy the *Maiyim Bourne*'s keel," Oceanvine suggested. "When we were young every yacht had a keel like this one. Most didn't need a sonic device so long as they were moving, of course, but there are still quite a few out there with the same design."

"I'd better get the word out as soon as we get home," Jollin decided as the *Kemalart* approached the damaged fishing trawler. "But someone enchanted that serp intentionally?"

"I don't know any natural way to cast such a spell on a creature," Oceanvine replied. "And considering this was the first serp sighting in decades, I doubt it was because a serp was the only beast they could find. Someone deliberately hunted down a serp so it could attack fishing boats."

"Maybe not fishing boats specifically," Saltspray pointed out. "They might have just cast their spell and let havoc happen where it might."

"That thought doesn't exactly ease my mind," Oceanvine replied sourly, "but I suppose."

"It makes even less sense to me," Jollin told them. "Why would someone essentially train a serp to attack and then just let it go at random?"

“We don’t know if it was random,” Oceanvine replied. “It could have been a rogue mage practicing on something new and then trying it out. Abominations of magic have to come from somewhere and even rogue mages might do research.”

“Would a rogue mage even think of himself as such?” Jollin asked pointedly.

“Oh probably not, but that’s hardly the point,” Oceanvine shook her head. “Thinking about it, I think that spell might have been useable on any aquatic reptile, so maybe I was wrong about someone deliberately searching for a serp. A salt water crocodile might have been similarly enchanted to attack people. The attack component of the compulsion was to seek out normal targets.”

“Normal targets?” Jollin asked. “Then that serp might have only gone after whales and sharks?”

“Could be,” Oceanvine admitted.

“There could be dozens of aquatic reptiles with the same curse roaming around,” Saltspray speculated, “only we just haven’t found them yet.”

“Oh, aren’t you a bundle of joy?” Jollin flung her hands up in the air.

They conferred with the people on board the *Kemalart* and decided it would be best to stay in the area for a few days to make sure the attacks had really come to an end, but after a week without further incidents, Jollin decided she had more important things to do than a late season cruise around the fishing grounds and asked Oceanvine to set sail back for Medda.

“This was easier back when we were young,” Saltspray remarked as they sailed back to Medda. “The only rogues were the mages of One Maiyim and most of them worked with the same set of spells.”

“Funny, but I don’t recall it being all that easy at the time,” Oceanvine remarked from the helm of the boat. “We were badly outnumbered back then.”

“You may still be,” Jollin told her. “Here we are, two and a half mages, if I might flatter myself that much, up against an untold legion of rogues.”

“Or just one,” Saltspray pointed out. “This could have been random mischief for all we know.”

“Mischief?” Jollin asked dangerously.

Saltspray caught her tone of voice. “A bad choice of words,” she replied hastily. “But we don’t know if this was part of some organized violence or terrorism or if one nasty person decided to see how many people he could get away with killing.”

“None of that would be good news,” Oceanvine remarked. “We’re caught between bad and worse, unless this was an isolated incident. For now, though we’ll have to drop this particular line of investigation.”

Jollin remarked, “There are mages within the Security Force. I think it’s time I put them to work on this sort of thing.”

“What have they been doing so far?” Saltspray asked.

“Working out better ways to detect terrorism and other crimes against Emmine in advance,” Jollin replied. “I think they’ve been spending too much time on intelligence work and not enough on real security investigations. I’ll see that at least some of them are put on investigating this incident. Perhaps some of the old One Maiyim rogues survived after all.”

“Methis says otherwise,” Oceanvine replied.

“Must be handy having a goddess tell you what you need to know,” Jollin remarked.

“If I really needed to know it, I doubt She would have told me,” Oceanvine retorted. “Have your tame mages contact me if they want. That spell doesn’t leave much of a trail, but you should get the dregs of One Maiyim out of your mind. This was nothing like the sort of spells they used to use. No Bonds of Aritos for example. That’s the biggest difference, but there also wasn’t a lot of variety of style between the One Maiyim mages. I never knew for certain, but I suspect they started with only a single master and his students taught others and so on. The main reason our own student have such different styles is that they’re exposed to more than one teacher, but they may have well all been the same person for all the difference between their spells.”

“Well, that made it easier, didn’t it?” Saltspray pointed out.

“Not that I noticed,” Oceanvine remarked. “Remember, I faced One Maiyim more often than you did, and it was never easy, but I will admit it was easier to know who you were up against. But it didn’t seem that cut and dried at the time.”

“I suppose not, but it did seem simpler in retrospect,” Saltspray shrugged.

“The past always does,” Oceanvine told her with a sigh.

Kanuduin

One

“So where are you two off to next?” Jollin asked from the wharf where the *Maiyim Bourne* was

docked.

“Someplace quiet and restful,” Saltspray replied.

“I think we’ll take the southern route to Sutheria,” Oceanvine replied. “If the winds hold up we can still get there before the end of the Silamon Cup trials.”

“Well, good luck on that,” Jollin replied. “The weather is pretty miserable throughout the Inaliand Islands any time of year. I think you’d make just as good time cutting across the Great Bay.”

“But I’ve never sailed this way, and maybe we’ll stop off in Midon and see Artifice. He might have something to share about the serps.” Her cell phone rang just then. She checked the Caller ID information and answered, “Hi, Six! Still on Kern, but just about to cast off. Where?” she asked a bit more sharply than she intended. “Yes, all right, I can’t refuse that. See you in Tarnsa.”

“Change of plans, Vine?” Saltspray asked.

“I’m swearing off plans,” Oceanvine decided. “At least that way I won’t have to keep changing them.”

“What’s the problem?” Jollin asked.

“His Majesty has requested Six and I take a look into a situation on Kanu,” Oceanvine replied. “Saltspray, I’d appreciate it if you joined us.” Saltspray nodded.

“What situation?” Jollin asked.

“Six wouldn’t say over the phone, but it could have something to do with the increased terrorism activities worldwide. We discussed that with Helm and Maia before leaving Randona. If you go back to the capital, you’re likely to know more than I will until we get there.”

“Well, you have several days of hard sailing to get to Tarnsa, Vine,” Jollin remarked. “I’d better let you go. Hey, thanks for the adventure. It’s been far too long.”

Oceanvine and Saltspray echoed her sentiments and a few minutes later they were under sail. “Vine, did Six say why we had to meet him in Tarnsa of all places? Why didn’t he just fly directly to Kanudu?”

“I could tell he didn’t want to say anything more than he did over a cellular line,” Oceanvine admitted. “We can ask him when we see him.”

“Because only private planes are going into Kanudu these days and very few of those,” Sextant told them when they finally arrived in Tarnsa just past midnight three days later. It was dark and she didn’t notice Sextant was not alone as she led the way back into the boat’s cabin. “I don’t fly a plane and going in on the king’s jet or a navy flight would have attracted far too much of the wrong attention. There was no time to try arranging a civilian-seeming flight. We need to enter Kanudu like any other civilian visitors.”

“Why?” Oceanvine asked. “What are we expected to do there?”

“Rescue my grandson, Lady Oceanvine,” an elderly man told her as he stepped into the boat’s cabin. “Thank you for coming.”

“Duke Norton,” Oceanvine greeted him. “What happened?”

“Aric was sailing between the north coast of Horalia and Arnd a few days ago when his boat disappeared,” Norton explained.

“At the time I called,” Sextant took up the tale, “there was still a chance his radio had gone bad, though not much of one. However, within hours two other yachts went missing as well and the Royal Intelligence Agency started picking up a flurry of encrypted messages going back and forth on Netmaiym.”

“The RIA?” Oceanvine asked. “Not the Security Force?”

“No,” Sextant shook his head. “Why?”

“I would have thought this was more up to Security,” Oceanvine remarked.

“They are involved now that it looks like a string of kidnappings,” Norton told her, “but intercepting encoded messages is usually the RIA’s job.”

“You’re right and those organizations are supposed to work together,” Oceanvine remarked.

“But it usually takes a royal command to get them to do so,” Duke Norton agreed. “Fortunately, His Majesty took a personal interest.”

“Aric is his cousin and sixth in line for the throne,” Oceanvine remarked. “Of course Helm would get involved.”

Norton nodded, but it was Sextant who continued, “The RIA has determined the center of all that Netmaiym activity is a handful of computers in Kanuduin.”

“You called this a kidnapping, your grace,” Saltspray noted. “Has there been a ransom demand?”

“There has,” the duke replied, “but I understand the RIA and the Security Force are working on other facets of the case.”

“What other facets?” Oceanvine asked.

“Those ransom demands, for example,” Duke Norton replied.

“And tracking down possible links to Saindo and Wennil, I understand,” Sextant added. “Maybe. At least they seem to think this is more than just a local ring of kidnappers.”

“But Wennil?” Oceanvine asked. “The people of Wennil wouldn’t tolerate this sort of thing.”

“No, they probably wouldn’t,” Sextant agreed, “but if there are conspirators who have otherwise been behaving themselves, those same people wouldn’t know about it. But it is all centered on Kanuduin and it is believed that is where all the missing people are being held there.”

“How would they know that?” Saltspray asked. “I mean I can see how messages can be traced, but they could be held in any number of places, couldn’t they?”

“Not really,” Sextant denied. “That many kidnap victims would be noticed wherever they were taken so it has to be somewhere no one would interfere with their operation.”

“Is Kanuduin really that lawless?” Saltspray asked. “I’ve heard stories, but you two were there with Granddad, weren’t you?”

“We stopped there one night on our way back from Sutheria,” Oceanvine explained, “That was over forty years ago. It was a rough place then, but it’s supposedly gotten rougher since.”

“It’s not a favored vacation spot of the rich and famous, Vine,” Sextant agreed, “but that’s precisely what we’ll pretend it is. A few of the more foolish and adventurous try sailing in every year. We’ll just pretend we’re sailing around for the fun of it. While there, we’ll nose about discreetly and see if we can track down Lord Aric.”

“Be nice if we had a tracking spell on him already,” Oceanvine remarked.

“We’re still one time machine short of time travel,” Sextant smiled, “which is what we would need to do that, but we do have this.” He held up a sock.

“Charming,” Oceanvine told him flatly. “I assume that belongs to Lord Aric?” Sextant and Norton nodded. “Last I heard, the Law of Contagion was disproved two centuries ago. Have you made a new break-through while I was away, Six?”

“Not as such, Vine,” he replied, “but perhaps you are discounting the aural properties that led our ancestors to believe that two objects in contact remain in contact. Lord Aric has worn this sock frequently. It has an intimate association with him and therefore traces of his aura have literally rubbed off on it. I have a few ideas about how we might establish a link to Aric, but if they don’t work, at least we’ll have this sock as an aural reference. I think we ought to leave for Kanu immediately.”

“Veto, Six,” Oceanvine stopped him. “Saltspray and I have not had so much as eight hours of sleep since leaving Kern. Give us four hours at least and we can leave at first light.”

“I’ll do you one better,” Sextant promised. “You go to sleep now and I’ll sail the boat solo until you get up.”

“Get a couple hours of sleep first,” Oceanvine advised. “We’re not kids any more, Six, and we’ll all be too tired to help Lord Aric if we try pushing on that way.”

“Your wife is correct, Sir Sextant,” Duke Norton agreed. “An extra few hours won’t hurt if it means you’ll be fully alert on Kanu.”

Six nodded and after Norton left they all found their ways to their bunks.

Two

When Oceanvine awoke, she was alone in bed and the *Maiyim Bourne* was already under sail and in the middle of the Quarna Strait. Sitting up, she swung her feet down off the bunk she had shared with Sextant, then made her way to the cabin closet. “The School Uniform?” she wondered, finding the closet filled with Orentan blouses and cream-colored skirts. “I haven’t worn it much lately.” But she grabbed one of each and got dressed quickly before making her way into the galley. On her way out the door, she spotted the hex nut she had “worn” onboard and telekinetically placed it back in orbit.

She reached into the food box without bothering to consider what she wanted and found just a jug of coffee. She took it out and decided the box was right. For now all she wanted was some coffee and she ought to bring some up on deck for Six as well.

“Good morning, Vine,” he greeted her cheerfully. “I like the new GPS unit. I’m surprised we never thought of it before.” The sky was overcast this morning although the ceiling was high and rain did not seem imminent. Visibility in the strait was three or four miles and it was pleasantly warm.

“We haven’t been on a long-enough cruise to need one before,” Oceanvine pointed out. “Good morning to you too.” She leaned over with a mug of coffee for him, but stayed long enough for a quick kiss. “I missed you.”

“Missed you too, Vine,” Sextant agreed. “How were Jollin and the rest of the family?”

“They’re fine,” Oceanvine reported before going on to tell him about the serp.

“That is a bit disturbing,” Sextant nodded, “but good news for serps and ecologists. Are you sure you didn’t hurt it?”

“I might have thrown his reproductive cycle off kilter,” Oceanvine admitted. “I don’t really know that much about serps, or any other reptile for that matter, although I think that might have been potentially more harmful had it been a female, but as far as physical harm goes I’m sure I did more good by releasing him from that curse.”

“I seem to remember reading in Candle’s notes you could just tickle a serp and make it go away,” Sextant recalled.

“A female serp only,” Oceanvine replied, “and this one was a male. Besides until just now I didn’t remember that. To tell the truth, I’m lucky I remembered about their mating season. What time of year do they mate, anyway?”

“I don’t know,” Sextant admitted. “I’m more worried about a spell designed to control aquatic reptiles. That’s not only fairly specialized but remarkably creative. It’s the creative part that disturbs me the most. Most rogues, aside from the former One Maiyim mages, usually go rogue because they can’t make it in more conventional positions mages fill. They don’t generally have the imagination needed to be a truly outstanding mage.”

“So we stumbled over an exception,” Oceanvine remarked. “It sounds like a comic book, but maybe he really does want to take over the world.”

“I wouldn’t give a single mage very good odds on accomplishing that,” Sextant commented.

“Probably not, but it’s something a disaffected mage might consider,” Oceanvine replied. “Saltspray was right. Maybe it was simpler back when we were fighting One Maiyim.”

“Well there was a clearly defined line between us and them,” Sextant nodded. “Hey, is that coffee all you’re having for breakfast. I haven’t eaten yet. I was waiting for you to wake up.”

“Oh,” Oceanvine gasped lightly. “Okay, I’ll get you something, what would you like?”

“I’ll get it,” Sextant offered. “You take the helm. I’ve been up for two hours now. The foils are deployed so if a breeze comes up, don’t be shocked if we suddenly start flying.”

Oceanvine nodded and took his place at the boat’s wheel. “Are you expecting the winds to pick up?”

“That’s the forecast,” Sextant replied as he disappeared below. He returned a few minutes later with a tray of waffles and several potential toppings and was slightly disappointed when Oceanvine chose to eat a waffle dry as though it was a piece of toast. “So, Saltspray is still asleep?”

“Unless she crept off the boat while we were asleep last night,” Oceanvine replied. “I doubt she would have done that. Have you only been awake for two hours? We seem to have made fairly good progress for still having our hull in the water.”

“Okay, I lied a little,” Sextant admitted. “I woke up around three this morning and couldn’t get back to sleep. Really. So I figured if I was going to be up, we may as well be on our way. It’s a bit of a challenge to sail this boat solo, but I piloted her out into the main channel of the harbor, then stopped to hoist the jib and piloted to the harbor mouth. After that I realized I could hoist sails by telekinesis, so that’s how I got the mainsail up. I wonder now why Wizard Candle didn’t have us doing it that way, back when we were his students.”

“Either it never occurred to him,” Oceanvine replied, “or he was waiting for us to come up with the idea on our own. More likely it was the former.”

“There is that,” Sextant agreed. “We all grew up hoisting sails by hand, didn’t we?”

“I only went sailing a few times growing up,” Oceanvine admitted. “Dad wasn’t a yachting enthusiast. None of our kids are either, come to think of it.”

“We seem to have raised a family of landlubbers,” Sextant agreed. “That may be the real reason we haven’t moved the boat to Olen.”

“It’s safe in Keesport,” Oceanvine remarked. “In Olen there are too many young mages who would want to sneak on board just for the thrill of it. Leaving her in Keesport keeps everyone out of trouble.”

“Is that why we do it?” Sextant continued to wonder. “Or is it like the sails and it’s something we do simply because we’ve always done it that way?”

“Both, maybe,” Oceanvine replied, taking a second waffle and spreading butter on it. She was about to eat it like toast again, but changed her mind and added syrup.

“Morning, kids!” Saltspray greeted them from the hatchway. She climbed up on deck. “Man! I wish I could have a bed that comfortable at home. I slept like I did as a teenager.”

“I don’t recall you got much sleep as a teenager,” Oceanvine told her. “It seems to me you were always up and running around.”

“Did it seem that way?” Saltspray laughed. “Not to me, though I do remember thinking how great it would be not to have to sleep. A whole extra eight hours every day to have fun in!”

“Breakfast?” Sextant offered.

“Looks good, but I don’t want to take your last waffle,” Saltspray replied. “I’ll help myself.” She reappeared a few minutes later with a large cheese and onion omelet, a stack of toast and a mug of strong tea.

“That’s a lot of eggs,” Sextant remarked. “Aren’t you supposed to be watching your cholesterol?”

“No cholesterol in these eggs,” Saltspray replied, starting to eat. “I specifically requested the food box to give me cholesterol-free eggs.”

“I never thought of that,” Sextant admitted. “I could have done that with the butter.”

“A little butter won’t kill us,” Oceanvine told him, “and we’re usually all too virtuous about that sort of thing when at home.”

After breakfast Sextant decided to catch up on his sleep. “If we sail over-night again, we can reach Kanaduin tomorrow morning,” he told the two women.

“Does he do that often?” Saltspray asked Oceanvine a few minutes later.

“Sleep?” Oceanvine asked. “Every night.”

“No,” Saltspray shook her head. “Agreeing with whatever you want and then going ahead with his original plans once your back is turned. He wanted to sail all night and you wanted to sleep. Remember?”

“Yes, he does that all the time,” Oceanvine smiled. “After this long, I’m used to it. We used to have some pretty bad fights about that, but maybe I grew up.”

“And he didn’t,” Saltspray remarked. “Well, if you’re not complaining...”

“Not in public, dear,” Oceanvine retorted, “and actually he’s right. With Lord Aric and the others in danger, we really should be rushing to Kanu with all due haste.”

“Still wearing that hex nut, I see,” Saltspray observed.

“And you still have your crystal ball,” Oceanvine retorted. “What’s your point?”

“We’re going to have to break that habit in Kanuduin if we want to seem like normal tourists.”

“No tourists in Kanuduin are normal,” Oceanvine shot back. “Merely being there we’re going to attract attention. But you’re right. We’ll need to act as normal as we can and for as long as we can.”

“That won’t last long,” Saltspray remarked with a smirk.

“Gee, thanks!” Oceanvine remarked acidly.

“No, I mean the first time someone tries something, like mugging us, we’re going to react with magic,” Saltspray pointed out.

“Well, I’m sure they’ve seen the occasional mage there,” Oceanvine retorted. “There are a lot more of us these days. And I imagine any stranger is going to be sized up by the local thugs. That’s the way it was when we were there with Uncle Candle. We went ashore for a meal at a tavern he remembered and one of the regulars decided to push around the ‘old man.’”

“What happened?” Saltspray asked.

“I think he lived,” Oceanvine chuckled, “but Uncle broke both his legs and arms and one or two ribs as well.”

“Why bother with the ribs once the man was helpless?” Saltspray asked.

“I think he was irritated,” Oceanvine remarked. “Uncle could be pretty nasty when angered, you know.”

“Actually, I don’t recall ever seeing Granddad angry,” Saltspray noted. “So you think a show of strength might help our search?”

“I guess it depends on what sort of show we put on,” Oceanvine replied. “Showing we can’t be bullied will at least keep the minor annoyances at bay.”

Three

“Lucky we have the boat to sleep on,” Sextant remarked as they walked around the town of Kanuduin the next afternoon. “I don’t remember this town being this grimy or run down.”

“The harbor district was never the most wholesome part of town, Six,” Oceanvine reminded him.

“True, but I remember this block very clearly,” Sextant replied. “Last time we were here the paint was fresh and so was the air. I’ll bet you dinner nothing has been painted here since and I don’t want to speculate what must have died to produce that smell. I’m not squeamish, but it’s such a shame to see a town fall apart like this. Ketch has a lot of old buildings too, but we keep them in good repair.”

“Doesn’t this town have any kind of businesses besides taverns?” Saltspray asked.

“There were chandlers on the first block up from the docks,” Oceanvine pointed out.”

“With one or two bars between each one,” Saltspray replied.

“Well, there are two or three banks in town on the next block uphill,” Sextant told her and I imagine there must be a market or two for the locals to buy food in, clothes shops, shoe shops and such, but they’ll be beyond the banks unless this place has changed more than I give it credit for, but I think that any place that has gone as far downhill as this has must be stagnating. There may be businesses that have closed, but not a lot of new ones.”

“So aside from hoping we might stumble on a bit of luck,” Saltspray asked, “where are we going right now?”

“Kanuduin doesn’t have a mayor,” Sextant replied. “It’s a bit like Saindo, but not as anarchic. Instead there’s a Council of Aldermen who run the city and we’re on our way to consult with a Mister Arhone Tome. Maia informs me he is the senior alderman here.”

“Maia?” Oceanvine asked. “Didn’t Helm have you briefed by someone on the Security Force or the RIA?”

“Of course, and you’ve seen the packet they gave me,” Sextant replied, “but Maia has taken a personal hand in this matter. You know how organized she is and how well she can pull useful data out of a mountain of paper. Well, she’s the one who was able to tell me who the top man in the local government was.”

“Does Kanu have a lord?” Saltspray asked.

“Never has,” Oceanvine informed her. “Kanuduin is a free port and has always been allowed a certain amount of autonomy.”

“That’s a large part of the problem here,” Sextant continued. “Kanu is technically part of the kingdom but has always been allowed to be autonomous.”

“We’re being followed,” Saltspray observed.

“You just noticed?” Sextant shot back. “They’ve been with us for a couple of minutes now.”

“You’re not worried?” Saltspray asked.

“Of course, I’m worried, but so far they’re just pacing us,” Sextant replied.

“Wards up then,” Saltspray remarked.

“I’ve had us warded since we left the boat,” Oceanvine replied, indicating her staff. Saltspray looked at her own and shrugged. “It’s a dangerous port you know and some people, I imagine, have guns.”

“Some have rocket launchers,” Sextant added nonchalantly, “but I doubt they’ll shoot one of those at us before they get to know us better. It’s hard to rob someone who’s been spread halfway across town.”

“Oh, thanks,” Saltspray remarked, sarcasm personified. “I needed to hear that.”

“Maybe you did if you were walking around here without thinking of warding yourself,” Sextant suggested.

“It’s been a very long time since I’ve had to think in those terms,” Saltspray pointed out defensively. “I’m not the one going out to solve murders and other mysteries.”

“We don’t do that very often either,” Oceanvine told her. “Most of our business trips involve inventing new spells to solve various problems. Most mysteries involve what we’re going to come up with next. You do that sort of thing too.”

“Only during school vacations or if someone brings a problem to me,” Saltspray explained. “That’s the problem with being the head of department, at least if you’re going to be conscientious about it. You don’t get to leave in the middle of the semester.”

“We only once took time off during the school year,” Oceanvine pointed out. “You were there in spite of orders for that matter.”

“That may not have been the wisest thing I have ever done,” Saltspray admitted, “although I thought the year’s worth of extra assignments paid that particular debt.”

“Have I brought it up since then?” Oceanvine asked.

“Hold up,” Sextant stopped them, “I think we’re coming up to the fun part.”

“Three middle-aged people strolling through the bad part of a rough town,” Oceanvine considered. “I’m surprised it took them this long to make a move.”

“They probably thought it was a trick,” Saltspray smirked.

“It was,” Sextant replied. “Follow me down this blind alley.”

The alley was not actually blind and instead was a breezeway that cut through the block they were on. They only took half a dozen steps down the gap in the row of buildings before turning to face their pursuers. A moment later two men bolted into the breezeway and were immediately stopped in their tracks by Sextant’s spell. A small pocketknife fell to the ground, but the other man managed to hold onto his switchblade.

“Ah, the welcoming committee,” Sextant chuckled. “Gentlemen, you’re about to take a nap. When you wake up, I would greatly appreciate it if you warn your friends to leave us alone. Hmmm?” He let them go and they fell to the ground already unconscious. “They’ll sleep for six hours,” he told Oceanvine and Saltspray.

“Assuming their buddies allow them to wake up,” Oceanvine remarked.

“They have a better chance than they were giving us,” Sextant retorted. Oceanvine nodded and then moved on.

Alderman Tome’s outer office was cramped but furnished with expensive pieces that appeared to have been chosen for their ability to display his wealth rather than his tastes. His receptionist, a woman who put Oceanvine in mind of a serp in horn-rimmed glasses, told them they would have to wait because they had failed to make an appointment in advance and, in fact, “I cannot guarantee he will have time to see you today,” she told them haughtily.

“And would he tell His Majesty the same, Miss Venger?” Oceanvine asked her quietly.

“His Majesty is not here,” Miss Venger replied.

“But we are his representatives and we most definitely are here,” Oceanvine told her. “We will see him immediately after his current appointment, assuming there is someone in the inner office with him?”

“There is,” Miss Venger replied, trying to sound cold, with only minimal success. “The head of the Fishermen’s Guild is with him.”

“Guild?” Sextant asked. “You don’t have the same union as the rest of Emmine?”

“We have very little here that the rest of Emmine has, sir,” Miss Venger replied. This time she sounded both angry and envious.

“We’ll wait then,” Oceanvine replied.

“What’s with the sticks?” Miss Venger asked a few minutes later, unable to contain her curiosity about the wooden staves Oceanvine and Saltspray were carrying. Oceanvine knew Sextant was carrying the golden staff he had inherited from Wizard Candle in his shirt pocket. Unlike a conventional staff, the so-called Staff of Aritos could change shape, size and mass to resemble any form of weapon, which evidently included writing implements. Both Candle and Sextant had generally preferred to keep it in the shape of a fountain pen even though it could not be used to write, but Oceanvine had seen and used it as a staff and once Jollin has used it in the form of a golden sword.

“We are mages,” Oceanvine explained. “We use them in casting spells sometimes.”

“I see,” Miss Venger replied. “Yours is quite pretty,” she told Oceanvine. Oceanvine’s staff had been hand carved decades earlier by her father’s groundskeeper. It had come from the branch of an ash tree on the estate and featured an intricate finial with a three dimensional representation of Oceanvine’s arms.

“Thank you,” Oceanvine replied simply.

“Why isn’t yours like that?” the receptionist asked Saltspray. Saltspray’s staff was considerably simpler, having been fashioned from a long dowel of maple and cut to the length of a quarter staff. The staff had once belonged to Oceanvine and the ends were still charred from an encounter in which she nearly funneled too much energy through it. The Wizard Candle had created a pair of bronze bands to shoe the staff at both ends, but a bit of the original wood extended beyond the bands, mostly to keep from scratching floors.

“The outward shape of a staff is not important,” Saltspray replied, “and this one has deep sentimental value to me. Besides, it’s not the staff that casts the spell, but the mage who uses it. Without magic it’s just another walking stick.”

A few minutes later the door to the inner office opened and a frightened looking man exited, still mouthing assurances that all would be well to someone inside the room. He finally closed the door and turned to see the others in the outer office. Dressed in a business suit that was over a decade out of style, it was all Saltspray could do, to keep from laughing, but the fear in the man’s eyes was still evident as he hurried out of the office.

Miss Venger immediately slipped into the back office and stayed there for several long minutes. “Alderman Tome will see you now,” she told the mages after returning.

Alderman Arhone Tome was a rotund man who filled a chair as overstuffed as he was himself. He sat behind an antique mahogany desk at the far end of a long office in which several bowling lanes might have been built. If the outer office had been furnished to display his wealth it was nothing compared to the garish splendor of his inner office, which looked to Oceanvine’s experienced eye as though it had been designed as the set of a barbarian court in a low-budget film. Saltspray was having trouble holding back laughter again.

“Emissaries from His Majesty are always welcome on Kanu,” Tome greeted them.

“Thank you, Alderman,” Sextant replied before introducing himself and the others. If Tome had heard of them, he hid his recognition well. Oceanvine was not sure if that was cause to relax or not. In the past her name had been generally well-known even if her face was not. In spite of protestations, there were statues of her in Silamon and Rjalkatyp. Her name appeared in a favorite jump rope rhyme skipped to across Granom and her colonies. Even many years later, Oceanvine’s Girls were renowned as the heroes of the Counterrevolution in Querna. And before her, her great-grandmother had possibly been even more renowned. It was rare for her to go anywhere where her name was not known. Sometimes doors of opportunity opened for the famous, but other times it brought a lack of privacy or other inconvenience. Oceanvine had experienced both and knew she might be able to work better if she and the others were not famous in Kanu.

“And to what do I owe this honor?” Tome asked sounding as though it was anything but an honor.

“There has been a rash of piracy and kidnapping in these waters recently,” Sextant explained, “and it is thought that the culprits may be working out of Kanu. His Majesty informs me we can rely on your cooperation in tracking them down.”

“Does he now?” Tome replied, keeping his face well disciplined. “Kind of him, I’m sure. Yes, I will be more than happy to facilitate you in your search. Kanu has enough problems without having to be accused of sheltering pirates. Of course my assistance can only go so far, you realize.”

“You are one of five aldermen,” Sextant noted. “Will your colleagues block our attempts to find the kidnappers?”

“Not at all, we would only be too happy to see all the victims released safely,” Tome replied, “but the Council of Aldermen is not the supreme power here in the city. There are several dozen ‘bosses’ as they call themselves, each of whom has their own private army.”

“Army?” Oceanvine asked skeptically. “I didn’t realize the entire population of Kanuduin could be referred to as an army, never mind that you might have several armies in town.”

“All things are relative, my lady,” Tome replied. “Perhaps a better description would be a gang of thugs, but they call themselves soldiers and think of their organizations as armies. Hardly a week goes by without one boss’ army conducting a raid on another. More often than not an alderman’s job here is to keep the peace by arbitrating such disputes, but when the bosses stand together as they sometimes do, then we must bow to their wishes as best we might.”

“Do you have any idea which if these bosses might be conducting these pirate raids and kidnappings?” Sextant asked.

“Any one or more of them might be or none of them,” Tome replied. “Look, the council runs the town because the bosses find it convenient to have us do so. We have a police force, but there are certain lines over which the town fathers and our police must not dare step. Some have done so in the past and the bosses have always made sure examples were made.”

“That’s one hell of a situation,” Sextant observed. “Why haven’t the marines been here to clean the place out?”

“We keep the town in line,” Tome explained indignantly, “for the most part. That’s not an easy proposition with our mixed population, making sure the angers or frustrations of one enclave doesn’t spill out into another.”

“I thought most of the Granomen and Orenta had emigrated from Kanu,” Oceanvine remarked.

“Most did,” Tome allowed, “but there are still a couple thousand of each and the Granomen hate the Orenta, the Orenta hate the Granomen and they both blame the humans for all their troubles. The bosses don’t tolerate such incidents however, and rely on us and the police to keep the peace.”

“So should we consult with the police?” Sextant asked.

“I really cannot advise you to do that, sir,” Tome replied. “The bosses all have their men on the police force and no one knows who all of them are.”

They remained in Tome’s office a little while longer, but eventually decided they would be on their own while in Kanuduin.

Four

They ate a light meal on the *Maiyim Bourne* that evening, but remembering his earliest lessons from

Wizard Candle, Sextant decided to visit one of the nearby bars after dinner and bring both Oceanvine and Saltspray with him for backup.

“One of the basic rules about buying drinks for everyone is that you’re suppose to drink as well,” Sextant warned them, “and if we don’t, we’ll not just look very suspicious, we’ll also be insulting everyone in the joint. However, we need to keep our wits about us, so be careful to transmute your drinks into something nonalcoholic but which looks the same. If you choose whiskey I think you’ll find sweet cider will be a close enough approximation in color to fool anyone in the bar.”

“So you’ll be doing the old fireball in the bottle trick?” Oceanvine asked.

“It’s been a while since I did that,” Sextant admitted. “It might be fun again.”

“Wouldn’t having a stranger walk in out of the blue and start buying drinks and making bets be a bit suspicious and call unwanted attention to ourselves?” Saltspray asked.

“Not at all. It happens in every port in the world,” Sextant, the son of a fisherman, explained. “It’s what a fisherman or sailor who makes port and gets paid with the first money he’s seen in months does first. He gets a drink and pays for one for everyone else in the house. Remember he’s just gone from being flat broke to having thousands of crowns in his pocket and he’s more drunk on the money than mere whiskey will ever get him.”

“He’ll also make a few bets. Depending on the port, it might merely be over a game of darts or snooker or he might have some special trick he does that is difficult or unusual so he might bet he can do it an improbable number of times. Throwing fireballs may be a bit out of the ordinary, but novelty is often the key.”

The bar they chose could have been a lot worse, Oceanvine decided. The people inside were hardly the cream of society, but the place was amazingly clean compared to the street outside and the atmosphere was warm and friendly. If the situation had not been so serious, she would have been happy to share a drink with these people.

Sextant started out by buying a round for everyone in the place, about forty drinks, which gave him the right to talk to anyone in the place. Saltspray wanted to start asking questions immediately, but Oceanvine who had been through this routine before held her back. “Too soon, Sally,” she whispered.

“Is it that serious?” Saltspray whispered back. Oceanvine gave her a questioning look. “When you’re relaxed you usually call me Saltspray. It’s mostly only when you’re excited you use my birth name.”

“We don’t know these people,” Oceanvine explained softly. “Most of them are probably just normal good folks, but we don’t know that for certain. If any of them are those bosses’ men, we could give away more than we can afford. Let Six handle this. There’s a certain rhythm to this. First he has to be accepted by these folks and it’s going to take more than a beer or two to do that.”

“Then how?” Saltspray asked.

“He’ll play darts or snooker for a bit,” Oceanvine replied. “He’ll probably play honestly for that matter even if there’s money on it. He’s a fair dinkum player at both and if someone beats him, well, we can afford it. Then eventually someone will ask him where he’s from and what he does, or they might come over and talk to us. That will show we’ve gained some conditional acceptance. Keep your conversation to small talk even then and follow my lead. Normally, if we misjudge a crowd we can just

try again the next day in a different bar and maybe we can here too, but I don't know it for certain, so I'd rather play it safe at first. If we have to come back tomorrow, it's better to play it slow and safe than to give away our entire reason for being here."

Within the hour, after Sextant had performed, shooting over two hundred tiny fireballs into a whiskey bottle, the mages had gained the acceptance they had hoped for. However, it was still a bad idea to blatantly ask about kidnappers and their victims and discussing the new and unusual got them nowhere. None of the people in that bar seemed to have anything to say that the mages found interesting.

"It was a pleasant evening," Oceanvine remarked as they returned to the boat, "but we didn't accomplish anything."

"We'll try again tomorrow," Sextant replied.

They spent the next week, splitting their time between random searching for traces of Lord Aric's aura and trying to talk to people in various bars around the town. None of that seemed to be getting results although now there were people on the streets they recognized and could greet as they walked.

Finally, that afternoon as they made their way off to yet another bar, they found themselves surrounded by several scruffy-looking men. None of the mages had failed to keep their protective wards up while walking through Kanuduin so when the men started brandishing weapons, it was not much of a fight. Immediately after things started going wrong for them, one of the men broke off and tried to run away. Oceanvine tagged him with a tracer spell and let him get away while Sextant and Saltspray dealt with the other four. Three were armed only with two knives and a tree branch and Saltspray and Sextant easily held them in binding wards, but the fourth had a gun and before he could be disarmed, he managed to fire off a shot.

Oceanvine stopped the bullet with a ward that suddenly contained so much energy it crackled and hissed as the bullet disintegrated on contact. Another shot only enraged her and a moment later all four of the remaining men were groaning on the ground with a collection of broken limbs and concussions.

"I only had knocking them out in mind, Vine," Sextant remarked.

"And I had something more permanent in mind," Oceanvine shot back, "so we'll call this mercy."

"We passed a police station a few blocks back," Saltspray remarked. "Seems to me we should drop these guys off there." Oceanvine and Sextant agreed, but it turned out to be a mistake because one of the injured men was an off-duty cop and was instantly recognized by his mates. The three mages were held several hours and questioned until word came from Alderman Tome that they should be released.

It was raining lightly as they left the police station, but Oceanvine might have seemed to be literally fuming even so. "So that's the way it is? I've had it, Six, no more sneaking around and making nice-nice to the populace. Tomorrow, I'm going to find that fifth attacker and shake some answers out of him."

"So the cops are crooked here, Vine," Saltspray tried a calming tone of voice. "Given the nature of this place, that really shouldn't surprise you. Besides, we could have left that station at any time and no one there was capable of stopping us. You know that."

"I do, but I was also brought up to respect the law," Oceanvine retorted.

"I'm not sure how many people here were," Saltspray replied. "Not respect. Fear maybe, but

definitely not respect.”

“Well, it’s too late to take in a new bar,” Sextant decided. “I suppose we could go back to the one closest to the boat.”

“No,” Oceanvine decided, “I’d be too tempted to drink my whiskey as it is without transmuting it into apple juice.”

“Besides, I think we’re being followed again,” Saltspray told them.

“Where?” Sextant asked. Instead of looking around, he grasped the golden pen in his pocket and searched around him with his senses. The Wizard Candle could read minds using the staff, but Sextant had never mastered that particular stunt. He could, however, detect other living beings around him in a manner he believed might be a toned-down version of Candle’s mind-reading.

“About two blocks behind us,” Saltspray replied. “They’ve been there since just after we left the police station.”

“Why didn’t you say something sooner?” Oceanvine asked.

“Well, they are two blocks behind us and until we stopped walking I didn’t realize they were deliberately following us. They stopped too and started standing around as though they had been there all along. Well, at least that’s what it looks like from here. Do we go confront them?”

“No,” Sextant replied. “Let’s go back to the boat. They may just be watching us to make sure we are going back. Tomorrow, however, I have other plans.”

“Good thing,” Oceanvine remarked, “because we’ve been wasting time in the bars.”

“We used to be able to get good information like that,” Sextant pointed out.

“We never tried it here,” Oceanvine retorted.

Five

They did not go to sleep immediately that evening. Oceanvine stayed up to add some notes to the reports they were preparing for Their Majesties on the situation in Kanuduin. “I think I have a few

suggestions to add,” she told the others.

“Yeah? Well, be sure to leave room for a few of mine,” Saltspray told her. “Burning this place to the ground might be a good starting point.”

“You mean like in Medda thirty-five years ago?” Sextant asked pointedly. Thousands of innocent victims, including the local lord and his entire family were destroyed in a magically induced explosion.

“I wasn’t thinking,” Saltspray admitted sheepishly. “Um, maybe I just need a bit of sleep. Good night.”

“Night, Sall... Saltspray,” Oceanvine called after her.

“Good night, El... Oceanvine,” Saltspray called back teasingly.

Oceanvine and Sextant stayed up only a little while longer and then finally made their way back to the master cabin. Everything remained quiet for the next two hours.

It was early morning when the boat was rocked by a massive explosion. The mages woke up as they were thrown from their bunks. “What happened?” Oceanvine asked, checking to make sure her bruises were nothing worse. “Did we capsize?”

“The boat is on her side,” Sextant reported. “I think someone set off a bomb. Help me find the staff and I’ll turn us right side up.”

“You don’t need a staff for that,” Oceanvine reminded him and reached out with her mind to roll the *Maiyim Bourne*’s keel back into the water. “I do think you’re getting too used to using that staff,” she added.

“You use yours all the time,” Sextant pointed out.

“I do,” Oceanvine agreed, “but only when it is already in my hands. Now let’s see if we can find yours. Mine is out in the galley area with Saltspray’s.”

“What’s going on?” Saltspray shouted from outside their cabin.

“We think it was a bomb,” Oceanvine told her, opening the door. “We’re looking for the golden staff.”

“Where did you leave it?” Saltspray asked. “A bomb, huh? On an indestructible boat? Waste of time, though I suppose I might have broken my arm rather than merely bruised it.”

“They don’t know she’s indestructible, Sally,” Sextant replied irritably. “Ouch.”

“Dear?” Oceanvine asked.

“I twisted my ankle,” Sextant admitted. “I think I may need that staff to walk with for the next few days at least.”

“You know, you really ought to keep it at full size when not using it,” Saltspray pointed out.

“Found it,” Oceanvine announced. “She’s right. You know this isn’t the first time you’ve mislaid it.”

Sextant took the staff and willed it to turn into a cane. “I’ll try to remember that. We’re wasting time. We probably should have gone up on deck immediately.”

“Immediately would have landed you in the water,” Saltspray pointed out. “We were capsized, remember?”

“There is that,” Sextant admitted, “and from the size of the explosion it’s possible whoever set it off did not stick around to watch.”

“There is that,” Oceanvine agreed. “To rock us like it did, it must have been fairly large.”

The galley area was a mess, with pots and broken dishes and cups everywhere. Oceanvine’s report, which had been left on the table, was scattered all over the area as well. They made their way up on deck by pushing things carefully to the side and then were finally able to survey the area around them.

Several other boats in the vicinity had been destroyed in the blast and two larger vessels had the facing sides of their hulls breached. One of them had sunk into the mud of its slip and was leaning way over to the side and the crews of both were frantically trying to put out fires. Several nearby buildings were also on fire.

Oceanvine immediately flew up into the air and used water from the harbor to help put the blazes out. But once she had done so, it was too dark to see much below her. The power had gone out all over the harbor area so the only lights were aboard various boats and ships that had been left unharmed. The nearest land-bound lights were at least half a mile away.

Suddenly a bright white light appeared overhead to illuminate the scene and Oceanvine assumed it had been Sextant who had produced it. Looking down, she saw that beyond the dock they had been attached to, its two neighbors had been damaged, a dozen smaller boats were now sunk at their moorings and she could only assume the debris in the water was what remained of the boats that had been near the *Maiyim Bourne* when the explosion had gone off. As she settled back down to the deck of the boat she scanned the area for bodies but found none.

“Haven’t seen any,” Saltspray told her when she commented on that.

“They may have evacuated the other boats before trying to kill us,” Sextant speculated.

“Nice of them,” Oceanvine replied acidly.

“What happened to the dock?” Saltspray asked, looking around in the now fading light..

“I think it used to be those pylons over there.” Oceanvine pointed at a series of vertical and not so vertical posts sticking up out of the water. “That seems to be the center of the damage. If they evacuated our neighbors, though, they obviously underestimated the strength of their bomb. Have you checked for spell traces?”

“We did, but there were none,” Sextant replied. “Not even tech magic which is what I would have expected from a blast that size. No, they used conventional explosives.”

“Probably hauled here in that truck,” Saltspray remarked. “At least I think it was a truck.”

“Where?” Oceanvine and Sextant asked as one. The light over head brightened again.

Saltspray pointed to some metal wreckage in the water near the pylons of their former pier. “There’s not much left of it and it’s mostly under water, but it looks like a truck chassis to me.”

“A truck bomb is definitely overkill if you’re trying to take out a single boat,” Oceanvine commented.

“They were trying to be sure,” Sextant told her grimly. “Had we been in a normal boat I doubt we would have felt a thing. I’m putting out the light and then I’ll pilot us to the outer harbor for the night. No one can harm us, but we should at least try to get some rest. In the morning we’re going to find out who did this.”

“I’m going to change into a clean nightgown,” Oceanvine decided. “At my age, I ought not walk around town in just a nightgown only.”

“I don’t recall there ever being an age at which that was appropriate, Vine,” Saltspray laughed.

“You know what I mean,” Oceanvine growled at her.

They tried to go back to sleep, but after another hour, Oceanvine gave up and got dressed. From the feel of the clothing she found in her closet, she had put on the “School Uniform” again, but she didn’t really care about that and headed out into the galley area where she found Saltspray already cleaning the place up.

“You couldn’t sleep either?” Saltspray asked.

“Too bruised up, I guess,” Oceanvine admitted, bending over to pick up a pot. She groaned as her body bent in a way her bruises wanted to punish her for.

“Take a pill, Vine,” Saltspray advised. “I did. The medicine box offered up this strange-looking orange caplet and I feel much better now.”

“I don’t like taking pills if I don’t have to, Sally,” Oceanvine replied.

“Upset again?” Saltspray teased her.

“Not at you,” Oceanvine remarked. “I have enough pills to take for various other problems these days.”

“Have you taken any this morning?” Saltspray asked.

“Well, not yet. Why?”

“Try concentrating on your various conditions and then open the medicine cabinet,” Saltspray suggested.

Oceanvine shrugged. She wanted to protest. Even in her late teens she was not prone to trying unknown drugs just to see what they might do, but she trusted the *Maiyim Bourne* to only deliver things that would help her, so she made her way forward to the head and opened the medicine cabinet to find two small bottles and a somewhat larger one. The two small bottles contained one pill each in them. She

recognized one from past experience as a general purpose pain reliever. The other single pill, a small blue one, she was not sure what it was and put it aside. The large bottle was marked, "Once each month with food."

"But what are you for?" Oceanvine asked the bottle. Not receiving an answer she tried closing and opening the cabinet again, keeping various medications in mind, but the cabinet remained empty. She brought all three bottles out to the galley.

"I got those same two single pills," Saltspray admitted. "I think the blue one is general purpose healing. At least I know my bruises are clearing up faster than I would have expected. Don't know about the big bottle, but it looks like a life time supply."

"At one per month, you may be right. I'd guess at a twenty year supply, but would they stay good that long?" Oceanvine asked. "And I still don't know why the boat thinks I should take them."

"What are you taking meds for these days?" Saltspray asked.

"Calcium, iron, high blood pressure and high cholesterol," Oceanvine replied, "but these can't be good for all those things."

"Maybe we should have them analyzed," Saltspray suggested.

"And when the report comes back that the drug is unknown? Then what?" Oceanvine asked.

"Look, I'll take two or three for analysis at the University," Saltspray offered. "Doctor Kenntis at the School of Medicine owes me a favor so even if this is something entirely new he ought to be able to figure out what it's supposed to do for you."

"Maybe," Oceanvine nodded. "In the meantime, though I think I'll keep taking my usual meds, along with these two, of course. Did the cabinet give you any new pills?" she asked suddenly.

"I didn't ask for any," Saltspray replied. "I might though. I've been taking calcium supplements for years and my blood pressure is borderline high."

Oceanvine took the two pills and put the large bottle away before helping Saltspray finish straightening out the cabin. "It could have been a lot worse," she told Saltspray when they finally sat down for a cup of coffee.

"How's that?" Saltspray asked.

"Everything that broke or was thrown around was an item that was sitting around on the counters or the table," Oceanvine replied. "The cabinet doors and the shelves all opened, but nothing was in them because none of us were intentionally opening them. Imagine what might have happened if the paper drawer, for example had been spelled to produce limitless paper when opened instead of producing it as demanded. In normal usage the results might have been the same, but when it fell out of its slot it would have kept producing paper until the cabin was too full to hold any more and probably fairly rapidly."

"So once again I'm impressed at how well Nildar and Wenni thought this boat out when they were building her," Saltspray replied. She yawned broadly "Maybe we should try getting an hour or two of sleep?"

"You go ahead," Oceanvine told her. "I'm going to stay up a while."

"Suit yourself," Saltspray replied.

After Saltspray had returned to her cabin, Oceanvine picked up the pages of her report and scanned through them. She found a few pages out of sequence and rearranged them then read through the report as it stood. "Well, this is bird cage liner," she sighed. She pulled a few more pages out of the paper drawer and started writing again, this time including the explosion. The earlier version of the report she decided could stand, but the emphasis for the introduction had changed with the attempt on their lives. She wrote for a few minutes then went out on deck to take a look across to harbor to see if there had been anything she had missed the first time through. Seeing there wasn't she went back in and wrote some more. By the time she was finished the sky had lightened to a dull grey.

She stepped back out on deck to watch the sun rise but instead started scanning the composite aura made up by the people of Kanuduin. Somewhere out there was Lord Aric, she thought to herself. If only there was a way to filter out everyone else's aura.

She returned to the cabin once again and found the sock Duke Norton had given them. She memorized the aura and then returned to her scan of the city. A simple spell allowed her to filter out auras, but it was slow work and when Sextant joined her an hour after dawn she had barely made any progress.

"I had an idea like that," he admitted, handing her a large cup of coffee. "It would work if there were only a few hundred people, but so many auras look alike until you look at them closely."

"I know," she agreed. "I started classifying them by color, but even there I was left with thousands of potential people to sift through. Worse, I know auras can change color under stress and it seems to me that kidnapping is a good cause of stress."

"Probably so," Sextant replied. "Let's have breakfast and then find another place to dock our boat."

"We could set anchor out here," Oceanvine suggested, "and just levitate ourselves ashore."

"Why bother?" Sextant asked. "It won't really deter anyone from attacking us. There are more than enough motor boats in the harbor and I have some ideas for defensive spells that will work better if we tie up to a wharf."

"We could rebuild the destroyed one," Oceanvine suggested, "or maybe just create a new one."

"That's a lot of mass to create," Sextant replied.

"We can convert water to stone," Oceanvine told him. "Something simple like a huge block of quartz."

"No, I don't think a block of quartz would be a good idea," Sextant replied. "It's simple silicon, but the sun shining on it would probably be hard on the eyes and if pieces get chipped off, they'll be sharper than a razor. Sandstone, maybe, or concrete. Yes, I think I know enough to create concrete."

"Preset concrete?" Oceanvine asked.

"Why not?" Sextant countered. "Right after breakfast."

Six

“Do you really need to use the Staff of Aritos to do this?” Saltspray asked Sextant.

“No, but it does make it easier,” Sextant replied. “Just as it increases the effectiveness of your healing spells, it helps me in creation spells.”

“And you’re going to make a wharf of solid concrete?” Saltspray asked archly.

“Is there a problem?” Sextant asked innocently.

“If you just create a big block of concrete, what will you tie the boat to?” Saltspray asked.

“Our lines are still attached to the cleats from the old dock,” Oceanvine commented lifting one of them out of the water. “Hmm, more than slightly bent out of shape, isn’t it?”

“It’s what happens when an only mostly immovable object meets an entirely indestructible object under high acceleration,” Sextant grinned. “I suspect we yanked that cleat out of its socket as we were pushed by the blast. Is the other in the same shape?”

“Not as bad,” Oceanvine admitted, “but I think both can be set in the new concrete.”

“It will be easier if you hold them in place,” Sextant decided after thinking it through. Oceanvine levitated both cleats to where the new wharf was about to come into being. “Um, a little lower, I think, judging by the high water marks on the pylons.” He waited a second, and then added, “Lift the sternward one about two inches, please. Perfect. Hold on now.

A long rectangular patch of water began to glow with a bright golden light and then slowing lifted up into the air. It remained transparent and golden until it reached its intended height and then began to grow opaque. It took a while but, as the next few minutes went on, the block became more and more solid looking until the glow wore off entirely, leaving a stark block of bare concrete the size and approximate shape of the old piece and with the wooden pylons firmly embedded in the structure.

“I increased the depth of the slips on either side too,” Sextant admitted. “I figure the owner will appreciate being able to berth larger vessels and it was the most convenient place to borrow mass from.”

“It’s going to get noisy when the boat bumps up against the bare concrete,” Saltspray remarked.

“We have fenders,” Oceanvine told her. “We just don’t usually need them. Most docks have enough padding since the boat doesn’t get scratched.” Together they found the rubber fenders in a series of storage compartments and hung them over the port side of the boat between the new wharf and the *Maiyim Bourne*’s hull. “Um. A bit of the jump to the top, isn’t it? Are you sure you didn’t make it too tall, Six?”

“It is a bit higher out of the water,” Six admitted. He concentrated again and an aluminum ramp formed between the deck of the boat and the top of the wharf.

It had hand rails on either side, but “It’s missing something very important,” Oceanvine observed. A moment later the metal ramp surface was covered with textured rubber. “That’s better,” she decided. “I think we’re all a little too old to be slipping down a ramp on our butts. Now I think it’s time to go back to work.”

The attack had been a wakeup call and for the next three days the mages alternated between wandering about town and working up new and ever more creative defenses for the boat. However their biggest problem was with the owner of the wharf they had replaced, who decided that he would rather have a wooden dock even when Sextant pointed out the advantages of the new one.

“And how am I supposed to set new cleats in this monstrosity you cobbled up?” the owner demanded.

“Drill holes and set them in with cement,” Sextant replied calmly, “just like anyone else would.”

“If I had wanted a concrete dock I would have built one in the first place,” the owner told him.

“Well, I can’t replace the old dock,” Sextant replied. “But I can make this one go away if you insist.”

“And we’ll only charge you half the usual fee,” Saltspray added. That led into the usual sort of blustering until the owner realized they really would take away his new concrete dock and he decided to move on before they actually did.

“What was that all about?” Saltspray asked.

“He wanted to get damage money out of us,” Sextant replied. “That wasn’t about to happen, but he nearly did get a swimming lesson. Thanks for stepping in when you did. I’ve been through that sort of thing a few times and your remark about fees got us to the heart of the matter sooner than we might have.”

“At least something was accomplished,” Saltspray told him. “We still haven’t found a trace of Lord Aric. Have you tried looking with the staff to filter out the wrong auras?”

“Several times,” Sextant admitted. “It’s not as easy as I had hoped. I think Vine might be right about Aric’s change under stress. Where is she, by the way?”

“She said she was working on something,” Saltspray replied, “and would meet me back here.”

“I hate when she does that,” Sextant admitted.

“What’s that?”

“She sometimes insists on working solo,” Sextant told her. “That’s okay on academic projects but going solo has gotten us both in trouble when in the field like we are now. You’d have thought she would have learned better by now.”

“Have you, Six?” Saltspray asked pointedly.

“No,” he laughed, “but Vine is really much smarter than I am. What? You didn’t think I knew?”

“You are one of the best wizards of all time, Six,” Saltspray insisted.

“Am I?” Sextant asked with a wry smile. “How do you quantify that? There really haven’t been all that many wizards over the course of history and we’ve all been something special. You know as well as I do that the Wizard’s degree is much harder to attain than a more conventional doctorate.”

“True,” Saltspray agreed, “but you were declared a wizard by the gods. Other than Vine, who else can make such a claim? Not even Silverwind could. And you can do stuff Silverwind never dreamed of.”

“So can you, Sally,” Sextant replied. “The sum total of sentient knowledge is ever-increasing. Okay, we know things now that our ancestors didn’t. That means there are things we can do they would not have thought of. It does not mean we’re better than they were. There are three facets to a mage’s abilities beyond the mere fact of raw power; intelligence, imagination, and education. I’ve got the intelligence and education, but Vine is not only more intelligent, she’s much more imaginative.”

“You can do anything she can,” Saltspray insisted.

“I can, yes,” Sextant nodded, “but she has invented far more spells than I have. It’s her imagination that sets her apart from the rest of us, but why are you trying to bolster my spirits? I’m quite comfortable with myself, you know. There is nothing threatening to me about having a wife who is more intelligent and accomplished than I am. I’m no slouch either in that department, it’s just that Vine is better.

“Methis said something about that many years ago back when your Granddad was pushing Vine to study the physical sciences more deeply,” Sextant continued. “She said that Vine’s liberal arts education stood her in better stead to excel as a mage than my training would for me. She was right. That’s one of the reasons I’ve taken the time over the years to study philosophy, poetry, music and the social sciences. They really do give one flexibility of thought.”

“Hmm, you’re right about that,” Saltspray admitted. “Most of the students these days aren’t interested in anything but straight magic. I keep telling them they’re limiting themselves if they don’t keep pursuing other subjects. Are we just producing the next generation of tech mages?”

“I suspect there were always those who went at magic like technicians, figuring all they had to do was memorize a thousand spells or so,” Sextant admitted. “A student can reach master level that way and possibly easier than someone who takes a more analytical approach, but a strict memorizer will never be a wizard. And, by the way there is one thing Silverwind could do none of us have ever tried; create a living creature.”

“Why would we need to?” Saltspray asked. “I know the story, it’s told in Renton all the time. The fact of the matter is, he was drunk at the time and trying to do something else altogether. The dove was an accident.”

“How does one create a dove by accident?” Sextant wondered.

“It was before my time and the story has improved in the telling, depending on who you hear it from. I heard it from Vine’s great-grandmother though, the last time she visited Renton. They were about to tear down Old Jack’s Tavern – Old Jack was my great-grandfather on my father’s mother’s side, by the way – and Auntie Oceanvine took me inside before the demolition. I was seven years old at the time. She pointed at one of the rafters and told me that I’d hear a lot of stories about that night, but she would tell me the truth. It’s hard to believe Silverwind had a drinking problem.”

“That was a long time before alcoholism was truly understood,” Sextant replied.

“No, he wasn’t an alcoholic,” Saltspray corrected him. “You can’t cure alcoholism and Silverwind eventually cured himself. He drank because of the demon’s curse. I thought you knew that.”

“I think Wizard Candle might have mentioned it,” Sextant admitted, “but these days he would have probably entered a Twelve Step program.”

“I wonder if that would have helped him or made his curse worse,” Saltspray commented. “The only thing that would have helped keep the nightmares away is abstinence from magic. That’s why he started looking into the physical sciences in a day when most of them had been discounted by the universities. Oh, look, here comes Vine.”

“Any luck?” Sextant asked her as she walked across the ramp. At high tide the ramp was nearly level.

“We may be getting the local hornets all stirred up,” Oceanvine remarked. “at least someone took a shot at me.”

“You really shouldn’t have been working alone,” Sextant told her.

“Neither should you,” Oceanvine shot back. “There are only three of us and we need to split up to cover this town. It was your idea, you know.”

“If they’re starting to shoot at us, maybe it was a bad idea,” Sextant admitted.

“Starting to shoot?” Saltspray laughed. “They tossed a truck-bomb at us the other night. A pistol or rifle shot is small potatoes in comparison.”

“Be that as it may, we should probably stick together from here on in. I forgot to mention this, Sally, but I think I can track Lord Aric down and incidentally validate at least part of the old Law of Contagion after all,” Sextant told her.

“Really?” Saltspray asked. “If you were one of my students I’d expect a paper on that by the end of the week.”

“I’ll publish it,” Sextant promised, “but before I do, I’ll want reproducible results. I’ll put a class on it at the winter session.”

“Ooh! Count me in. Methis is probably tired of seeing me in her Life 101 class anyway,” Saltspray remarked.

“I’m going to need the staff,” Sextant continued. “Well, theoretically I don’t really need to use a staff for this, but the golden staff makes everything easier and this probably won’t be an exception.”

“Well, let’s get on with it,” Oceanvine told him. “If we’re lucky, maybe we can grab Lord Aric and get out of here by sunset.”

“Aric isn’t the only kidnap victim, Vine” Saltspray reminded her.

“Well, we ought to at least find him,” Oceanvine replied as Sextant went below.

He returned a minute later holding the golden staff in one hand and the old sock in the other. It had been a long time since Oceanvine had seen her husband close his eyes to cast a spell and this time he sat down on the deck as well, but as she and Saltspray watched, the gold color of the staff gradually spread all over Sextant and then he began to glow.

“That staff always produces the same color, doesn’t it?” Saltspray remarked.

“It seems that way,” Oceanvine replied distractedly. “I’ve never actually tried to produce a different color with it and as far as I know any light emitted by such spells are incidental to the way they work. It’s just a means to shed excess energy, unless you know something on the subject I don’t.”

“I might look into that,” Saltspray remarked, “but I think you’re essentially right although I would imagine the color is an indication of the intensity of the excess energy.”

“Or just the frequency being produced,” Oceanvine remarked. “It could be ultraviolet or X-rays, but I’m glad it isn’t.”

Suddenly a golden thread shot out and arced over the town of Kanuduin. Oceanvine blinked, worried the thread of light might be visible to anyone, but realized she was watching the process on the aural level. Most people would not have seen anything out of the ordinary. *Just as well*, she thought, *or the kidnappers would have known we were coming*.

“Contact,” Sextant announced. “I have a tracer on Lord Aric. Let’s go find him.”

They rushed back into town but only got two blocks before a sniper started shooting at them. Saltspray shot a fireball back in response and the rifleman fell, burning, from his rooftop perch. “That’s two gunmen so far today,” Oceanvine remarked. “We should have tried this sooner.”

“I didn’t come up with it until today, Vine,” Sextant protested.

“Sorry,” Oceanvine apologized. “I guess I don’t like being shot at.”

“Who does?” Saltspray asked.

They continued on into a wide open marketplace with stalls and carts just starting to close near the end of the afternoon and were most of the way through the market when an explosion rocked the area, throwing them across the wide street and into the side of a building. They sat up to survey the situation and saw hundreds of screaming, panicked people running in all directions around them.

“Ouch,” Saltspray groaned. “How did we survive that? I think the device was right next to us.”

“My ward held,” Sextant told her. “Doubt I could have managed it without the staff, though.”

“We need to do something,” Oceanvine remarked. There was something strange about her voice and Saltspray saw she had hit her head even with the ward to protect her.

“Careful, Vine,” Saltspray told her, “I think you got a concussion. Here let me take a look. Oh boy, yeah. I hate being right sometimes.”

“I’ll be okay,” Oceanvine insisted stubbornly.

“You will if you’ll just sit still a moment,” Saltspray told her firmly. She had to reach out to keep Oceanvine from getting to her feet. For a moment she was afraid her old teacher might resist, but finally Oceanvine calmed down enough to let Saltspray work.

People were still screaming all around them several minutes later and Sextant was on the far side of the square, putting out a fire in a car that had ignited when the bomb went off, but finally Saltspray felt comfortable that Oceanvine would be okay.

“I still have one heck of a headache,” Oceanvine remarked.

“It was the best I could do under the circumstances,” Saltspray told her, “and it’s a lot better than the concussion you would have suffered from if I hadn’t.”

“There is that,” Oceanvine admitted.

They were enclosed in a ward, Sextant had left around them, but suddenly that ward glowed bright violet as it came under attack. A moment later the ward failed, but by then both Saltspray and Oceanvine had their own personal protections erected. Both women levitated themselves to a standing position and stood back to back looking for their attacker.

A fireball came down at them from directly overhead but splashed uselessly on Oceanvine’s ward. “Where the hell is he?” she growled.

“Or she,” Saltspray corrected her absently.

“Not now, Sally,” Oceanvine shot back as another, more intense fireball came at them.

The ground underneath them started shaking and a moment later a large slab of sidewalk lifted up under their feet and dumped them off, disrupting both their wards. Across the way, Sextant noticed what was going on and managed to protect them just before a lightning bolt shot down the street at them.

As the roar of thunder shook everything in sight, Oceanvine and Saltspray both fired back but the attacking mage blocked their attacks and ducked out of sight. “He’s good, whoever he is,” Oceanvine admitted grudgingly, “or else I’m getting old.”

“Or both,” Saltspray added.

“Yes, thank you,” Oceanvine commented testily. “We’d better go catch that one. You go straight for him and I’ll fly around the block.”

“Gotcha!” Saltspray agreed, sprinting in the direction the enemy mage had last been seen. Oceanvine picked up her carved staff and lifted herself into the air, then shot off in the opposite direction. Shooting around a corner, she noted out of the corner of her eyes that the sight of a flying woman seemed to have calmed the people in the area down considerably. I probably just shocked the heck out of them, she thought to herself. She zoomed around the second corner and saw Saltspray already locked in a duel with the other mage. They seemed to be trading fireballs and lightning bolts.

Oceanvine considered the matter for only a split second and then shot a thought at the enemy and stunned him with a mental blast she hadn’t tried in years. The man fell to the ground and Oceanvine had to fend off a fireball from Saltspray.

“Sorry, Vine,” Saltspray shouted at her.

“It’s okay,” Oceanvine told her. “You missed. I think we’ll need to drag this one off to the police. I’m sure I can keep him under control long enough.”

“Oh my gods!” Saltspray gasped softly.

“What?” Oceanvine asked.

“I know him,” Saltspray explained. “Nickol Manesy He was a student. Graduated... um, about ten years ago, I think. I thought he was fairly promising, but then he never came back to start his master’s degree.”

“So he went rogue,” Oceanvine concluded. “It’s happened before.”

“He wasn’t the sort,” Saltspray told her. “At least I didn’t think so. He was always so polite and gentle, in fact. Well, you’re right, we’re going to have to turn him over to the authorities.”

Seven

The police were already on the scene by the time they made it back into the market place. They attempted to explain what had happened, but the cops decided they should come to the station house and make an official statement. Keeping a mental hold on Nickol Manesy all the way, Oceanvine and the others complied.

Their reception at the police station however was even less friendly than their previous experience.

After being kept waiting for an hour, Oceanvine noticed her captive was starting to shiver uncontrollably. Saltspray had been taken into another room to give her statement and Sextant was talking to a sergeant downstairs. She applied a gentle heat spell to his clothing and he calmed down for a while but a few minutes later he started complaining about how hot he was.

“What is wrong with you?” she asked sharply.

“Mindclear,” he croaked at her. “Boss Donn addicted me to it. He owns the police too. You’ve got to get out of here or they’ll get you too.”

“Mindclear? What’s that?” she asked, but before she could get an answer two cops approached her with steel manacles.

“You’re under arrest,” one of them told her, attempting to grab her arm and apply the cuffs.

“On what charges?” she demanded.

“Multiple murder charges, by the orders of Boss Donn,” the man replied.

“No!” Manesy screamed, shaking off Oceanvine’s control. He pushed the two men away telekinetically and told Oceanvine, “We have to get out of here.”

“Sally!” Oceanvine shouted. Her call was met by the sound of a door crashing open.

“Time to leave, Vine” Saltspray told her and she came sprinting down the corridor, staff in hand.

“My thoughts exactly,” Oceanvine replied. Her own staff had been surrendered and placed up against the far wall, but a simple spell brought it back to her hand as they crossed the room amidst a flurry of gunshots. There was a staccato of impacts as the bullets hit their wards, but Manesy turned back and lobbed a fireball back at the police to give them cover as they escaped.

“Six!” Oceanvine shouted as she came down the stairs. “We’re leaving.”

“You can’t leave, you’re under arrest!” the sergeant shouted back.

“And you’re fired!” Mansey screamed, throwing yet another fireball at the police sergeant. Sextant quickly doused the spell, but the man was already badly burned and rolling on the floor.

“Six, come on!” Oceanvine shouted.

As soon as they were outside the police station Oceanvine lifted them all up into the air and started back toward the harbor. She was not moving as swiftly as she could alone until Sextant took over the flying chores and a few minutes later they were standing on the concrete wharf.

“What about this one?” Sextant asked,” indicating Manesy.

“Kill me,” Manesy begged. “I’ll die soon anyway. It will be a mercy.”

“I still want to know what Mindclear is,” Oceanvine told them.

“Mindclear?” Saltspray echoed worriedly. “Nickol?”

“My mage name is Basket,” he told her with a shiver. The small shiver grew until he was shaking all over uncontrollably.

“Mindclear addiction?” Saltspray asked. He nodded miserably. “How? You knew better than that?”

“What is Mindclear?” Oceanvine asked again. They could hear the sound of sirens going off in the town above them.

“Let’s get in the boat,” Saltspray suggested, “and pretend we’re sailing away. But, Six, keep your best ward up around us. Just in case.”

“No kidding,” Six grumbled. “You know, I had pretty much sweet talked that sergeant into letting us go.”

“Yes?” Oceanvine asked. “Then why were his men attempting to handcuff me? I’m the only one they hadn’t questioned yet.”

“It was a setup,” Saltspray told them. “The only reason they held off is that they were waiting for orders from this Boss Donn.” The sirens got louder and they saw flashing lights headed their way. Basket slumped to the deck, with his arms wrapped around himself as though freezing to death. “Oh my gods, he’s developing Mindclear withdrawal pains. This is going to be nasty. Six, get us the hell out of here.”

“What the hell is Mindclear?” Oceanvine demanded.

“Help me get him down below and I’ll tell you,” Saltspray promised. Behind them, Six was already using telekinesis to release their lines from the dock and the boat was glowing with the staff’s golden light and starting to rise into the air. The golden light filled the cabin as well, and the two women helped Basket into the bow cabin.

When he was lying down with several blankets over him Saltspray finally explained. “Mindclear is an old drug but until about ten years ago it was virtually unknown. It was just a footnote of pharmacology. Then someone rediscovered it and started selling it to mages as a great way to increase concentration and therefore cast spells like a wizard. It really works too. A small dose increases the ability to relax and concentrate so much that even a rank apprentice can cast difficult spells. Every semester we catch students resorting to Mindclear to help pass finals. Not just mages either, although magic students are the most vulnerable.

“The problem is,” Saltspray continued, “even one use kills brain cells and the stuff is horribly addictive. The very first use triggers withdrawal symptoms as it wears off and withdrawal gets tougher with each use. By the look of him this could be fatal, but that’s not the worst of it. Withdrawal brings nightmares similar to those Silverwind suffered from Arithan’s curse, except a long time addict will actually make those nightmares come to life. We need to stay alert and be prepared to disrupt his thought processes.”

“Kill me, Wizard, please,” Basket begged.

“Not when there’s a chance you might survive,” Saltspray told him.

“Survive for what?” he asked. “I’m ruined.”

“There’s always hope,” Oceanvine told him. “You seem more lucid now.”

“It won’t last,” Basket moaned. “I’m dead already, I’ve been on the junk for three years.”

“Three years?” Saltspray asked incredulously. “Are you suicidal?”

“I am now,” Basket replied.

“Sally,” Oceanvine asked, “isn’t there a treatment of some sort, an alternative drug that can be used to take the place of Mindclear?”

“You mean like methadone for heroin addicts?” Saltspray asked. “None I’m aware of.”

“I’m checking the medicine cabinet,” Oceanvine decided. She left immediately and nearly wrenched the cabinet door off its hinges in her haste to open it. Inside was yet another of the plastic bottles she had come to expect. It was not as large as the last bottle she had found there, but it seemed to hold about one hundred tablets. “‘One every four hours for first eight days,’” she read. “‘Then one every eight hours for ten days and then one per day until finished.’ It’s a chance.” At that point she noticed she still had the bad headache she had been suffering from since the encounter in the market and she tried the cabinet again and found a large pill waiting for her.

She took the pill before bringing the bottle back with a glass of water. Opening the bottle, she gave one pill to Basket. “It might help,” she told him.

He looked up hopelessly, but with a little encouragement he took the pill and drank the entire glass of water. “Thirsty,” he croaked. Oceanvine concentrated on the glass and a moment later it was full again. Basket drank the second glassful then put the container down. “Oh gods!” he moaned, starting to shiver again. “It’s a bad one!”

The temperature in the cabin dropped suddenly and frost began forming on every surface. It took both Oceanvine and Saltspray working together to counteract Basket’s unintentional freezing spell, but fifteen minutes later Basket passed out and the cabin became abruptly warm. It was about the same time that the golden glow in the cabin faded and they heard and felt the boat splash down into the water.

“I figure we’re about five miles out of the harbor by now. It ought to be enough,” Sextant told them as he entered the cabin. “Now do you want to tell me what I missed?”

“I think he’ll be asleep for a while,” Saltspray remarked, pushing Oceanvine and Sextant back into the galley, “but we can’t leave him alone for more than a few minutes at a time, though he does look better now. I’ll take a chance for a bit.”

“Leave the cabin door open,” Oceanvine suggested. “We’ll be able to hear if he stirs.” Saltspray nodded and they sat down at the galley table.

“We’ll need to keep watch out there tonight as well,” Sextant told them.

“Just where are we?” Oceanvine asked looking outside.

“I just brought us straight out of the harbor,” Sextant told her. “I planned on waiting to see if we were followed and if not we can probably sneak back in later. A good ward should be sufficient protection. I just didn’t feel like sticking around if they brought out the town canon.”

"This time, maybe we shouldn't try tying up to a dock, though," Oceanvine suggested. "We'll blend in with dozens of other sailboats on the west side of the harbor."

"That's worth a try," Sextant agreed. "The alternative is beaching the boat up the coast and walking back."

"Only if we must," Saltspray told him.

"So you want to tell me about our passenger?" Sextant asked. Together Saltspray and Oceanvine explained what had happened. "Mindclear, huh? I've heard of it, but didn't realize it had become such a problem."

"It's been getting worse every year," Saltspray admitted. "Students take it at exam time, but every so often people are caught taking it recreationally." She shivered at the thought. "First-time users suffer permanent brain damage, although that's so small at first that most figure they can take it once or twice, but it's the withdrawal that's the real killer. One use can leave you suffering for a week, although one or two days is more the norm, but with continued use they can last years. Maybe the problem never goes away, for all I know. We haven't been dealing with it long enough to know for certain, but the most common form of death among addicts is overdose."

"That part is easy enough to understand," Saltspray continued. "The more you use it, the more you need to use it just to stave off the withdrawal pains. I can't believe Basket has been taking it for three years. The doses are increasingly less effective and the effect is shorter in duration the worse the addiction is. He must have been taking it once an hour. Maybe more. I'd better go back to the bow and keep an eye on him."

Four hours later, well after midnight, Sextant eased the *Maiyim Bourne* back into Kanuduin harbor and tossed the rarely used anchor into the muddy depth, which Oceanvine stood by as Saltspray woke Basket up for his next pill.

Saltspray was worried he might wake up violently, but the younger mage opened his eyes and smiled slightly. "I feel much better," he told them after taking the pill, "but I'm very tired and still cold."

"You're looking better and your aura seems healthier," Saltspray told him.

"Um, do I know you?" he asked Oceanvine. She introduced herself. "Oh, of course. I came to one of your lectures back when I was a student."

"Basket, are you up to answering questions?" Saltspray asked gently.

"A few," he replied. "What would you like to know?"

"Well, for starters, how the hell did you end up here?" Saltspray asked him.

"It's a long story and I'll probably fall asleep in the middle," he replied. "After graduation, I worked for a few years for Souter Shipping. I was trying to save enough money to get my master's degree. Souter doesn't pay all that well and they stationed me in Sollen which is an expensive town to live in, so I started working with an agency. Jobs were always different and unusual and there was a lot of traveling involved. I had a job in Sanaril, assisting their blessing of the fleet. They still use mages to push the boats and ships past the local priests for the blessing. And then I got an assignment in Tarnsa. The ship I was

on stopped here in Kanuduin overnight and I heard about a man who had an antique lamp that needed its light spell renewed. It was an easy job and I'd have done it for free just to see one of those antiques, you know?

"One of the sailors on the ship I was on warned me just how bad Kanuduin was, but I figured I could take care of myself," Basket continued. "I was a mage and could do stuff no one else on this island could. I didn't know he had another mage working for him.

"I never heard his name," Basket admitted, "but he knocked me out with a spell and they shot the stuff into me. Large doses because they wanted me addicted fast. I came close to overdosing twice, but after a week, I was so sick I didn't care about anything. It was only later that I realized my ship had left without me days earlier. By then the withdrawal pains were so bad I had to take the Mindclear to keep from going crazy the fast way, but Boss Donn, that bastard, never let me have enough to feel good, but enough that I could work magic for him."

"What happened to the other mage?" Oceanvine asked.

"He's dead," Basket replied. "As soon as Boss Donn had me, he didn't need the other guy any more. He had him killed."

"Couldn't you have gotten away while you were still new to Mindclear?" Oceanvine asked.

"You don't understand," Basket told her. "By the time they let me wake up it was already too late. I can't kill myself, not with magic. It's something they did to me. That other mage did it, but I don't know how."

"I can imagine a few ways," Oceanvine replied coldly. "Too bad I can only use one of them on this Boss Donn of yours."

"Well, I cannot harm myself directly, nor make myself die," Basket admitted, "so I had no choice but to work for Boss Donn or suffer withdrawal. I tried to tough it out several times, but he always had someone watching me. If it looked like I might make it, they would just beat me up and then inject the drug. I tried killing them, but there were too many of them. I'd just get beaten, doped up and they'd let me suffer withdrawal for a week or two. There really was no way out until I saw you. Do you mind if I sleep again?"

"No," Saltspray told him. "We'll wake you up for your next pill."

Seven

The next time Basket woke up, they let him go right back to sleep after taking his pill and since it wouldn't be safe to go into town, they stayed on board all day.

"You couldn't get us closer to the docks?" Saltspray complained to Sextant sometime later. "I can barely see what's happening ashore."

"That was the point," Sextant replied. "If we can't see them, they probably cannot see us. And even if they can, we're far enough out in the harbor that they cannot be sure it is us."

Oceanvine stepped up on deck with a pair of binoculars and looked at the concrete dock they had created. "They aren't looking for us out here. "They're still standing around the dock as though they think we would go back there."

"I never said we were dealing with intelligent people," Sextant told her. "We don't want to try going back there until this evening anyway and we'll need disguises when we do."

"Too bad we can't just disguise the whole boat," Saltspray remarked.

"I thought of that," Oceanvine told her. "Illusions just sort of slip off the boat if we don't keep our minds on them, although I could probably keep such an illusion up long enough, but I think that crowd will be suspicious of any small vessel coming into port at this point, especially one with three or four people."

"We could be a large ship with a crew of dozens or more," Saltspray suggested.

"It would be easier to slip ashore after dark," Oceanvine remarked.

"We've been up all night again," Sextant reminded her. "We need to get some sleep before going back."

"You don't have to stay up with me," Basket told them from just inside the cabin. "I'm feeling much better now."

"You must," Saltspray told him. "You aren't due to take another pill for an hour. Are you hungry?"

"Ravenous," Basket replied. "I never knew what that meant until I came here. I don't know if starving me was supposed to be part of the torture or just neglect on Boss Donn's people."

"Another debt to be repaid," Oceanvine remarked bleakly.

"Debt?" Basket echoed. "Oh, I see what you mean. Donn used up his credit on that account years ago."

"Well, let's find you something for breakfast," Saltspray remarked practically. "Then we need to talk at length."

Oceanvine and Sextant had a second cup of coffee while they extracted the remainder of Basket's story.

“Boss Donn kept me on hand to do all sorts of dirty work for him,” Basket explained. “He wanted me to cast a spell called the Hook for him, but I didn’t know that one. Never even heard of it, nor could I figure it out from his description, so mostly it was when he wanted to raid one of the other bosses, but torture was another favorite of his. He liked to watch.”

“I wonder if he’d like to experience,” Oceanvine snarled.

“He might,” Basket told her. “He’s a very sick man. I have no intention of tormenting him. His death will be enough for me.”

“Tell us about yesterday afternoon,” Sextant suggested.

“You’ve been in town for days and all the bosses take note of newcomers. When it became obvious you were mages Donn wanted you killed before one of the others could enslave you just as he had me. He didn’t want to send me after you. He was worried magic could cure me of my addiction. I told him there was no cure, but he didn’t believe me.”

“If those pills work, his fear may be justified,” Oceanvine remarked.

“Are they a cure?” Basket asked. “My mind seems less fuzzy than it was. Is that even possible? I was only a few steps away from being a drooling idiot.”

“The brain doesn’t heal with just a few pills,” Saltspray told him. “I thought you were sounding a bit too clever for a Mindclear addict. Let me take a look.” She closed her eyes and scanned his brain. “No, there’s still a lot of damage, but the pills are doing something up there. If I had to guess what it was, I’d say it’s sort of rewiring you. I think something is copying parts of your memories into previously unused parts of your brain. It’s a little like how a stroke victim must learn to reuse his body, assuming he survives and it is just a minor stroke, of course. I can’t believe just a few pills are doing that, though.”

“It could be the *Maiyim Bourne*,” Oceanvine remarked. “The spells on board produced those pills in the first place. They keep our staves fully charged as well. The boat may be attempting to repair Basket’s mind as well.”

“That would make more sense than a pill,” Saltspray remarked. “However, that’s another medication I intend to have analyzed on our return home.”

“Try asking the cabinet for a sample,” Sextant told her. “I’m sure it gave Basket precisely what he needs to recover.”

“I don’t think I’ll completely recover,” Basket replied. “I’ve been trying to do magic since I woke up. Just a simple light spell but nothing happens.”

“But you were using magic last night in the police station,” Oceanvine recalled.

“And during withdrawal you nearly froze your entire cabin,” Saltspray added.

“Maybe the drug suppresses magical ability,” Sextant told them. “Just as Mindclear enhances it.”

“Then the cure is not a complete one,” Saltspray remarked. “I’m sorry, Basket.”

“You saved my life, Wizard,” Basket told her. “It was a price worth paying.”

“And that might change after the pills are gone,” Oceanvine told him.

“Maybe, but I won’t hold out any hopes for that. I was a failure as a mage,” Basket replied. “Maybe it’s time to try something else. My father is a civil engineer, maybe I’ll work with him, but you wanted to know about yesterday. After the snipers failed, Donn went crazy and sent out half his army. That’s when I got my first look at any of you and I knew you might be my only chance for release. I threw a bunch of spells, but tried to miss, or only strike when I knew your defenses were up. I left my wards down, hoping you would kill me.”

“Well, I’m not sorry we didn’t, Basket,” Saltspray told him.

“Now that there’s some hope for me, neither am I,” Basket replied. “Anyway you captured me and hauled me off to the police station, but I was already in bad shape and all I could think of was begging you to kill me. If I’d been at all lucid, I’d have warned you about the cops in this town.”

“We had already been warned by Alderman Tome, but we didn’t pay enough attention, I guess,” Oceanvine commented.

“Tome?” Basket asked, alarmed. “He’s the worst of them all. The Boss of Bosses he likes to call himself. Donn tried to get me to kill him several times, but Tome’s a clever one and his defenses were too much for a mere journeyman to get through. If he warned you that the cops were crooked it was only because he knew you wouldn’t believe him. He would have especially wanted me arrested and killed as it would have given him free reign to attack Donn. Donn and Tome have been at odds for years, but the rest of the bosses stay out of their way. It’s a social ecology. Each one has his own neighborhood, like a fief from out of the Age of Faith. Some have specialties, but most just pay a percentage of their gains to either Donn or Tome or, in some cases, both, I think.”

“So the alderman is really just one of the bosses,” Oceanvine remarked.

“Alderman, boss,” Basket waved his hand slightly. “It’s the same thing here. There are twenty five of them, but like I said the two most powerful are Tome and Donn. If any of the others has the power to be one of the big boys, they’re still waiting for the chance to make a move.”

“This place is a nightmare,” Sextant told the others. “I’m calling in the Marines and have the whole city shut down. I’ll suggest to His Majesty that we establish martial law until a proper and fair election can be held.”

“Before we can do that, we need to free the kidnap victims,” Oceanvine reminded him. “Basket do you know anything about them?”

“Oh yes,” he replied. “Boss Donn’s latest little business foray. There are over eighty hostages being held in a warehouse on North Water Street.”

“Eighty?” Oceanvine asked. “I didn’t realize there were so many.”

“His people have been very busy,” Sextant observed, “and I’ll bet a lot of small boats haven’t been reported as missing yet. Basket, do you know where Lord Aric of North Horalia is being kept?”

“I don’t know one hostage from the others,” Basket admitted, “but I do know the building where

they're being held and I know which rooms most of them will be in."

"Follow me," Sextant told him, leading the way back into the chart room. He reached for a random chart and as always it was precisely the one he wanted. "Here's a blueprint of the building, right?"

"How did you get that?" Basket asked.

"Later," Sextant told him. "This is it, right?"

"It looks like it," Basket admitted. "Three very large floors, covering an entire block. Actually you can see the building from here. It's that big red brick one off to starboard."

"Okay, on which floor will the hostages be?" Sextant asked.

"All of them, probably," Basket explained. "They are being kept in small storage rooms, with no more than five or six in each room. Every day they get moved around a bit, but they're still all in that building."

"Why bother moving them around?" Sextant asked.

"I don't know," Basket admitted. "They just do. Another thing, though. Donn knows why you're here and he's prepared to kill all the hostages the moment someone tries to rescue them."

"How does he know?" Oceanvine asked. "The only one we spoke to about it was Tome."

"They may be competitors, but you three comprise a common enemy," Basket informed them. "They talk about common enemies."

"And do they cooperate against them as well?" Oceanvine asked.

"They might," Basket replied, "but so far Boss Tome has done nothing more than warn Donn about you. My guess is that he'll hold his own army back as long as you're only attacking Boss Donn. Then after you're done, he'll wipe out whoever you leave and try to consolidate his position here in Kanuduin. But there's a chance he'll attack you after you're finished with Donn, figuring you'll have exhausted yourselves. Ourselves, I should say. I'm going to have to go with you."

"Why do you say that?" Sextant asked.

"I'm the only one who's seen the inside of that building, Wizard," Basket replied. "These blueprints are good, but nothing beats real-life experience. I also know where the traps are and what they are. What I don't know is how you plan to get in before Donn's gunmen kill everyone."

"There are some possibilities," Oceanvine told him, "but we'll have to see what we're up against before we decide. But what makes you think you're going with us?"

"Do you trust a Mindclear addict to stay alone on your boat?" Basket asked wryly.

"About as much as I can trust a Mindclear addict not to turn on me while we're in town," Oceanvine replied bluntly. "However, you've already helped us and I think I can rely on your gratitude for the possibility of a recovery from addiction."

“I know you can trust me, Wizard,” Basket told her, “but how do you know?”

“I don’t,” Oceanvine replied easily, “but I have a good feeling about you and sometimes one’s gut feelings are more accurate than facts. Six, have you called in the Marines yet?”

“I was going to wait until we had the captives safely out of Donn’s hands,” Sextant replied.

“Call them now,” Oceanvine told him. “If something goes wrong, the hostages will probably be dead anyway, and so might we.”

“That’s a bit melodramatic, Vine,” Sextant replied.

“But true,” she fired back. “Call His Majesty.”

“Calls can be tapped, you know,” Basket warned them. “Especially cell phone calls.”

“This one won’t be,” Sextant told him.

“How can you be so sure?” Basket insisted.

None of them had told Basket the full truth about the *Maiyim Bourne* and this did not seem to be the time to do so. “The call will be encrypted,” Sextant replied, thinking *It probably will be if I use the boat’s phone*. He picked up the handset of a phone, Basket could have sworn hadn’t been there before and started pushing buttons.

Eight

“That is a very large building,” Sextant noted, taking his first look at their intended target from two blocks away. “I think we’ll need the golden staff for this. We could try knocking out everyone in the building.”

“And carry eighty unconscious victims out of the building?” Saltspray asked skeptically.

“Or hold everyone in a large ward,” Sextant continued. “You could all phase through it.”

“I don’t think we should tie up the staff like that,” Oceanvine opined, “especially since we may need it to hold off an attack on a moment’s notice.”

“That’s a large volume,” Saltspray remarked. “How do you intend to find the power to cast a ward that large without the staff?”

“I won’t use a conventional ward,” Oceanvine told her. “It would take forever to phase through a solid cube of a ward and the people inside the building might well suffocate if I made a mistake. I think Six’s idea of putting everyone inside to sleep is good, but I can do that with a stasis spell. Then we can release victims as we find them, and leave the captors frozen in place until they can be arrested.”

“That’s still a lot of stasis spells to cast,” Saltspray insisted.

“No, just one very large one,” Oceanvine replied, “and I think Six should cast a protective ward around the perimeter of the building while we’re inside.”

“But how do you intend to cast stasis spells on eighty hostages and their captors?” Saltspray asked.

“With a bit of divine help,” Oceanvine replied. She lifted a small pendant that hung from a chain around her neck. It was a piece of crystal with a symbol that moved magically within it.

“The Seal of Methis,” Saltspray identified the symbol. The pendant had been a gift from the Goddess Methis herself and when invoked properly the user could literally tap into the power of the goddess. “Have you used it anytime in the last decade or two?”

“I haven’t had to,” Oceanvine replied. “To tell the truth it scared me more than a little when I did use it. It’s very powerful, but whenever I used it I could hear Methis’ advice in my head and it felt more like she was working through me than I was doing much of anything at all.”

“You’ve told me that before,” Saltspray confirmed. “Was it really that bad?”

“A god or goddess has a very powerful presence when encountered so intimately,” Oceanvine told her. “Uncle Candle never mentioned such a thing, so maybe his experience with Aritos never got to that level, but I was afraid of losing myself. I swore not to use the Seal of Methis again unless there was no other way. But perhaps I over-reacted. Both Methis and Aritos told me that the reason I had such a strong reaction with the Seal was that I had developed a close affinity with Methis herself. They also said it was a temporary thing and would wear off in time. It’s been a long time and I think we need it now.”

“I don’t mean to discount the power of a goddess,” Saltspray told her, “but are you sure you’re up to something this complex even with Methis’ Seal to back you up?”

“Take my hand,” she told Saltspray. “You don’t have Methis’ leave to use her seal, but you can watch what I’m doing and help guide me if I miss something. I did something like that years ago when Uncle Candle had to use the seals of both Aritos and Methis at the same time.”

“Really?” Saltspray asked. “You never mentioned it.”

“It was a detail,” Oceanvine shrugged. “It was a very small detail out of everything that happened that last summer in Bellinen.”

“Oh,” Saltspray let the matter drop. Wizard Candle, her grandfather and Oceanvine’s uncle had died not too long after that incident. “Okay, what do I do?”

“Well, to get into the spell you need to memorize the Seal,” Oceanvine told her. “I let you study it years ago, but it’s been too long to expect you to still remember all the intricacies. It’s constantly in motion, but the pattern repeats after a while. If you keep the pendant in front of you, I think you’ll be able to catch up.” She removed the pendant and was about to hand it over and stopped. “Give me a few moments to get it right, then I’ll wait for your aide.”

Oceanvine stared at the ever-moving symbol and felt it all come back to her. The Seal of Methis looked like a clockwork flower with baroque flourishes that curled and uncurled in extremely fine detail. However, it only took a glance to remind her of the entire pattern as the Seal came to life within her mind.

“It’s been a long time, dear,” she heard Methis’ voice within her for the first time in decades.

“I thought this was supposed to wear off in time,” Oceanvine replied silently as she handed the pendant to Saltspray.

“It will,” Methis’ voice replied, “and what are we doing today?”

Oceanvine was not yet ready to start and instead she asked. “Is that really you or is this just an illusion on my part?”

“Does it matter?” Methis asked.

“I think it does,” Oceanvine replied.

“We can discuss it at length this winter in Olen,” Methis replied as Oceanvine felt Saltspray’s presence join her in the spell.

“Okay, now what?” Saltspray asked carefully.

“Just follow along with what I’m doing,” Oceanvine told her. “Don’t try to actually do anything. You won’t be able to and it could disrupt what I’m doing.”

With that Oceanvine turned her attention toward the large brick warehouse. Through the power and complexity of Methis’ Seal she could sense everyone inside the building. Keeping them all in mind, she directed the Seal toward the building where it expanded until it formed a large halo-like object. Seeing it, Oceanvine hoped it was not actually visible, but she realized it was too late to worry about it now. Then almost before she thought it, the Seal-aided spell was cast and a large ward filled the volume of the entire building. Just as quickly the ward broke up into over one hundred pieces, each one warped around a different person and holding them still.

“Near perfect stasis,” Oceanvine remarked, coming out of the spell trance. “We can release the victims one at a time, merely by disrupting the wards that hold them.”

“Did you know it was going to be that easy?” Saltspray asked.

“I suspected,” Oceanvine replied, “but there’s always a chance I could have been wrong and I figured that after all these years you ought to know what it feels like to use the seal of a god.”

“Thank you,” Saltspray replied. “I guess I’m not likely to get that sort of dispensation on my own.”

“You’ve never needed it,” Oceanvine reminded her.

“That was incredible!” Basket exclaimed. “That great halo over the building looked like it was raining light.”

“You could see it?” Oceanvine asked.

“See it?” Basket echoed, “I’ll bet half the town saw it.”

“We’d better hurry then,” Oceanvine told them and started running toward the warehouse.

Once they were inside, Sextant told them, “I see people heading this way. I’ll keep the perimeter warded while you release the hostages.”

It took nearly two hours before they had released all the hostages, but by the time they had, the building was surrounded by hundreds of armed men and women. They were shooting guns and rockets at the ward but Sextant’s ward continued to stand unshaken.

“That’s both Donn’s and Tome’s armies,” Basket identified them, looking out a second story window. “We’re dead.”

“Stop talking dirty, boy,” Saltspray told him testily. “If Sextant’s ward wasn’t so perfect we could pick them off with fire or even just sleep spells, but with what they got out there, I don’t dare ask him to allow me to poke some holes in it.”

Just then a large explosion rocked the building. “What was that?” Basket asked worriedly.

“It’s a blinding glimpse of the obvious,” Saltspray told him dryly even as they ran to investigate, “but I think someone tried a bomb.”

The former hostages were panicking in the hallways of the building so progress in the direction of the blast was severely hampered, but by the time they got there, Oceanvine was already on the scene.

“Another truck bomb,” she explained. “Six’s ward damped down the effect on this side to just a bit of plaster falling off the ceiling. Our neighbors though didn’t fare as well.” The buildings across the narrow street had been staved in by the blast and the rubble was on fire. The windows were missing from the ones beyond. And their walls were starting to catch fire as well.

“I wish we could do something about that,” Oceanvine remarked, “but Six has us warded above and below. That reminds me, it’s time one of us took over for him.”

“I will,” Saltspray volunteered. “You and Six have done all the real work this evening.”

“Not true,” Oceanvine corrected her. “We’ve all be working, but Six has been doing more than the rest of us. We should start taking two hour shifts, I think.”

“Vine, what are we waiting for?” Saltspray asked.

“The Marines, of course,” Oceanvine told her. “They’re supposed to be landing between now and dawn. Once that happens, I expect the crowd out there will stop trying to get in and start trying to get away.”

“Or pretending to be innocent bystanders,” Basket added, “not necessarily on this island.”

“Vine, it’s too late to go to Silamon, isn’t it?” Saltspray asked.

“Way too late,” Oceanvine agreed. “Why?”

“Well, I was thinking when we get out of this, we really ought to get the chance to relax for a few days,” Saltspray told her. “Well, Arnd isn’t too far away. It’s warm there year round and they have an arts festival coming up next week.”

“It sounds good to me,” Oceanvine remarked, “but we may still be picking up the pieces here. But if we can.”

The bosses’ armies tried another explosion an hour later, but after that, the night became quiet as they continued to besiege the old warehouse. Inside the hostages were complaining and had chosen Lord Aric as their spokesman.

“There’s no good place to sleep,” he told Oceanvine after introducing himself.

“Where have you been sleeping up until now?” Oceanvine countered. “You can’t have expected us to bring beds.”

“Well, we’ve mostly been sleeping on floors, but some of the rooms had bags of grain which were only marginally better,” Aric replied. “That brings me to the matter of food.”

“What about it?” Oceanvine asked.

“Most of us haven’t eaten today,” Aric pointed out.

“It won’t kill you,” Oceanvine told him, “or would you like me to call out for pizza?”

“Lady Oceanvine,” Aric protested. “I don’t think you appreciate our situation. Sure, we were hostages, but at least they fed us once a day and a few hours ago we might have been locked up but we weren’t worried about being killed at any moment.”

“Lord Aric,” Oceanvine mimicked his tone, “perhaps you should have been worried. Under siege as we are, this is the safest you’ve been since you were kidnapped. Those guards who fed you so obligingly, and I can only imagine what sort of slop it was – the food in this town is abysmal – had orders to kill you the moment someone tried to rescue you. The least misunderstanding could have led to your death and right now we have a handle on the people trying to attack us. Just sit tight and we should be out of here by morning.”

“But, Lady Oceanvine,” Aric started.

“Do you want me to turn you into a fairy tale?” Oceanvine demanded. Aric backed a step away. “I didn’t think so. Just tell everyone to find a comfortable patch of floor and be thankful they at least have the luxury of being able to sleep. I and my companions don’t have that option tonight.”

Finally, an hour before dawn, a general alarm siren sounded, filling the night air with an eerie sound. “I haven’t heard something like that since the Cold War,” Sextant remarked to Saltspray while Oceanvine took her turn maintaining their defenses.

“I remember the drills in school too,” she replied. “What do you think it means?”

“I’m fairly sure it means the Marines are currently landing,” Sextant replied. “Maybe the Navy as well. Hear those planes overhead? They’re probably dropping paratroopers to secure the airport and I think there may be some motion out in the harbor, although without Midbar in the sky this morning, it’s hard to tell, but I think it just a matter of time now.”

Nine

It was another half an hour before the siege was lifted and the mages could drop their ward to let the first squad of Marines into the warehouse.

“How many of you were sent in?” Sextant asked a Marine captain.

“We’re the Fourth Brigade, sir,” the captain replied, “and we’re being backed up by the Thirty-first Airborne Division and the Jannedd Carrier Group.”

“So it’s a full scale invasion,” Sextant translated. “Good. I was worried His Majesty might not take my warning seriously enough. The people of Kanuduin need to be brought back into the kingdom, you know.”

“Yes, sir,” the captain nodded.

“Kanuduin has always been a free port, Six,” Oceanvine reminded him.

“That status is a tax convenience, Vine,” Sextant replied. “It can still be a free port, but the people who live here are citizens of Emmine and they deserve an Emmine government and a representative in Parliament.”

“What about the aldermen and bosses?” Saltspray asked.

“They are being placed under house arrest, Ma’am” the captain informed her.

“It’s not over,” Basket predicted, “and Boss Donn has a dozen escape routes planned. The rest of the aldermen probably do too.”

“Do you know where Donn might be running to?” Sextant asked him.

“I know some of them,” Basket told him. “Captain, see to it that a contingent guards the small black

building at 75 South Reelen Street. Also at 1048 Blaner Boulevard. The Blaner place is Donn's main office, but the place on South Reelen is where his secret tunnel comes out. If he hasn't already escaped, you'll likely catch him at one place or the other. If not, I can show you where the tunnels let out in the basements. Right now, I'm due for another pill. Good thing you made me bring them with me."

An hour later, after bringing the *Maiyim Bourne* back to the dock Sextant had created, word came that Boss Donn had escaped capture, but that he, Tome and several other aldermen were holed up with their armies in a building that resembled a fortress on the outskirts of town and the mages' aid was being requested.

"We could just rush in," Navy Captain Brine explained when they arrived, "but this installation is heavily fortified. We've been lobbing in explosives, but just like an iceberg is mostly below the surface, most of this place was carved out of the bedrock and is well-shielded. We've taken a pounding every time we tried to overpower them."

"The castle-like appearance is just ornamentation," Basket explained, "and there are gun emplacements all over that hill behind it. And they can see and hit any approaching target from almost a mile away except for where we are in the lee of this hill and we're still over half a mile away from it. Wizard Oceanvine, could you do the same thing you did at the warehouse?"

"We don't have to be that gentle this time," Saltspray remarked before Oceanvine could.

"They may have hostages in there too, you know," Basket told them. "I don't think they do, but there was talk of gradually moving everyone out here."

"This place isn't as large as that warehouse," Sextant noted, "and we don't have to watch our backs this time." He lifted the golden pen out of his pocket and allowed it to expand into a staff with an intricate design etched into each end. The upper end began to glow like an incandescent bulb and became so bright its normal gold color seemed almost white. The glow condensed into a large ball of light and then shot off into the fortress.

There followed a series of gun shots and a muffled explosion, but after several minutes it grew quiet and every exposed part of the fortress glowed with a soft yellow light. "Look at that!" Saltspray marveled. There must be over a hundred lights on the hillside. Are all those gun emplacements?"

"They are," Basket confirmed. "I was told it was built by magic, but I'm not so sure of that. It's over a century old and various owners have been improving it over the years. The reason I was here is they expected me to ward the front gates against attack."

"That would have made it harder for us to get in," Sextant replied, "although I probably could have smashed through most wards with the staff, given enough time to wear you down."

"My ward work isn't the finest on *Maiyim*," Basket replied, "You may not have had much trouble. I felt a better defense could have been accomplished by various illusions, but Boss Donn only believes in strength. My illusions always won me top marks in my class and with Mindclear to back me up, you'd have spent a lot of energy attacking the hillside, rather than the front gate."

Sextant nodded and decided not to point out that it was not overly hard to see through an illusion once you suspected it was there. The younger man needed some trace of self pride, after all. "Well, we may as well go in and pick up the pieces. I think I got everything, but I'm sure I don't have to advise caution, Captain."

“No, sir,” Captain Brine agreed. “How long will they be out?”

“A few hours,” Sextant replied. “You may want to bring in trucks and haul them off to wherever you plan to set up a confinement area.”

“This place will make a perfect jail,” Basket told them. “All the rooms are small with heavy doors. No locks on them, but we can probably fit them with bars or bolts from the outside and most don’t even have windows.”

“No nasty little secret passages going from room to room?” Oceanvine asked, remembering the interior of the Wurra palace in Querna.

“This place was carved directly out of the hillside, Wizard,” Basket pointed out. “There’s a passage leading out the back side of the hill, but anything else would have been an extravagant waste of time. They never expected this place to be taken by force.”

“That was short-sighted,” Oceanvine remarked. “Even centuries ago a place like that would have fallen to a magical assault.”

“Except that mages were never particularly common on Kanu,” Sextant reminded her, “and few of us have ever joined the military. “I’m sure they just didn’t take magic into account.”

The mages were all exhausted by the time they were finished that day. By Oceanvine’s private count they must have created over one hundred locking mechanisms for the improvised cells between the three of them and, having not slept the night before, it was with the greatest relief that they finally got into their bunks aboard the *Maiyim Bourne* early that evening.

Chastigon

One

Oceanvine had almost fallen asleep when her cell phone suddenly started chirping. “Why the hell did I even bring that thing with me?” she asked, sitting up from the double bunk.

“I thought it was part of your basic tool kit, Vine,” Sextant joked.

"I don't talk on the phone that much," she denied, picking up the small device and flipping it open. "Ahoy?"

"Ahoy, Vine?" Ksanya's voice answered. "How delightfully old-fashioned!"

"Sorry, Ksanya, I'm a bit tired," she explained. "Maybe because I've been stuck in Kanuduin, which is about as backwards a place as you're likely to find on Maiyim. The Merintan Islands seem positively modern in comparison."

"You're exaggerating, Vine" Ksanya laughed, "but I'm glad to hear you're on Kanu. That's not as bad as I feared. I was really worried I'd be dragging you back from Sutheria."

"Problems?" Oceanvine asked.

"A few," Ksanya admitted. "Could you and Saltspray join me in Tamd?"

"On Chastigon?" Oceanvine considered. "We're tying up loose ends in Kanuduin, but I could probably leave in a few days."

"You can go in the morning, Vine," Sextant told her. "I'll stay here a few days to help the Navy and Marines before flying back home."

"Are you sure, Six?" Oceanvine asked. He nodded. "Okay, Ksanya, I have the green light to leave in the morning, but I warn you I intend to sleep in. It's been two days since I slept at all."

"Great!" Ksanya enthused. "So I'll see you in a few days?"

"That sounds about right. I'll let you know if we get hung up," Oceanvine replied. "And speaking of hanging up..."

"Oh right," Ksanya laughed. "See you soon!"

"This is some vacation," Oceanvine remarked, trying to keep her tone light.

"Problem?" Sextant asked.

"Sounds like," Oceanvine replied. "Ksanya is trying to fluff it off for my sake, but you know she wouldn't have called for help if it wasn't important. Sally wanted to go to Arnd next, but I think that's just going to be another vacation plan shattered. Chastigon isn't even in the right direction."

"Sleep on it, Vine," Sextant advised. "Maybe Ksanya's problem isn't all that big a deal."

Oceanvine was alone in bed when she finally woke up the next morning. Donning the old uniform once again, she left the cabin and helped herself to a large mug of coffee and a small piece of pastry. She realized she ought to be hungrier than that, but was not about to eat for the sake of assuaging a hunger that did not exist.

"Oh, you finally woke up!" Saltspray greeted her on deck as Oceanvine climbed out of the cabin.

"Even sleep gets boring after a while," Oceanvine replied. "I was half afraid you might have been tempted to weigh anchor and set off again."

“Six warned me about Ksanya’s call,” Saltspray told her, “and we can leave whenever you’re ready, but Six promised he’d be back any time now. He went to get Basket so he could move out properly before we leave.”

“Ksanya didn’t sound too anxious,” Oceanvine admitted. “An extra hour or two probably won’t make much of a difference.”

“I think she would try to make light of a tsunami if it was happening to her,” Saltspray remarked. “But as you say, if an hour or two would make a difference, she would have asked us to fly there.”

Sextant arrived a few minutes later with Basket. “I don’t really have any belongings to pack,” the younger man admitted, “but I felt I ought to at least come and say, “Thank you for all you’ve done for me.”

“It was mutual assistance, Basket,” Saltspray told him.

“But you really should take a few changes of clothing. Those jeans you have on are utterly disreputable,” Oceanvine insisted.

“I couldn’t, really,” Basket refused.

“Yes, you can,” Oceanvine pressed. “Six, I have an extra seabag in the cabin. Make sure he fills it.”

“And I’ll see he has some pocket change too,” Sextant nodded. “No, Basket, you’re just being too proud now. If you’re going to stay in Kanuduin for the foreseeable future, you’ll need to buy food and lodging. And if you decide to leave, you’ll need to buy passage. Think of it as a stake.”

“I’ll think of it as a loan to be paid back with interest and nothing more, Wizard,” Basket replied.

“We’ll discuss that later,” Sextant chuckled.

“Basket?” Saltspray asked. “You’re staying here?”

“The Navy needs a consultant on this place,” Basket replied. “Also, the Friendship Corps will need a guide when they get here in two weeks. Not everyone here is like the bosses, you know. There are some good people here too and I hurt some of them. Maybe this way I can start to make it up to them.”

An hour later, both men had packed, made their farewells and stayed only long enough to watch the *Maiyim Bourne* slip away from the dock.

“Whatever Ksanya has in store for us in Tamd,” Saltspray remarked as they finally cleared the harbor, “what happened here has got to make it look like a walk in the park.”

“You like to live dangerously, don’t you?” Oceanvine snapped back.

“Maybe I’m just not superstitious,” Saltspray replied.

“I didn’t use to think I was either,” Oceanvine laughed, “but after this adventure if I want to tempt the Gods, I’ll do it with coffee and doughnuts.”

Two

There had been a sizable population of Granomen in Tamd for over two centuries, which was why the Kingdom of Granom had chosen to establish a trade delegation in that city. Tamd was an old city, but a large one that had been modernized several times since its founding. It boasted a large ultra-modern business district packed with tall glass and steel towers and a large outskirts of suburban sprawl. However, on the east side of the harbor area there was an historical district, that, like in other older Emmine cities had been lovingly preserved.

It was in that historical area that Granom had built her consulate, a miniature of the famous Wurra Palace of Querna. Oceanvine and Saltspray had no trouble finding the pink granite-faced building with towers and crenellations capped with improbably large blocks of smoky quartz. “Where did they ever find all that quartz?” Saltspray asked as they approached the building.

“It was magically produced,” Oceanvine replied. “I thought you knew that.”

“I never thought to ask, I guess,” Saltspray admitted, “and no one ever happened to mention it to me either. I wonder what the spell was like.”

“Try looking up the Wizard Dolomite when you get back to Randona,” Oceanvine suggested. “He invented the process and used it extensively during the rebuilding of Querna after the treaty of Sentendir was signed. At one time the entire city of Querna looked like this, but now only the palace does.”

“I like it,” Saltspray decided. “It has a nice solid feel to it.”

“It’s a darned silly way to build in the subtropics,” Oceanvine told her. “There aren’t enough windows for ventilation and while this sort of construction might be drafty during a temperate winter, it’s absolutely stifling in hot weather. But the Granomen built most of their embassies and consulates this way, even in Merinne.”

“I visited the Granomish Embassy in Merinne often, which I was working on my master’s degree there,” Saltspray remarked. “It was always nice and comfortable inside.”

“Air conditioning,” Oceanvine replied, “and a lot of it. Those stones really soak up the tropical heat and keep radiating it all night, but that pink granite is such a good insulator that it doesn’t manage to shed all the heat before the sun comes up again in the morning.”

“Then thank the Gods for modern conveniences,” Saltspray remarked.

“Thank the Granomen for modern air conditioning,” Oceanvine corrected her as they stepped inside.

“Thanks for the A/C, Granomen,” Saltspray told a couple on their way out the door.

“Uh, anytime?” the man replied, confused.

“Excuse me,” Oceanvine asked the receptionist a few paces further on, “Where can we find Countess Ksanya?”

“Are you expected?” the receptionist, a young Granomish woman, asked politely.

“Should be,” Saltspray remarked dryly.

“Oceanvine and Saltspray,” Oceanvine explained patiently, but rolling her eyes toward Saltspray.

“Yes, my lady,” the receptionist nodded. “You’ll find her in the solarium on the fourth floor. She was hoping you would arrive today.”

“We aim to please,” Saltspray chuckled. The receptionist gave them directions and they moved on.

“What is it about Granomish royalty that leads them to establish offices on the top floor of a building in a room with a panoramic view?” Oceanvine asked as they found Ksanya working at a desk in the solarium.

“I wouldn’t know,” Ksanya replied. “I’m nobility just like you, Vine, not royalty.”

“Maybe it’s a trait of House Granova then,” Oceanvine laughed. “You did pick a lovely place to work.”

“It’s a bit too nice, actually,” Ksanya admitted after hugging her friends. “I keep catching myself staring out at the harbor. It is a nice view, though, but if I want to get any real work done here, I’m better off on a foggy day. So, sit! Should I send for tea?”

“That would make a nice change,” Oceanvine decided as she sat down next to Ksanya. Saltspray waved them off and turned to look out the windows. “I’ve been running on coffee since we left Kern.”

Ksanya picked up a phone and made the arrangements. “So you actually saw a serp!”

“And dabbled in monster breeding,” Oceanvine laughed. “It was a better warm up than most for what happened on Kanu.”

“I heard about that too,” Ksanya nodded. “The news media was there just ahead of the Navy and Marines to televise the invasion.”

“Glad I missed that part of it,” Oceanvine admitted. “I got lucky and never had to talk to the press.”

“Really? I saw you all from when you were attacking that underground fort,” Ksanya told her. “You had an embedded reporter in that crowd.”

“Did we? I didn’t notice,” Oceanvine admitted.

“Well, he sure noticed you,” Ksanya laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Oceanvine asked.

“Did you know you had a reputation for being implacable?” Ksanya asked.

“That’s news to me,” Oceanvine admitted. “There have been times I wished that was the case.”

“The reporter seemed almost afraid to bother you,” Ksanya informed her. “That’s exceedingly rare in that breed.”

“He may have confused me with Great-Grandmother,” Oceanvine guessed. “I’ve heard a lot of stories about things she did that somehow got attributed to me.”

“As if you haven’t done your own fair share,” Ksanya laughed, “but you are formidable in your own right, you know. Little girls in Querna jump rope to your name because when you were twenty you led an all-female brigade in the Counterrevolution. And you were instrumental in bringing about the Medda Compact.”

“I was not,” Oceanvine denied. “I was just one of many people involved and rather unimportant when it came to formulating the treaty itself.”

“Vine, Veras told me you stood on the wharf with King Hacon Ancel waiting to meet what everyone thought was a Granomish attack on Kern,” Ksanya told her.

“It was a foolish thing to do, I admit,” Oceanvine told her, “but I wasn’t going to let my king do it alone. Okay, you’ve made your point and without mentioning Sutheria, Rjalkatyp, Castelon, a dozen islands in Bellinen, Saindo, and Elisto and those were just before I reached my thirtieth birthday. But I’ve never tried to intimidate a reporter. I might have liked to, but Uncle Candle was right, I was brought up too well to do things like that.”

“But you did threaten to turn Lord Aric into a fairy tale, Vine,” Saltspray laughed. “That’s something your great-grandmother would have done.”

“Threaten him, yes, but as nasty a reputation as she had in some situations, she never actually acted on such threats as far as I know,” Oceanvine replied. Then she remembered a story she once heard on Kern, “Well, not after she graduated anyway.”

The tea arrived, with a dish of biscuits to go with it, and all three women sat down to enjoy them for a few minutes. Finally Ksanya started talking, “There have been some interesting things happening around Emmine lately. Actually there have been incidents all over the world in the last year as Helm and Maia told you a few weeks ago. There have been weird occurrences around Chasitgon as well.

“A few days after I arrived in Tamd, the local consul died in a boating accident,” Ksanya continued. “That’s part of why I’m still here. There was no foul play so far as anyone can tell and there was a mage who looked for spell traces just in case. Just bad luck, I guess. Anyway, he was out investigating reports that shark attacks are more frequent this year than ever before and he was looking for a possible solution to the problem.”

“I would recommend staying out of the water,” Oceanvine remarked.

“Hey swimming is fun,” Ksanya pointed out. “But the only beach where there have been injuries is on the west side of the island. It’s not really the issue at hand. While the sharks are becoming a safety problem, there are also boats out there doing what they can to thin out the shark population in the area and there’s where the real problem is.”

“Are the sharks endangered?” Saltspray asked.

“Depends on who you ask,” Ksanya remarked. “I suppose individual sharks are highly endangered, but as a species, none of the ones in these waters are in on any official list, but of course because someone is out hunting sharks, there are others who have organized to stop it.”

“That doesn’t surprise me much,” Oceanvine commented. “Anytime someone comes up with a solution to a problem, there’s bound to be someone who disagrees with the solution. So who’s complaining? Ecologists?”

“That’s right,” Ksanya nodded. “Normally I’d agree with their concerns but in this case it’s hardly necessary. Shark hunting on Chastigon has become a fairly prosperous industry. People can book trips on the hunting boats. The meat is considered a delicacy in Bellinen, at least when properly prepared, so the sharks aren’t just caught and killed. They are sold and a good catch might well pay for the trip. Not every time, of course, since some species are more desirable than others, but the odds are a lot better than your average lottery.

“Of course now the pleasure fishers have to confront protesters and cross picket lines and most aren’t willing to do so,” Ksanya continued. “The main effect so far has been to just drive up shark prices by cutting down the supply. It’s far too expensive to ship to Bellinen and Granom now and if this keeps up the locals will lose the market since there really is no shortage of not-endangered shark species.

“But that’s not really what worries me,” Ksanya told them. “The Tamd shark fishery supplanted the one out of Quintituc because the pleasure boats could undercut the prices asked by the professionals, so if Tamd stops exporting shark meat, someone else will pick up the slack. Bad for Tamd, but good for someone else, I guess.”

“So you don’t have an interest in the local shark hunting industry?” Oceanvine asked.

“Me?” Ksanya asked in surprise.

“Royal Granom, to be specific,” Oceanvine clarified.

“No,” Ksanya shook her head. “Why would Granom be interested in that? We do buy some of the shark meat, but it’s not the reason we built our consulate on Tamd. This is a very recent benefit of the location.”

“Then why have you been going on about the sharks?” Saltspray asked. “Not exactly pleasant teatime chit-chat.”

“I’m far more concerned this could be a re-emergence of One Maiyim,” Ksanya explained. One Maiyim had originally started out as a collection of mages and University students dedicated to international peace and friendship. Among their other ideals had been the maintenance of the planet’s ecology. As an organization it was ahead of its time, pursuing those goals in a world that had not yet

recognized it even had a problem along those lines. The organization was taken hostage a generation later by an Inner Council that saw it as a means toward a unified world government with themselves either in charge or pulling the puppet strings of those who nominally were. They had kept their ecological message because that made a popular front to hide behind, but the Inner Circle saw mages as the one group of people who might stop them so they began a long and nearly successful crusade to wipe out all mages not part of the Inner Circle. Oceanvine, Ksanya and Saltspray had all suffered from the actions of One Maiyim when they were younger.

“I doubt it,” Oceanvine replied. “Methis told me we got everyone who counted.”

“And how about those beneath our notice?” Ksanya countered.

“We can’t very well attack people just because they disagree with us,” Oceanvine told her.

“It never stopped our ancestors,” Ksanya pointed out.

“Perhaps, but I’d like to think we’ve all grown up a bit and perhaps become a bit more tolerant of others,” Oceanvine told her.

“I’d like to think that too, Vine,” Saltspray told her, “but I think what happened in Kanuduin showed us that barbarism is not really behind us. It’s still there in the minds of opportunistic people, just waiting to spring out.”

“Kanuduin was an exception, not the rule,” Oceanvine argued.

“An exception in the modern world,” Ksanya agreed, “but there have been hundreds of Kanuduins over the course of history. Just look at Saindo. They’re even worse than Kanu and we can’t even help them.”

“What?” Oceanvine asked. “I thought you and Helm were planning an intervention there.”

“Our plans got put on hold,” Ksanya admitted. “Bellinen objected strenuously at the thought of going in there with the military and where Bellinen leads, Ellisto follows.”

“Since when?” Oceanvine demanded.

“Okay, that’s recent,” Ksanya shrugged, “but it’s been going on for fifteen years or more. So we decided to hold off and see if we could at least persuade them to take a more neutral stance. No need to trigger a world-wide war over Saindo, which is the way the Orenta were talking. No wonder my ancestors hated them!”

“What about the hostages their pirates are holding, or was Kanu just a warm-up act?” Oceanvine argued.

“Bellinen insists they can negotiate for their release,” Ksanya told her. “I understand several are already on their way home and Bellinen hopes to have the rest released within the week. We’re off the subject, though.

“What’s going on in Saindo is probably not related to anything on Chastigon and I don’t really have much of a stake in how this shark hunting thing turns out, like I said, but if this is a resurgence of One Maiyim it could relate to my other problem,” she continued. “Tamd is an Emmine city, but it has a very

mixed population. There are only a few Orenta who are citizens of Emmine who are living here, but your Granomish population is roughly equal to the numbers of humans here. That's the real reason we keep a trade delegation on Chastigon."

"The Granomen here are mostly Emmine citizens," Oceanvine pointed out.

"I know that," Ksanya agreed, "but there's a certain species loyalty that in times of hardship transcends one's citizenship. The Granomish citizens of Emmine are extremely loyal to King Helm, but most still think of Granom as the 'Homeland.' So when their problems grow to a certain proportion, they'll sometimes come here to resolve them."

"I suppose that's only natural," Oceanvine shrugged. "They might expect a sympathetic ear, at least, since their origins are proclaimed by the chalk white color of their skins."

"Hey, I think it looks good on me," Ksanya laughed. At sixty years of age, Ksanya was no longer the pretty young woman she had once been, but she retained a certain beauty that comes with maturity.

"Yes, yes, you're gorgeous," Saltspray laughed. "So what's wrong with the Emmine Granomen?"

"There appears to be an unnamed group of businessmen or women – I'm not even sure of that much," Ksanya explained, "who have been attempting to buy up a wide variety of businesses here in Tamd."

"That doesn't sound like a crime," Oceanvine opined.

"I never said it was," Ksanya shot back, "but here's the interesting part; all the target businesses are owned by non-humans. I think this group is systematically trying to drive all non-human businesses out of Tamd. They're doing it neighborhood by neighborhood, in fact.

"At first I thought they were just trying to buy enough contiguous land to put in a casino or a theme park just the other side of downtown," Ksanya continued, "but then they started buying out businesses in the downtown area and it became apparent that they were leaving human-owned and operated businesses alone. I think they are trying to drive the Granomen out of Chastigon."

"It does sound suspicious," Oceanvine admitted, "and I won't insult you by asking if you're sure of that. So what are we supposed to do about it?"

"Well, I'd really like to know who these people are," Ksanya admitted. "The more I learn about them, the more they sound like the Inner Circle of One Maiyim. I can't even get the names of the principals involved."

"That's not illegal before a deal is finalized," Saltspray pointed out. "A lot of offers are made anonymously."

"I can't even get those names after the deals are finalized," Ksanya replied. "The only name I have is a company called Maiyim Acquisitions, LLC."

"Well, there you have it, then," Saltspray told her. "All you need to look up are the partners of record."

"That's the problem," Ksanya insisted. "I can't."

“Why not?” Oceanvine asked.

“The information is being withheld from the public,” Ksanya explained.

“Is that legal?” Oceanvine asked.

“Apparently,” Ksanya replied. “It would not have been a decade ago, but when your Parliament passed a series of new tax bills, certain restrictions were relaxed and your courts ruled that the partners of record of a limited liability corporation need not be a matter of public record.”

“That would explain why there are so many more LLCs these days,” Saltspray considered. “I’m surprised though. Someone has to have filled out the papers in whatever city hall the home office of the company is registered in. The names you want have to be there.”

“And while I don’t like to suggest such practices,” Oceanvine added, “I imagine creative bribery would get you those names.”

“Great!” Ksanya laughed. “So tell me, what city hall should I be looking in? I can’t even learn that much. Only the legal representatives of Maiyim Acquisitions are ever seen or heard of. They’re the ones who registered in Tamd on behalf of their clients and they’re the ones delivering all offers. They’re claiming client confidentiality.”

“That’s not unusual in itself,” Oceanvine pointed out, “but aren’t they required to tell where their company is headquartered?”

“That’s the way I read the law,” Ksanya agreed, “but evidently it is up for interpretation and so far I’m trying to do this quietly. It’s the sort of thing that can drive a diplomatic wedge between our two nations again and I worked too hard removing the last wedge to allow that again. I tried asking the Granomish Royal Bureau of Investigation to poke around for me. They were most obliging.”

“Of course,” Oceanvine chuckled. “You’re the king’s cousin and a resident of the Wurra Palace. They’re going to be very helpful to you.”

“Of course,” Ksanya shrugged, “but the whole situation was news to them and even if they can get past the stone walls I’m up against, it will be a while because Veras won’t allow them to violate national sovereignty anywhere. Sometimes I think my royal cousin is just a little too honest.”

“Well, thank the Gods for that,” Oceanvine remarked. “As a loyal citizen of Emmine, I’m just as happy to know the RBI is not going to run roughshod over our local laws.”

“Good point,” Ksanya admitted. “It’s the intelligence agencies of both our nations we need to watch out for, but let’s move on. So I don’t know who they are, I don’t know where they are and needless to say that while I know some of what they are up to, I don’t know why. I just have my suspicions.”

“Are they at least buying up companies in the same sort of business?” Oceanvine asked.

“No,” Ksanya replied. “It’s all over the board. Everything from show shops to stock trading concerns.”

“Actually if they were only buying up a single sort of business they would run afoul of the anti-trust

laws,” Saltspray remarked. “We had far too much trouble with monopolies a century ago to make that easy again.”

“But this sort of activity could be defined as trust-building as well,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“It can,” Saltspray admitted, “but it is harder to prove.”

“Maybe I’m just being paranoid,” Ksanya broke in, “but I don’t like secrecy in this sort of case and I don’t see why it is necessary once a business deal is concluded.”

“If they’re still buying up businesses in the area,” Oceanvine speculated, “I suppose a case could be made that confidentiality should be maintained.”

“That’s the problem. All Maiyim Acquisitions, LLC appears to do is acquire. Some few of the businesses they keep operating, but most just shut their doors after the closings. The lawyers say this is for restructuring, but none of the closed businesses has yet to reopen. Since they keep some going it could be monopoly building, but I just don’t know. You know I don’t really have to even look into this, it was a consortium of Emmine Granomen who asked me to, but I agreed so I feel committed to at least try everything I can.”

“We’ll help out all we can,” Oceanvine promised, “but you do realize that this is not exactly the sort of thing we excel at, don’t you?”

“Thanks, Vine,” Ksanya replied. “Maybe all I need is a bit of moral support.”

Three

They spent the next few days getting up to speed on the situation with Ksanya. A small law firm, Harres and Tremn, P.C., was the legal representative for Maiyim Acquisitions in Tamd, so after finding her computer skills wouldn’t take her any further than Ksanya’s, Oceanvine paid a visit to the law office.

“I’m sorry, my lady,” Saynor Harres, a tall man in his thirties, replied. “but I don’t have to tell you that. It would violate client confidentiality.”

“You cannot tell me the names of the corporate officers?” Oceanvine asked, feigning incredulity.

“MA, LLC is not a publically traded company,” Harres replied smoothly. “I do not have to divulge

that information even to our business partners. Maiyim Acquisitions is a legal entity in its own right.”

“And you cannot even tell me where Maiyim Acquisitions, LLC is incorporated?” Oceanvine pressed.

“I could, but it is not required that I do so,” Harres informed her smugly. “Not to you.”

“Surely the owners of a business you are attempting to buy have a right to that information,” Oceanvine argued.

“My lady, you are not the principal of any business Maiyim Acquisitions, LLC is interested in,” Harres insisted. “Legally speaking, I do not even have to tell you that much and we both know it. Now if you do not mind, I have work to do.” It was a dismissal more final than any a king would have issued.

“Good day,” Mister Harres,” Oceanvine told him politely, silently thinking, *This is just round one* .

She left the offices of Harres and Tremn, P.C. and went directly to the *Maiyim Bourne* where she drew out a large number of gold coins from one of the money bags that could always be found on the cabin dressers. The bags had been enchanted by the Goddess Wenni to provide as many coins as the holder needed. Oceanvine upended the coins on her bunk and waited until the pile had grown so large she worried about finding something to put them in. Then she used those coins to open a special account at a local branch of the Royal Bank of Emmine.

“Lady Oceanvine,” the young bank officer was startled when he saw the gold coins, “this must be worth over ten million crowns! It’s going to take a while to count it all accurately.”

“That’s all right,” Oceanvine replied. “I have all day. Take your time.”

“You do realize that these coins are worth a lot more than their face value to collectors?” the younger man advised her. “I hate to see anyone cheated especially of so much money.”

“Thank you for your honesty and I’m aware of that,” Oceanvine told him, “but while I have the time to let you count the coins – and yes, I’m aware your machines are not geared for gold coinage any longer – I don’t really have the time to sell these to collectors one at a time. I’m fairly sure that, if sold as a single collection, I would not get much more than you’ll credit me for. I’m only hoping this will be enough.”

“Enough for what?” the bank officer asked politely after arranging to have the coins counted.

“I like Tamd,” Oceanvine told him evasively. “I like it so much I’d like to make a few, uh, shrewd investments, shall we say?”

“Ah! There has been a lot of financial activity here as of late,” the man agreed.

“Has there?” Oceanvine asked innocently. “What sort? Are we talking of say, the fishing industry or the stock market?”

“There’s been quite of bit of that, yes,” he agreed, “but the real news has been in the real estate market.”

“Oh, yes, I suppose I might want to purchase a small condominium to use while in town,” Oceanvine replied.

“Actually, I meant commercial real estate, my lady,” he clarified. “We’ve been handling an amazing number of business deals here of late.”

“Really?” Oceanvine asked. “What sort of business deals?”

“Well, as I said there have been a lot of businesses changing hands lately,” he replied. “I don’t normally handle commercial loans of that sort, but we have been so over-run with them, quite a few have fallen my way. It’s quite odd, though.”

“Why is that?” Oceanvine asked interestedly.

“Most of the people selling are Granomen,” he replied. “It’s as if they all suddenly decided to sell out and go somewhere else.”

“Really?” Oceanvine replied. “Are they selling their houses too?”

“A few are,” he replied, “but most can’t.”

“They can’t sell their houses? Why is that?” she asked.

“The housing market is in a slump all over the archipelago and has been these past two years,” he replied.

“Hmm, so businesses are selling like hotcakes but the houses aren’t,” Oceanvine summed up. “Is that normal?”

“Normal? It’s hard to say,” the banker shrugged. “There are times when one is up and the other down, but generally when commercial properties do well, homes do as well and vice versa. Obviously there are exceptions.”

“Obviously,” Oceanvine agreed.

“Now do you have a local address or should we send your checks to your home in Olen?” the banker asked.

“I need them here,” Oceanvine replied, “but I’m hoping not to be here too long.”

“Oh, that is not a problem, my lady,” he assured her. “I’ll have fifty starter checks for you before you leave the bank.”

“Thank you,” Oceanvine replied. “Then the rest can go to Olen. I assume I can withdraw funds without writing a check if need be?”

“Of course, and your account debit card will be ready for you tomorrow,” he continued. “I can have it delivered by courier if you like.”

“What’s a debit card?” Oceanvine asked, never having heard the term.”

“It’s sort of like a credit card except it is directly keyed to your new account,” he explained. “Many people like them over conventional credit cards because you can’t spend more money than you actually

have.”

“That’s never actually been a problem for me, but it does sound convenient and, of course I can always deposit more in the account if I need to,” she decided.

“Of course,” he agreed. “Do you really think you may need to?”

“I might,” she conceded. “Why?”

“It’s really not safe to walk around town with millions of crowns in your pocket, so to speak,” he advised her.

“Don’t worry,” she replied confidently. “I took ample precautions.”

A young lady stepped into the glassed-in office and handed the banker a slip of paper. “Thank you,” he told her as she left. “Now, it appears the face value of those coins was ten million, three hundred forty-six thousand crowns to the penny. Is that the number you arrived at?”

“It sounds approximately right,” Oceanvine replied, “A little higher than I expected, but that’s all right. I didn’t actually count it, you see.”

“Would you like to now, just to be certain we didn’t make any mistakes?” he offered.

“That won’t be necessary,” Oceanvine smiled at him. She was doing her best to appear frivolous, just in case this man was in league with Maiyim Acquisitions, although she really had not had the time to count the coins. The bag had been far too heavy to lift without telekinetic assistance and, if her failure to count them made her seem a bit bubble-headed to Maiyim Acquisitions and their people, that might be worth the cost of having been cheated on the count.

She felt a bit guilty about her plan to dump so much newly created gold into the local economy, but a few million extra crowns here would not have much effect on the inflation rate or the fluctuating price of gold. While waiting for her checks she pondered just how much gold she had created over the years. Fifty pounds? One hundred? She decided it must have been somewhere in between and probably closer to fifty than one hundred. The gold had always gone to help people in need, such as the survivors of the great explosion in Medda, and Oceanvine and Sextant were both careful not to reveal how the precious metal had come into their hands. So long as nearly everyone thought it was natural in origin, or far less than it actually was, there would be no trouble in the financial markets. She shuddered at the thought of what might happen should the public get the notion that tons of gold had been created by mages, especially since there were only a handful of mages who could accomplish the feat.

“Lady Oceanvine?” a woman asked from behind her. Oceanvine turned in her chair to see a human woman in her mid thirties. She was dressed in a business suit that was not all that different from the man Oceanvine had been dealing with.

“Yes?”

“Oh, this is such an honor, my lady,” the woman gushed. “I am such a fan of yours and so is my daughter.”

Oceanvine had been through this more than a few times and knew what was coming. “Autograph?” she offered.

"If you don't mind, my lady," the woman nodded, fumbling in her purse for a pen. She handed it to Oceanvine with a blank deposit slip. "Could you make it out to Kenna? That's my daughter. She wants to be a wizard like you someday."

"She does? How old is she and has she taken the aptitude tests yet?" Oceanvine asked while composing a few words of encouragement for the girl.

"She's ten years old, my lady. She's only had a chance to take the PMATs so far. She scored over seven hundred on both the power and concentration modules, however."

"Those are very good scores," Oceanvine acknowledged. "We have special classes for promising young students although the entry age is twelve. If her scores remain as high on the Magical Aptitude Tests, please feel free to have her apply for one or more of our sessions."

"Oh we could never afford the tuition, never mind transportation, my lady," the woman demurred.

Oceanvine smiled, "We do offer scholarships to especially promising students, including transportation costs. I can't promise anything, but it won't cost you to apply." She handed the autograph and pen back to the woman."

"Thank you, my lady."

"You're very welcome," Oceanvine replied just as the banker returned.

"Here you are, my lady," he announce, handing her a new checkbook in a brown plastic folder. We have all the signatures but one. Sorry about taking so long, I was just looking up the records of your other accounts so we could file this new one properly."

"What other accounts are those?" Oceanvine asked. "I believe I have several long term notes in my name with the bank, but aside from those are you referring to the savings and checking accounts I hold jointly with my husband?"

"I didn't look for joint accounts," he admitted. "No, I meant the large savings account in your name that was opened at our main branch in Randona sixty-seven years ago."

"I'm only sixty," Oceanvine admitted. "That account must have been opened by my great-grandmother."

"As her heir, it might be yours anyway," he pointed out.

"I'm only one heir," Oceanvine admitted. "It's a large and widespread family. I suppose I'll have to look into it on my return home. Is it a very large account?"

"It's about ten times the size of the one you just opened," he informed her.

"I suppose it should be split up in the same ratio as the rest of her estate," Oceanvine considered. "Well, I don't need the money, but there are others who might. Thank you for telling me about it."

Four

“One hundred million crowns!” Oceanvine told Saltpray and Ksanya. “Can you imagine that much money going missing without anyone noticing?”

“It’s happened before,” Ksanya considered, “but that’s more than most of the famous pirate treasures of two centuries ago. Were there any bequests her known estate was unable to cover?”

“Not at all,” Oceanvine replied. “Every item in her will was accounted for, nearly to the penny. It’s like she forgot about this money entirely and I seriously doubt that. Great-Grandmother’s mind remained sharp and lucid almost to the end. If this money wasn’t mentioned, there has to be a good reason.”

“Well, by law it should be distributed between the named heirs,” Salt spray pointed out, “proportionate to what they received from her will.”

“Well, yes, I know that,” Oceanvine agreed, “but... Oh, no.”

“What?” both Ksanya and Salt spray asked.

“I was the only member of my side of the family who benefitted from Great-Grandmother’s estate,” Oceanvine told them.

“Sounds familiar,” Ksanya agreed. “So?”

“My share was ostensibly because I had been her companion those last years not because I was her great-granddaughter,” Oceanvine continued. “I wonder if this money represents what would have gone to Grandmother and her descendants. It has the feel of something Great-Grandmother would have done. And had she and Grandmother reconciled, the will would have been revised.”

“Well, aside from you, none of your family has a legal claim on the money,” Salt spray told her.

“None of us need it,” Oceanvine replied honestly, “not even me. Did you know Silverwind had several dozen bank accounts spread all over the world? Most of the time, when he got paid, he would deposit the money in a local bank wherever he happened to be. Two of those hidden accounts came to light twenty-five years ago which caused my brother Clemen to look for the others. Even if the family had not already been rich, we would have been then. Trust me, we really do not need the money.”

“You won’t get a choice, Vine,” Salt spray pointed out. “You’ll have to take your share. Of course you don’t have to keep it.”

“A donation like that would put my name on half the buildings in Emmine whether I want it or not,” Oceanvine sighed. “Well, if I must take any part of that account, and, in spite of the law there will be a probate hearing to say the least, it will probably go into the scholarship fund for the school.”

“See?” Saltspray laughed. “You do have a plan for it.”

“I just came up with it,” Oceanvine admitted and told them about the woman at the bank who asked for her autograph. “With more money we can afford to grant more scholarships. It’s an easy decision.”

“You know,” Saltspray remarked, “you really ought to have your name on a building or two.”

“After I’m gone and can’t protest,” Oceanvine replied seriously. “And then maybe it ought to be a dormitory at the school.”

“The auditorium,” Saltspray argued.

“Or the gymnasium,” Ksanya put in.

“Or none of the above,” Oceanvine told them. “The school is my best memorial whether my name is on it or not. Statues in Rjalkatyp and Silamon, jump rope rhymes in Querna and all the rest, well, they’re nice and all, but the school is my life’s work and the legacy I most care about after family, or maybe that’s with family. We live and work there too, even Astilla teaches during the winter session.”

“But what were you even doing at the bank today?” Ksanya asked.

“That lawyer for Maiyim Acquisitions gave me an idea,” Oceanvine replied. “He said that he did not have to answer any of my questions because I am not a principal of one of the businesses in question. My plan is to buy into as many companies as it takes to get answers.”

“Technically one,” Ksanya commented, “but with that much money you could probably buy out several.”

“I don’t want to buy them out,” Oceanvine replied. “That’s what Maiyim Acquisitions is doing. I just want to buy a small percentage and be a very silent partner, except as far as Harres and Tremn, P.C. are concerned.”

“Oh, well, that’s a pretty good idea,” Ksanya agreed, “but really, ten million crowns is overkill. Most of these businesses will sell you a one percent, non-voting share for a single crown, just to allow you to help them.” Saltspray started laughing.

“What’s so funny, Sally?” Oceanvine asked.

“Ten million crowns of unearned income,” Saltspray giggled. “Plus whatever you get from that legacy you discovered. I’d hate to have to pay your tax bill next year.”

“I didn’t think of that,” Oceanvine admitted. “Well, if I do put the legacy in the scholarship fund it’s all deductible and as for this bunch, well, it’s a good thing the Inland Revenue doesn’t worry about where the money comes from so long as I declare it accurately. Maybe I can buy high and sell back later at a loss. That would eat into it.”

Buying turned out to be the least of her problems. Ksanya was able to provide a list of twenty five Granomish-owned companies, all of whom were facing pressure from Maiyim Acquisitions to sell out.

“My lady,” one middle-aged Granom named Kevin Fanov protested when she made an offer. He was a cobbler, one of the few remaining shoe-makers in Emmine who actually still made and repaired footwear by hand. “Ten thousand crowns for a one percent interest in my shop is far too much, especially since you are only doing this to help me and my fellows in the community. I would gladly make a gift of the percentage.”

“No, I have to pay for it or Maiyim Acquisitions could question my ownership,” Oceanvine insisted.

“But you propose to sell it back later for a single crown?” Kevin asked. “That just isn’t right.”

The argument went on like that for some time while Oceanvine tried to convince the shoemaker to accept the deal. Finally, looking around the shop she spotted a pair of fleece-lined slippers. “I’ll tell you what,” she suggested. “Winters are much colder in Olen than they are on Chastigon. Keep me supplied with slippers like these after this is over and I’ll consider it money well-spent.”

“I will gladly make you shoes of all descriptions if you like,” Kevin offered.

“Those slippers will be sufficient,” Oceanvine replied, “although I may arrange some special commissions for you. You do nice work. Do you advertise on NetMaiyim? No? Maybe you should. I know a lot of ladies who would kill for custom-made shoes like yours, although you may have to raise your prices a bit.”

“Raise them, my lady?” he asked.

“Call me Vine,” she told him. “We’re going to be partners after all. And yes, you make fine footwear. Your prices may be the going rate in Tamd, but in Randona such shoes run over three times as high as yours do.”

“I work by myself, my... uh Vine,” he replied. “I’m not sure I could keep up with the demand.”

“That will only increase the value of your work,” she replied, “but maybe you should consider taking on an apprentice or two. And I believe establishing a waiting list so you can continue your regular work might be a good idea, but you know that’s entirely up to you. I’ll say no more about it if you want. I promised to be a silent partner and that means I should keep my mouth shut.”

“No, I like your ideas,” Kevin admitted. “It’s just finding the best way to implement them. I’ll think about it and get back to you.”

That turned out to be the model by which the rest of Oceanvine’s deals were made over the next few days. She came in and offered a large amount for a minor percentage and when the owners tried to be honest with her, she found a way to assuage their pride. No one really wanted to accept charity, she knew, but what she would do with all the goods she was bargaining for, she could not say.

The meals from the delicatessen she bought into would hardly make a difference. How often would she be in town to enjoy them? And the tennis racquets from the sporting goods store could be used on the school’s courts by students who did not have their own, she supposed, but she certainly didn’t need more clothing from the dress shop or the tool kit from the hardware store.

The one deal she did make a reasonable offer for her one percent, however was with the small shipping company where she paid two million crowns. “I’ve never actually owned part of a ship before,” she explained to Saltspray later.

“Neither have I,” Saltspray replied, “but you don’t see me going out and buying one.”

“Well, unlike the others, I’ll probably hold on to that investment,” Oceanvine admitted. “They are considering going public as soon as they can be sure Maiyim Acquisitions won’t try for a hostile takeover by that route.”

“What will you do with all the money?” Saltspray asked.

“You know, I haven’t the faintest,” Oceanvine laughed. “Maybe I’ll leave it in some blind account for my great-grand daughter to discover.”

Five

Oceanvine’s investments finally paid her intended dividends three days later when Maiyim Acquisitions made a follow-up offer on a fishing boat she had bought into. “Six will be amused when I tell him about that one,” Oceanvine told Ksanya at the time. “His entire family is in the fishing industry on Ketch.”

Mister Harres was not at all pleased to see Oceanvine sitting beside the other owners of the *Jill and Jane* that afternoon. “This meeting is only between principals and their agents, my lady,” he told her coldly on entering the owners’ home office.

“I am a principal, Mister Harres,” Oceanvine told him. “I have been for two days. I have a record of the transaction, if you would like to see it.”

He did and scowled as he looked through the small stack of papers. “You accomplished this purchase extremely rapidly, my lady,” he observed.

“I had the assistance of a very nice young man at my bank. He was able to pull a few strings for me,” Oceanvine flashed him an insincere smile. “Now are you taking issue with those documents?”

“I suppose I cannot,” Harres admitted, “but if I later find out they are fraudulent...” he let the matter hang.

“Hmm,” Oceanvine shot back. “You have an interesting talent for making friends and influencing

people, Mister Harres. Let's get down to business. As you know, I have a number of pertinent questions, speaking as a principal of the *Jill and Jane* .”

However, Harres remained as unforthcoming as he had been on their previous meeting. “I am not required to answer that question,” when she asked again about the ownership of the mysterious Maiyim Acquisitions.

“What?” Oceanvine asked angrily. “Do you mean to say that as an owner of this company I do not have the right to know who is offering to buy me out? That I am not entitled to know the names of the officers of that company nor even where it is incorporated?”

“Maiyim Acquisitions, LLC is a legal entity in its own right,” Harres explained, “and as such, that is all you need to know.” He went on to cite chapter and verse from the compendium of Emmine’s national laws. Oceanvine reached into her purse while he spoke and pulled out a small notebook, opened it and was currently scribbling something inside. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Taking notes,” Oceanvine replied sweetly. “Do go on, please. This is fascinating. I just want to let my brother know about this.”

“Your brother, my lady?” Harres asked.

“Lord Olen,” she explained. “You did know my brother sat in the House of Lords, didn’t you? Well, I’m sure he will be very interested in your interpretation of the business laws and will be happy to propose some amendments that will stop anyone from abusing them this way again.”

“You can’t threaten me with that bluff,” he blustered.

“Mister Harres,” Oceanvine replied with a wide and predatory grin, “I’m not trying to threaten you and I’m not bluffing. I will speak to my brother about this. Now it is possible he’ll tell me I’m just being silly, but considering Clemen proposed those laws you just cited himself, I’m certain he will take an active interest.”

“This has been tested in court,” Harres argued. “I am following set precedence.”

“I’m sure you are, Mister Harres,” Oceanvine nodded. “The thing is, you had better make the most of it while you can, because if and when the law changes, you may find yourself in a lot of trouble. In the meantime, I’d like to know if the owners of Maiyim Acquisitions, LLC are allowed to remain anonymous, how do they sign contracts? Do they just make an ‘X’ and have it witnessed?”

“I sign the contracts,” Harres informed her, more comfortable with the way the conversation had turned. “It is called the Power of Attorney.”

“I call it a clever misdirection,” Oceanvine snapped at him. “All well and good, and if you are not prepared to even divulge the location of your clients’ incorporation, I know who can find out.”

“Who?” he demanded.

Oceanvine flashed her teeth at him. “I’m sorry, but the law does not require me to give you that information.”

The negotiations took an unpleasant turn downhill after that and before returning to her own boat,

Oceanvine made a point of placing a ward around the *Jill and Jane*. It was not entirely impenetrable, but should stop any incendiary device or explosive substance.

“Hi, Clemen!” she greeted her brother on the *Maiyim Bourne*’s version of a cell phone within minutes of her arrival on board. Saltspray was trying to press dinner on her, but she waved her friend off. “Sorry if I woke you up.”

“I was up late, Elie,” Clemen replied. “Problems?”

“A bit,” she admitted and went on to tell him about what had been happening on Chastigon.

“Interesting interpretation of the law,” he admitted, “but somewhat opposed to what my colleagues and I intended when we passed that law. I’ll see about drafting an amendment, but that’s likely to take months before it can be enacted.”

“I just don’t want to see this sort of thing become a common practice,” Oceanvine told him.

“I could probably launch an official investigation into this Maiyim Acquisitions, LLC in the meantime, if you want, Elie,” Clemen offered.

“I’ll get back to you on that, Clem,” Oceanvine replied. “I’m still trying to do this quietly. An official investigation will make headlines and I’d like to know what’s going to fall out of the branches before I shake the tree. Now I need to give Maia a call, I hope she is up late as well.”

“She probably is,” Clemen admitted. “I just left her and His Majesty a few minutes ago. I’m actually still in the palace, in fact. If you had called then, I’d have just passed over the phone.”

“No you wouldn’t have,” Oceanvine laughed. “It would have been turned off and all I would have gotten was voice-mail. Talk to you again tomorrow, I promise.”

Her next call had to go through the palace switchboard, which required several minutes of persuasion and a pair of pass codes to get the operator to ring the royal suite for her. “You need a direct line,” Oceanvine told Queen Maia when she finally got through.

“Good evening and hello to you too, Vine,” Maia laughed. “I wish I could get one again. Should I pull out that old special radio we used to use?”

“Not a bad idea,” Oceanvine admitted, “at least for the next week or so, but I think I’ll call the conventional way when I can. I’ll keep the radio in the boat tuned to you though. I’d apologize for waking you up, but Clemen told me he was just with you and Helm.”

“Yes,” Maia agreed. “We were discussing the situation in Saindo. Does this have anything to do with that?”

“I doubt it,” Oceanvine replied. “I’m with Ksanya, by the way, although she’s up at her consulate at the moment and she told me how Bellinen is trying negotiation for the hostages.”

“They seem to be getting results,” Maia reported, “although it is doing nothing for the international prestige of Emmine and Granom.”

“I’m a bit concerned Bellinen is showboating on this one,” Oceanvine admitted.

“A bit and, in spite of how their president makes it sound, they are not at all united on their attitudes concerning Saindo,” Maia told her. “The Merintan caucus in their senate is very much opposed to the current administration.”

“They always have had warm relations with Emmine, especially since Misana leads the caucus,” Oceanvine remarked. “Maia, I wish this was all I was calling about, but have you ever heard of a company calling itself Maiyim Acquisitions? They’re a limited liability corporation ostensibly from somewhere in Emmine, but I can’t even get that much information about them.”

“You can’t?” Maia asked.

“Their legal representative refuses to answer any questions,” Oceanvine replied and went on into detail.

“Not even where their business license is on file?” Maia wondered. “I might be wrong, but I don’t think the law allows that much anonymity.”

“Harres evidently disagrees,” Oceanvine replied. “I don’t even know when such a license was issued, not that I thought to ask.”

“If he wouldn’t say where,” Maia laughed, “I doubt he would have told you when. That was very clever buying into those companies, but maybe you should have called me first. I could have given you Power of Attorney to use some of my money. It would have been tax exempt.”

“I can afford it,” Oceanvine shrugged.

“I suppose you can, Vine, but there’s really no need to spend your own money even if it was a gift of the *Maiyim Bourne* .”

“Well at least you aren’t accusing me of spending counterfeit money,” Oceanvine replied.

“You aren’t,” Maia told her. “I asked Methis about that one time. She told me the money bags don’t actually create the coins they dispense. They aren’t like the food box or medicine cabinet. They are actually translocation devices and they find lost coins from caches and troves all over the world. That’s why so many of the coins are ancient.”

“Very few are ancient,” Oceanvine replied. “Most are from the last two centuries and some are quite modern.”

“That’s what I meant,” Maia replied. “Anyway, you aren’t a counterfeiter, just a treasure hunter. So long as you declare the income, it’s legal.”

“I guess I should have asked,” Oceanvine admitted, “but I’ve never relied very much on those bags save to pay port costs. Do you think Uncle Candle knew?”

“Ha!” Maia laughed. “The wizard had a larcenous soul. I think it amused him to think he was passing counterfeit coins all those years. He probably would have been disappointed by the truth, but you should know the Gods wouldn’t commit crimes even in the best of causes.”

“I guess I never thought to wonder about that either,” Oceanvine admitted. “But do you think you

could find out something about Maiyim Acquisitions? The names of its principals would be nice, but even just proof of the company's legitimacy would help."

"Hmm," Maia considered. "I should be able to find that much out at least. I'll see what I can learn, Vine. Heh! It's almost like old times, isn't it?"

"Almost," Oceanvine replied.

Six

"You just missed Maia," Saltspray told Ksanya as she entered the boat's cabin.

"Didn't even wing her," Ksanya shot back. "Why did she call?"

"I called her," Oceanvine replied and went on to explain.

"I agree with your assessment of the Orenta," Ksanya told her when she got to that point in her story. "They're attempting to exploit the Saindo situation to increase their own influence world-wide at the expense of Granom and Emmine. It will score points with Ellisto, maybe with Wennil and definitely with the core constituency of the Harawaka Party who currently make up the majority of the Senate. I suspect they'll lose points with almost everyone else including the Merinta."

"The Merinta only have five men and women in the Senate though," Saltspray remarked.

"And sadly their colleagues have certain prejudices against them," Ksanya commented. "They think the Merinta are primitive and crude."

"They have chosen to preserve their cultural heritage," Oceanvine retorted, "rather than to embrace the dubious benefits of modern society without bothering to question the cost."

"At least their senators come from their own people," Saltspray added. "The two allowed to the Falienta are just Orentan lawyers from Merinne, paid for from the tribe's trust fund."

"And, except in matters directly pertaining to the Falienta, which only comes up at budget time, they generally vote whichever way the Harawakas tell them to," Ksanya remarked. "You know I have a lot of friends in Bellinen, but I really hate their government. It's proof-positive that democracy can be as oppressive of minorities as any other sort of government."

“The Isle of Fire is just the opposite these days,” Saltspray remarked.

“A lot of that was Blizzard’s doing,” Oceanvine told her. “She was part of the council that re-established representative government after the Triumvirate there, and then went on to serve as president several times and then did again after the so-called People’s Party attempted to subvert the government. She was a remarkable woman.”

“So Balance always said,” Saltspray replied. “I always wondered if he put her on a pedestal.”

“Well, she was his grandmother,” Oceanvine remarked, “but no, she truly was a remarkable woman. I stayed with her during the problem with the People’s Party there. She was quite old then, especially for a Granom, but she was still active and a powerful political force.”

“That was just before we met, wasn’t it?” Ksanya recalled.

“We went directly from Rjalkatyp to Querna that summer,” Oceanvine replied.

“It was winter,” Ksanya corrected her.

“Not on this side of the equator,” Oceanvine replied.

“We’re sort of at a standstill at the moment, aren’t we?” Saltspray asked. “I mean here in Tamd?”

“We’re at a point where we need to wait for something to happen,” Ksanya replied. “I doubt it’s going to take long. Why? Did you have something in mind?”

“I thought it might be nice to go out to eat for a change,” Saltspray told her.

“You have access to every known food in the world and then some and you want to eat out?” Ksanya asked.

“The food is often better out of the boat’s food box,” Saltspray allowed, “but nothing beats eating out for a sense of occasion.”

“There is that,” Ksanya agreed, “and there’s a Pafsan restaurant a few blocks from here I’ve been meaning to try out.”

The foods of Pafsa, a small island in the Granom Archipelago, ranged from hot and spicy stews to cool and refreshing salads and the two were often served together with steamed rice and fresh fruit and hot, highly spiced tea.

“I wasn’t aware tea was a common drink anywhere in Granom,” Saltspray remarked.

“Just the opposite,” Ksanya corrected her. “We drink a lot of tea. We just don’t make an afternoon ritual of it like some do in Emmine. This place is very good. We had a Pafsan chef in the Wurra when I was growing up and this is as good as anything he ever made. Mmm! It’s been years. You know Pafsa isn’t very far from Querna, but I’ve never actually been there. Maybe I will this summer if I get back during the season.”

“Why?” Saltspray asked. “I mean how long are you stuck in Tamd?”

“Only until the new consul shows up in another week or two,” Ksanya replied, “but unexpected things have a way of coming up, so I don’t count my vacations until I’m on the beach.”

They had just paid the bill when a large, deep roaring noise shook the walls from somewhere outside the restaurant. The three women raced outside and looked around. Finally Oceanvine saw an anomalous orange glow in the evening clouds and pointed to it for Saltspray and Ksanya. The glow suddenly grew into a gigantic torch, followed soon after by the renewed roar of an explosion. They raced closer until blocked off by a hastily erected fire line of bright yellow tape.

“There are or maybe were several businesses on that block that Maiyim Acquisitions has been trying to buy,” Ksanya noted.

“I know,” Oceanvine agreed. “I own parts of several of them.”

“It could be an accident,” Ksanya suggested, “but that would stretch my suspension of disbelief beyond the breaking point.”

“Someone just stopped being patient,” Saltspray remarked, “and subtle.”

“I never thought they were being particularly subtle,” Oceanvine told her, “but I would never have expected this level of violence, at least not so soon or suddenly.”

“Not every villain walks around making melodramatic threats,” Ksanya told her. “Well, not outside the movies and comic books, anyway.”

“I’ve run into a few who evidently read too many comic books,” Oceanvine shot back, “right down to the monologues when they think you’re helpless, but apparently this one isn’t given to speeches, at least if this is at all related to Maiyim Acquisitions.”

“You think it isn’t, Vine?” Ksanya asked.

“I think it certainly is, but we have no real proof of that,” she reminded Ksanya. “Until this fire is extinguished and a forensic examination can be conducted, all we have is our suspicions.”

“You’ve acted on nothing but your suspicions before, Vine,” Saltspray reminded her.

“I try not to,” Oceanvine replied. “In this case, I don’t see the obvious connection. Yes, it’s an amazing coincidence that Maiyim Acquisitions is attempting to buy out this entire block and when they meet some resistance to their plans it suddenly goes up in flames. Maybe it is too amazing to be believed, but who then do I go after? A lawyer?”

“He could have ordered this,” Ksanya pointed out.

“He could have,” Oceanvine agreed. “He might even have done it himself. But it could also have been his employers. Harres is what they call a mouthpiece, though, and I suspect that’s all he is. They tell him what they want and he puts it into words. We need more to go on or we’ll just waste our time.”

“I’m picking up spell traces in there,” Saltspray told them, “but they’re faint. They aren’t anything I would associate with a large firespell. At best it was a trigger spell for a tech-magic incendiary device.”

“Nice to know this probably wasn’t done by a mage,” Oceanvine remarked.

“Should we get involved and try helping extinguish this fire?” Saltspray suggested.

“We should ask first,” Oceanvine replied. “The Fire Department here acted swiftly and may feel they have the blaze under control.”

“They got here fast, didn’t they?” Saltspray asked as though trying to find something suspicious in that.

“The fire could have tripped off an alarm very early on as it spread,” Ksanya told her. “And it took us nearly ten minutes to get here from the time we heard the first boom.”

When they found a captain of the Fire Department, he thanked them for their offer, but replied that his men had a handle on the fire. “A sudden inrush of water from an unexpected quarter can be even more dangerous than what we normally do,” he explained. However, he did promise to let Ksanya know the results of the investigation that would follow after she explained who she was and what her interest in the situation was.

It was an hour past midnight by the time, they left the site of the fire, now reduced to smoldering embers, and were halfway between the Granomish Consulate and the waterfront when another flash and boom from among the boats caught their attention.

“Why do they always try to bomb the *Maiyim Bourne* when we’re on the case?” Saltspray asked.

“That wasn’t an attempt on the *Maiyim Bourne*, Sally,” Oceanvine informed her as they ran toward the harbor, “and it’s only happened once. What happened is someone tried to scuttle the *Jill and Jane*.”

“The fishing boat you bought into?” Ksanya asked.

“That’s the one,” Oceanvine replied. “I didn’t like the way Harres was talking this afternoon and... well, no that’s not really what prompted me, I just got a bad feeling and decided to ward the boat. Someone just got a handful of explosives go off in his face because I warded the boat against that sort of thing.”

They arrived on the pier just behind two police cars and a dozen spectators that Oceanvine privately thought have come directly from the barroom across the way. The pier had a bad burn mark in its pavement and the wooden pylons in the area were slightly charred, but the *Jill and Jane* was untouched and the neighboring boats escaped with minimal damage – mostly broken glass. The arsonist himself had been thrown backwards against the wheel house of one of the boats and his charred body was found on the boat’s deck.

“I don’t think that’s Harres,” Oceanvine remarked which earned her and the others a trip to the central precinct station, where they spent the remaining hours until dawn explaining what they knew of the situation. Finally, the police captain released them and offered them a ride back to the harbor.

“Thank you, Captain,” Oceanvine told him gratefully. “I think I’m getting a little old for all-nighters.”

“Me too, my lady,” he replied tiredly. “I’ll keep you informed if we learn anything about what’s happened tonight and if we find a connection between either fire and this Maiyim Acquisitions or their agents, you’ll know about it.”

“Thank you again,” she replied.

Seven

On a whim, Ksanya decided to sleep on board that morning. “With two fires in one night, I may be a bit paranoid, but I do feel safer here,” she told Oceanvine and Saltspray.

By the time Oceanvine woke up in the middle of the afternoon, however, Ksanya was already back at the consulate and Saltspray was working at the galley table. “About time you woke up, Sleepy,” she told Oceanvine.

“I guess I was more tired than I thought,” Oceanvine admitted. “Sally, take my advice and don’t get old.”

“A bit too late to tell me that,” Saltspray laughed. “You’re only eight years older than I am.”

“Eight rather critical years,” Oceanvine replied, and then laughed. “I said something like that to, um... Maia, I think, thirty-five years ago. I had just referred to you and your freshman mates as ‘kids’ and she pointed out I was only eight years older than you were. Maybe eight years can be a difference all your life?”

“Maybe,” Saltspray nodded, “but when I’m with you, I’m always ‘the Kid’ and I think I always will be. Don’t worry, I like it, well, with you, anyway.”

“Still it’s a good thing I didn’t stay in Randona,” Oceanvine decided. “and I think you make a better department head than I would have. Well, it probably would have been Six, not me. I never really wanted that job.”

“Neither did he,” Saltspray remarked. “Six likes to teach and do research and I think he really enjoys your jobs in the field, but I’ve noticed he lets you handle all the admin work in Olen.”

“Well, it is my school,” Oceanvine pointed out. “He’s always let me run it my way.”

“Like I said,” Saltspray reminded her, “he likes to teach and research and so long as he has a free hand to pursue his projects in the manner he prefers, he’s a happy camper. I think he could run the place if he had to, but he’s just as glad you’re around to do that.”

Oceanvine's cell phone rang. She checked the caller ID and answered, "Ahoy, Ksanya!"

"Ahoy again?" Ksanya asked. "You're only sixty, girl, not a hundred and sixty." Oceanvine laughed, but let Ksanya's retort pass otherwise uncommented on. "The Fire Department just called. They expect to have a forensic archaeologist on the scene of last night's fire in a few minutes. If we hurry, she'll let us join her as she sifts through the ashes. Literally, I guess."

Janet Trowel was a tall human woman from the Probellinen Islands with dark brown skin and long black hair. Oceanvine estimated her age to be thirty-five, but it was always a bit difficult to estimate the ages of Probellineners. Doctor Trowel, Saltspray told them, had graduated summa cum laude with a journeyman's degree about fifteen years earlier before turning her talents toward forensic archaeology, hence her use of the mage name, Trowel. Like many journeymen who went on to study in other fields, she also had kept her given name, using the mage name as a surname.

"It's nice to see you again, Wizard Saltspray," Trowel greeted her, "and you too, Lady Oceanvine. A pleasure to meet you, Madame Ksanya."

"You attended a winter session in Olen, didn't you?" Oceanvine asked.

"Two of them," Trowel replied. "Freshman and sophomore years. Wizard Fireiron's classes are what woke me up to the field of archaeology. Sometime I'd love to come back, though."

"We can always use more teachers," Oceanvine told her.

"Thank you, but I meant as a student. I'd like to continue my magical studies now that I have a specialty to apply them to. Also if Fireiron is still teaching there, I get the impression there's so much more I can learn from her."

"She is a remarkable teacher," Oceanvine agreed. "Have you come to any conclusions about the fire here yet?"

"Only that there was one," Trowel replied. "I was asked to wait for you."

"Thank you," Oceanvine replied. "Where do you start in an investigation like this?"

"Just as in any forensic magic investigation, we start by searching for spell traces," Trowel replied. The three mages all looked for a few minutes before Trowel continued, "I'm sure you saw what I did. A few random traces, mostly from tech-magic artifacts. That's pretty common and, to tell the truth, pretty much what I see in any such cursory glance at a site. The trick is in knowing how to interpret such traces, as I believe you said yourself, Saltspray, in one of your classes."

"Sounds like me," Saltspray laughed. "It also sounds like Vine."

"And I got it from Uncle Candle, who probably got it from Silverwind," Oceanvine added.

"Who probably inherited it from one of his teachers," Ksanya remarked. "It's amazing how academic inheritance works."

Trowel was looking at her strangely. "Madame Ksanya, are you magic null?" she asked.

"I am, but I can control it and was planning to walk a few paces behind the rest of you," Ksanya replied. "I can stay back here if you think I'll hamper or harm your investigation."

"No, merely not charging on ahead of us should be okay," Trowel decided, "though I may have to ask you to move every so often. You tend to eclipse anything behind you."

"Fair enough," Ksanya shrugged.

"All right," Trowel continued. "Now some, maybe most, of these tech-magic traces belong to things like flashlights, switches, radios and other commonplace conveniences. And one of the stores on this block, I understand, sold home entertainment equipment, so there will be a concentration of spell traces there. I believe you'll see them off on the north corner of this lot."

"They seem to be arranged fairly neatly," Oceanvine observed.

"The damage was not total on that side of the block," Trowel agreed. "They are probably still sitting on their shelves. Let's move on deeper into the site now."

"We're looking for traces that might have been associated with an incendiary device," Trowel continued, "although we have no guarantee that any form of magic was involved. An accomplished arsonist can set a building ablaze with a well-placed can of gasoline, although in my experience a fire this extensive and which spread as rapidly as this one did must have been set up more elaborately."

"There were at least two explosions last night," Ksanya informed Trowel. "Would that positively indicate such an elaboration as you called it?"

"Perhaps," Trowel replied. "But one or both of those explosions could have been something that was already in one of the buildings. Arsonists get lucky too, sometimes."

"So you already think this was arson?" Ksanya pressed.

"It seems likely," Trowel shrugged, "and I'm neither a lawyer nor a news reporter, nor am I talking to one right now, so I can call it anything I like. Later on I may change my mind, but I've done nearly one hundred cases like this. I find my first instinct is generally correct. This was almost definitely arson. Our job is to prove it."

"How often do you change your mind?" Oceanvine asked.

"Maybe one time in ten," Trowel replied. "The proof, when you can find it, is always fairly definitive. If I can't find it, I have to report that there was no proof and that has happened a few times when I was still certain there was a crime too, but most of the time I stay with my original assessment. I know I'm not supposed to make such an assessment until I have enough facts, but with enough experience, even the way the ruins are arranged can be sufficient proof. You'll see what I mean."

They continued on into the ruins, avoiding shaky walls where they could and propping them up telekinetically when they absolutely had to. "That's one of the benefits of being a mage in this field," Trowel explained. "Most of my colleagues are archaeologists only, but to be a good archaeologist, you have to have as broad an education as possible. The more you know, about anything in the field of sentient endeavor, the more easily you can interpret what you find. The perfect archaeologist, just like the perfect mage, should have the educational equivalent of a bachelor's degree in everything. That's not really possible for any mere mortal, of course, but it is the ideal."

“I knew that about being a mage,” Oceanvine replied, “but never realized it applied to any other field.”

“It applies to many of what we refer to as the social sciences,” Trowel replied. “Archaeology, sociology, philosophy, psychology and more besides. Any study of the way sentient beings think requires the scholar to know as much as possible. These subjects are not really sciences although they employ the scientific method. They are disciplines and the true specialization of such scholars lies in how they apply their generalist knowledge to their chosen discipline. In my case I use it in solving crimes when the clues are ruined beyond the abilities of most detectives to interpret. It’s a highly specialized use of knowledge, but the knowledge itself is general.

“Now I can already tell you,” she continued, “from the way the ruins of these buildings are burnt out, that there were three originating points for the blaze. That, by itself, is proof of arson. Someone was more concerned about burning these buildings down than in making it look natural. However, even if he or she had taken the pains to start with only a single ignition point, I can see how the flames were guided up through the ventilation shafts and inside the interior walls to spread as rapidly as possible. That second could have happened by happenstance, but not so thoroughly, and right here is our absolute proof. See these spell traces?”

Oceanvine and Saltspray looked closely. “Traces of a small but intense fire spell,” Oceanvine remarked.

“Yes,” Trowel agreed. “As I said, I don’t need this confirmation, given the nature of the rest of the ruins, but you’ll note that whoever did this modified a conventional tech-magic-powered cigar lighter. That doesn’t mean he was a mage, mind you. Any talented individual who had passed a Magic 101 lab could have done this and we all know that a lot of students take the intro course and lab these days without continuing their studies in magic.”

She used telekinesis to slowly sift through the debris until she had cleared away a small section of the floor around a melted and burnt mass of plastic and metal. “And there it is,” Trowel proclaimed, “or what’s left of it.” She put on a plastic glove and scooped up the remains of the lighter then put it in a small bag and placed it in a canvas bag she wore over her shoulder. “The bag is magically neutral so any spell traces on the lighter will be preserved, she explained.

They searched some more in the vicinity and, under a pile of rubble, found a room that had remained intact. Inside the room were a pair of only partially charred corpses, both Granomen. “Oh oh,” Trowel said suddenly. “I knew there were people unaccounted for in last night’s fire, but the location of these two so near to one of the ignition points is highly suspicious. I think I’ve found what I need to, but investigating these deaths is more up the line of my boss. Let’s get out of the site and give him a call.”

“Why not call from right here?” Ksanya asked, indicating her cell phone.

“There is a small chance that using a phone in here could contaminate the evidence,” Trowel replied. “It isn’t much of a chance; about the same as a cell phone causing a plane to crash – almost nonexistent – but we do not take chances. Also, it would be best if we guide him to this spot rather than wait for him to find us.”

Eight

The elderly Orent, a master mage who called himself Halon, was the City of Tamd's Chief Forensic Mage. "I do not have Trowel's gift for archaeological reconstruction," he admitted, "but I am more experienced with possible murder investigations, although given a few more years of experience, young Trowel will be my equal or better, I think."

Trowel looked as though she was blushing, although with her dark complexion it was difficult to ascertain. "Assuming I keep investigating murders," she added.

"You aren't planning to quit any time soon, I hope?" Halon asked.

"Planning, no," Trowel admitted, "but my old teachers being here reminded me that I would like to pursue a master's degree in magic."

"As I have been advising all along," Halon agreed. "I think we can arrange some time off, and some classes can be conducted by correspondence. For now, let's take a look at your victims."

"This way, Master Halon," Trowel led the way.

"Thank you for coming, Wizards," Halon told Oceanvine and Saltspray as they made their way back into the ruins. "It will be an honor to assist you in this case."

"I believe we're assisting you, Master Halon," Oceanvine replied. "It's certainly not our intention to take over a case that is in your jurisdiction."

"Thank you for the courtesy, Wizard Oceanvine," Halon told her, "but while the matter of these victims of the fire may be my business, the greater problem of who killed them, I understand, is yours."

"Possibly," Oceanvine replied, "depending on who ultimately caused this fire. For now, however, let us work on the more immediate issues and in that I shall assist you."

Halon nodded as they arrived at the site of the room that had survived the collapse of the building. He spent a few minutes examining the bodies both physically and magically and eventually announced, "These people were killed before the fire was actually set. See these wounds? Gunshot."

"So you think they stumbled on the arsonist as he was setting this up?" Oceanvine asked.

"It's the most likely reason," Halon replied.

“They could have been accomplices,” Saltspray argued, “and whoever was in charge killed them to make sure they wouldn’t talk.”

“Two reasons why I don’t believe that,” Halon replied. “First of all there was no reason a fire like this needed more than one person to set it and, secondly, these bodies are Granomen. I know it is difficult to tell in the condition they are in, but the limb to body length ratio is most telling. Now I suppose the arsonist could have had Granomish helpers, but considering we believe this crime was related to the recent buy-outs of Granomish properties, I think it would be unlikely.”

“We don’t know for a fact this is related,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Oh, come on,” Halon told her. “A large real estate firm comes to town and starts buying out businesses all owned by non-humans, and then when several such businesses in the same block of buildings refuse to sell they burn down. Do you really think it isn’t related?”

“I’m trying to not jump to conclusions,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“So am I,” Halon replied, “but this is a fairly obvious situation and it is hardly unique. Obviously it doesn’t happen in every case, but arsonists get caught by the residents of buildings often enough that I have seen this before. I could be wrong about the timing, though, but the coroner should be able to confirm the cause and time of death.”

“The time of death estimate is just that,” Oceanvine remarked, “an estimate. The time of death will be a range, not an exact time. Also the gunshot wounds may not have been immediately fatal. They may not have died until later when the building collapsed.”

“The room did not collapse though,” Saltspray pointed out.

“These bodies are very badly burnt,” Oceanvine told her. “It was hot down here, but I’ll bet it got much hotter as the building came down.”

“Yes,” Trowel agreed. “Their bodies were burned when the already hot air became compressed and superheated. There wasn’t enough oxygen in here to burn them completely, but they did become desiccated and partially carbonized. I disagree, though, Master Halon. I don’t think these bodies are in good enough condition for the coroner to establish an actual time of time by his usual tests. He may be able to establish a definite cause of death, but I suspect it will be a guess.”

“For my purposes,” Oceanvine told them tightly, “I don’t think that detail will matter.”

There were two more suspicious fires over the next week and Oceanvine and Saltspray ended up spending a lot of time with Trowel and Halon. “It is obvious these fires are all related,” Trowel told the two wizards over coffee one morning on the *Maiyim Bourne*. “That still doesn’t tell us who is setting them, however.”

“The body of the man who attempted to scuttle the *Jill and Jane* was never identified,” Saltspray complained. “I really hoped that we would have a lead there.”

“He probably was not a native of Chastigon,” Trowel told her. “We sent fingerprint and DNA samples to the Royal Security Force, but if he didn’t have a record, they aren’t likely to be able to identify him. Still they haven’t completed their examination yet, so there is still hope.”

“We need to actually catch the arsonist in the act,” Saltspray remarked.

“A stakeout?” Trowel suggested. “Those are long hard work and very boring as well.”

“And there are only a few of us,” Oceanvine remarked, “and many potential targets. I think some buildings are more likely to be attacked than others, though.”

They decided to keep a watchful eye on three likely business buildings in the hope of getting lucky. Two nights later, they saw the folly of that plan when a building suddenly burst into flames just behind them while they were watching the opposite side of the street.

Saltspray, however, was the first to react, using water from a nearby hydrant to extinguish the blaze before it could grow very large. The move, however, was only partially successful and Trowel explained why. “The original accelerants are still burning.”

“I’ll take care of that,” Oceanvine told her and concentrated on drawing energy from the burning materials. There was a strong surge funneled into her staff, which she, in turn, caused to shoot harmlessly into the sky, and a few moments later the fire was no more.

They spent an hour inspecting the source of the fire with Trowel and a police lieutenant detective, but neither Trowel nor the detective was able to identify the handiwork of the arsonist. “This is too generic,” Trowel explained. “It’s practically out of a textbook.”

“Are there arson textbooks?” Saltspray asked.

“Police manuals,” Trowel replied. “There are booklets that discuss this sort of thing for our information. If we didn’t have them, each of us would have to learn everything the hard way.”

“I know this is a disturbing possibility,” Oceanvine told her, “but is there a chance our arsonist is a cop?”

“I hope not,” Trowel replied, “but those manuals aren’t exactly classified materials. We don’t spread them around, but they do get out and I believe there are even one or two books on the subject that can be bought via Netmaiym that talk about it.”

“Really?” Oceanvine asked. “Obviously, I’ve never needed such a book.”

“No,” Saltspray agreed with a laugh. “If you wanted to burn a building, it would be ashes in seconds.”

“There is that,” Oceanvine nodded. “Well, it looks like an earlier evening than usual tonight.”

“Do you think we should split up tomorrow and each watch a different building,” Saltspray asked.

“It’s an idea,” Oceanvine decided. “Trowel, are you any good with wards?”

“It’s been a while but I can stop a bullet, if I concentrate,” Trowel replied.

“Good enough,” Oceanvine remarked, “and we can communicate via cell phones.”

The next evening, Oceanvine got lucky and spotted two suspicious-seeming people enter the building

she was watching. "Sally, call Trowel and meet me here," she instructed over her cell phone. "I just tagged two people, male and female, with a tracking spell. They were carrying large plastic bags full of something inside and have gone into the basement."

"I'm on my way, Vine," Saltspray promised.

Oceanvine realized she could not wait for the other two to join her, and keeping her protective ward up, she grabbed her staff and headed inside. The stairs going down were loose and noisy, so she used levitation to lower herself down them silently, but ahead, in the building's cellar, she could hear the couple talking softly.

She stepped around a corner, prepared to cast a binding spell at them, but they saw her first. The men used telekinesis to shoot several lead pellets at her, but the woman surprised her even more by casting a lightning bolt.

Oceanvine might have been caught unawares, but her concentration was iron clad and her ward protected her against both threats. *Mages?* she thought. *And we thought those wounds were bullet holes!*

The two rogues, she realized, were good enough to make a decent fight of the encounter. Oceanvine instantly saw holes in their defenses, and she could have killed them easily, but was reluctant to exploit them because she really wanted to keep these two alive for questioning.

She tried the binding ward on the off chance they were ignoring their defenses, but that turned out not to be the case, and she started firing off projectile wards and various objects at them with such rapidity that she hoped to break their concentration.

When that didn't work she attempted to engage them into a mage's duel of illusory worlds and mental arm wrestling, but while it was possible to force someone into such a state, as Oceanvine had learned the hard way, it was also not particularly easy. Her defenses were perfect, however, bolstered by the energy she habitually kept stored in her staff.

Part of her mind noticed that they were both fighting back with their eyes open and they were moving around as well. There was a time when most mages worked their spells from within a state of self hypnosis, but Oceanvine and Sextant had rarely been allowed to train using that technique so in turn they had treated their students similarly. She wondered if these two had taken classes with her and then remembered that most of One Maiyim's mages had fought while fully conscious as well.

She might not have been able to force them into an illusory world, but she realized it did not restrict her from using illusions herself. Immediately she filled the room with a loud siren that she was certain could be heard from blocks away. Even if it did not distract the rogues, it might alert anyone else in the building that something was wrong.

There was another spatter of lead shot against her ward, followed by a fireball. Fire was the one spell she did not dare use in this basement. There were too many flammable objects and Oceanvine feared it would only make these two arsonists' work easier for them. She was right on that count, the fireball ignited a nearby puddle of gasoline that had been spilled as they all moved around the room.

It was not the distraction Oceanvine had desired, but the sudden fire did the trick and she was finally able to wrap binding wards around the two mages and knock them out.

“Whoa, Vine!” Saltspray shouted as she bounded down the stairs with Trowel. “You were supposed to be stopping the fire, not setting it for them.”

“Funny,” Oceanvine remarked even as Saltspray worked on damping the fire before it could spread to the rest of the building. However, more of the arsonists’ fuel was starting to catch and she obviously needed help. “Trowel, get these two upstairs, please,” Oceanvine requested.

Inside the building as they were, there was only so much heat energy they could funnel into their staves, so Oceanvine and Saltpray joined together to try to extinguish the blaze by suffocating it. The flames immediately disappeared under the impenetrable ward they slapped down over the burning fuel.

“It’s still too hot under there to release this ward,” Saltspray coughed in the smoky and enclosed area.

“I’m going to translocate the fuel,” Oceanvine replied, choking back a cough of her own. And instant later the floor was covered by an inch of water, although the atmosphere in the room was still hot and poisonous. “Let’s get upstairs.”

They released the ward and the water beneath it burst into steam, but they were already on their way up the stairs before the resulting fog caught up to them. They found Trowel on the sidewalk outside the building where Saltspray finally found the breath to ask. “Where did you put the fire?”

“About one hundred miles north and about one hundred feet down,” Oceanvine replied. “I suppose it means I’m guilty of polluting the ocean, but, given the choices, I’ll have to live with that. Where are those two?” she asked Trowel. There were several police cars on the street around them.

“In one of the squad cars,” Trowel replied, pointing at the one that held the rogue mages.

“We can’t just lock them up,” Oceanvine told her.

“We can’t just kill them either,” Trowel pointed out.

“There’s still the death penalty for what they did,” Saltspray argued.

“I never did like that,” Oceanvine remarked, “and they do have to stand trial first. Trowel is right about that. But we need to keep them unconscious until they can be arraigned, which I imagine won’t be before morning. Hold on.” She trudged over to where the two unconscious mages were slumped over in the back seat of the car and cast another spell. “Now they’ll sleep for the next twelve hours.”

“Hey, how are we supposed to interrogate them?” an officer complained.

“With one of us on hand to keep them from turning you into charcoal,” Oceanvine snapped at him. “Right now I’m too tired to do that so I’ll see you in the morning.”

South Horalia

One

“I knew those two,” Saltspray admitted over breakfast two mornings later at the Granomish consulate. “As journeyman candidates I thought they had a lot of promise.”

“They gave me a run for my money,” Oceanvine told her, “but that’s over now.”

“Were they killed?” Ksanya asked.

“No,” Oceanvine shook her head. “I think the death penalty is barbaric especially when we have more humane alternatives these days, so I made a deal with the district attorney on their behalves. I used a variation on Arithan’s curse, the one that stopped Silverwind from using magic for so long. This won’t give them nightmares, but they will have intense headaches anytime they even think of performing magic.”

“For the rest of their lives?” Ksanya asked.

“No, ten to twenty years,” Oceanvine replied. “Curses can be removed, after all, it’s just that this one cannot be removed by the victim.”

“Silverwind broke his curse,” Saltspray pointed out.

“Not easily and not within ten years,” Oceanvine pointed out. “Anyway, the deal was they had to tell us everything they knew. Of course all they knew was that they had been hired to burn those buildings. Clever of them to use tech magic igniters rather than their own spells. It really threw us off.”

“But who hired them?” Ksanya pressed.

“Oh, it was Harres, of course,” Saltspray told her. “He’s currently awaiting trial and, of course, refusing to admit he had anything to do with the fires, but we’ll see. He isn’t a mage so the wheels of justice are likely to grind on in their usual relaxed pace, but we got him.”

“Lady Oceanvine?” a junior legate asked from the door to the dining room. “There’s a call for you on line three.”

“There’s a phone in the next room if you want, Vine,” Ksanya offered. Oceanvine left the room immediately.

“Isn’t your replacement due here soon?” Saltspray asked Ksanya.

"This evening," Ksanya nodded. "I'll spend a day or two bringing him up to speed and then it's straight back to Querna. Nice! I'll be home in time for the cherry blossoms."

"That does sound pleasant," Saltspray agreed. "I remember spring time in Querna when I was working on my wizard's degree. Horrible winters, but the spring made it all worthwhile."

Oceanvine returned, looking excited. "Come on, Sally. We've got to move on again."

"Where now?" Saltspray asked.

"That was Maia just now," Oceanvine explained. "You'll remember I asked her to look into Maiyim Acquisitions, LLC? Well, she tells me they were originally incorporated in Lon."

"Lon?" Saltspray asked. "That's an odd place to incorporate, but I suppose it's as good a place as any."

"It's a moderately small city," Oceanvine told her. "If you want to go into business quietly, it might be a perfect place to do so. Anyway we know they were incorporated a year ago in Lon, but just who was involved is still clouded. His Majesty has requested that the Royal Security Force investigate the matter and if we want to be involved we should get on our horses and ride directly to Lon and meet an Agent Falanda Emmings there."

"Let's go then," Saltspray agreed.

They caught a strong quartering breeze as they rounded the northern cape of Chastigon and were able to hydroplane nearly all the way to the port of Lon by following the Innercoastal waterway between Rallena and the Celenan Islands. Sea traffic was heavy with tankers and other cargo ships, but the *Maiyim Bourne* slipped nimbly between them as she flew on her way to Lon.

Finally two and a half days later they arrived in the outer harbor. Lon had once been an active port serving both cargo and passengers bound for the Querna peninsula from the southeastern end of crescent-shaped Rallena Island. With the advent of high-speed motor ways and air travel, however, the port was no longer the transportation hub it had once been and many of the buildings along the harbor had been abandoned. They looked shabby and the ivy that encrusted many of them only added to the signs of neglect. However, there was an actively maintained area in the center of the harbor area where the buildings had been cleaned and painted and a main street led uphill to a small business area.

Following the harbormaster's instructions, Oceanvine piloted her boat into a slip along a large commercial pier that was closest to the downtown of Lon. "When the word came that His Majesty was sending a yacht here, I expected something larger," he explained as he helped lash the boat to a cleat.

"We could move to a more appropriate slip," Oceanvine offered.

"No, that won't be necessary, my lady," he replied. "I'm not expecting an arrival that requires this slip for another week. Oh, by the way, there's been a woman asking for you two."

"Agent Emmings?" Oceanvine asked.

"Tall, wears a dark gray business suit like a man?" the harbormaster countered.

"I wouldn't know about that," Saltspray admitted. "We've never met."

"It sounds like the standard RSF uniform, though," Oceanvine remarked. "Where can we find her?"

"She wouldn't leave her whereabouts, but you shouldn't have too long to wait," he replied. "She's been stopping in every two hours, like clockwork."

"May as well have lunch," Oceanvine decided after the harbormaster had left. They had just started to unwind from their hectic trip down the coast when Agent Emmings arrived.

"About time you two got here," she grumbled after introducing herself. Falanda Emmings stood nearly six feet tall. She was muscular in an athletic way and, as the harbormaster had described, seemed to habitually wear a man's business suit with a white shirt and a red tie, that tie being her only concession to color. She was in her late twenties and kept her dark brown hair short. Also Oceanvine could not help but notice the bulge of a hand gun in a shoulder holster.

"We had to sail down from Chastigon," Oceanvine shot back. "I thought we made pretty good time, considering."

"You got here from Chastigon in only two days?" Emmings asked, betraying astonishment.

"Two and a half," Oceanvine replied. "The winds were favorable."

"They must have been," Emmings admitted. "That trip usually takes twice as long. Are you hiding a racing motor under the hull?"

Oceanvine chuckled. "No, she's just a fast little boat. How long have we kept you waiting?"

"I arrived yesterday afternoon," Emmings replied as though giving an official report. "I attempted to access the records pertaining to Maiyim Acquisitions, LLC, however I was informed by the city clerk that I did not have sufficient clearance to that information."

"If an agent of the Security Forces doesn't, who does?" Oceanvine remarked. "Are they expecting His Majesty to come here himself?"

"They informed me that they were not to release to records without a search warrant," Emmings replied.

"Sounds reasonable, I guess," Oceanvine considered, "although it was my understanding that articles of incorporation were public documents."

"They are," Emmings replied, "but for reasons of personal privacy, individual jurisdictions are allowed to require warrants if they deem it to be reasonable. Lon evidently requires such procedures to be followed in every instance."

"That's ridiculous," Oceanvine replied. "I can understand if a single proprietorship or a partnership was treated that way, but a corporation?"

"An LLC is a special case, Wizard," Emmings replied. "I also believe Lon is chosen by a number of similar companies as a convenient location to incorporate in for both tax and privacy purposes."

“Then let’s not waste any time securing a search warrant,” Oceanvine decided.

“I hoped you would feel that way,” Emmings replied, “and already have an appointment scheduled with the district court this afternoon.”

“Good,” Oceanvine nodded. “We should go now, I expect.”

“Finish your lunch,” Emming told her. “The court won’t reconvene for another two hours. Must be nice to get three hour lunch times. I generally have to eat on the run.”

“Then have a seat and join us,” Oceanvine offered hospitably. “what would you like?”

“Perhaps just some coffee if you have some,” Agent Emmings replied, “and thank you.”

Oceanvine was surprised at the size of Lon’s courthouse. She had expected a large building two or three stories tall, probably of red brick and partially covered with ivy as many of the older building in town were. Instead, Agent Emmings brought her and Saltspray to a much smaller edifice with one large room for the court and several smaller ones for the jury, if needed, and offices for two judges and the officers of the court. “So small,” Oceanvine remarked.

“I could have told you that,” Saltspray told her. “Dad used to bring me to Lon on business trips all the time. They actually have four court houses and each is fairly specialized. The main criminal court has a lot more room and the probate court is somewhat smaller. This one, I think, is used for spill over from the criminal court, and appeals.”

“And also for search warrant approval,” Emmings added, “or so I’ve been told.”

Gaining a warrant, normally a rubber-stamp experience, was not going to be a simple experience this time. When their turn came up, there was an instant objection from a lawyer working for Maiyim Acquisitions, LLC. “The release of names of the principals of Mayim Acquisitions would severely obstruct the normal working of my clients’ corporation,” he argued, “and that obstruction would place a severe financial burden on the principals and thereby harm both them and their own beneficiaries needlessly.”

“Interesting argument, Mister Vistar,” the judge replied dryly, “but is not Maiyim Acquisitions a publically incorporated entity?”

“It is,” Vistar replied, “but it is not publically traded and as a licensed limited liability corporation it enjoys certain protections of its right to privacy comparable to those of individual citizens.”

“I must say, I don’t believe I have ever heard anyone argue along those lines before,” the judge replied.

Attorney Vistar went on to cite several laws and statutes. “Maybe we should have recruited the district attorney,” Oceanvine commented to Emmings.

“This is idiocy!” Emmings replied a bit too loudly.

“Agent Emmings?” the judge asked. “Is that an objection?”

Emmings reacted quickly enough and replied, “Yes, your honor, it is. I have requested over one

hundred search warrants of this sort in my career with the Royal Security Force and this is the first time anyone had claimed that the owners of a corporation is privileged information. I would remind Mister Vistar that we are not demanding the corporation's financial records at this time nor a list of the businesses it is dealing with. Just the names of those owners."

"The principle remains the same," Vistar replied.

"I don't see how," Emmings shot back. "Your honor, this is not a minor case of personal nosiness we're concerned about here. People have been killed through the machinations of Maiyim Acquisitions."

"Objection!" Vistar shouted immediately. "That is only an allegation and one which will eventually be proven false."

"On the contrary," Emmings argued, "There have been a dozen deaths in Tamd in the last month. All were proprietors of businesses Maiyim Acquisitions was attempting to buy or people who lived in the buildings that housed those businesses. Further there have been similar 'alleged' fires in similar circumstances on Milla, Mairsten and Festa, all islands Maiyim Acquisitions is attempting to buy out small businesses on."

"I didn't realize their activities were so wide-spread," Saltspray whispered to Oceanvine.

"Apparently," Oceanvine remarked just loud enough to inadvertently get Emmings' attention. "Apparently," Oceanvine repeated for the court, "there have been confessions from perpetrators in Tamd."

"That's right," Emmings picked up the line of reasoning. "Two rogue mages apprehended by my colleagues here confessed to having been hired by one Saynor Harres, an attorney for Maiyim Acquisitions, LLC."

"Mister Harres acted well beyond any orders from Maiyim Acquisitions," Vistar told them. "The company has disavowed any knowledge of his activities and renounces all ties to him and denies categorically that it authorized arson and murder."

"Now there's a tune I've heard before," Emmings remarked acidly. "So your principals will be glad to testify to that when we get them in court, I'm sure."

"And I can hear that you still have not explained why the principals of a business your clients are making an offer on are not allowed to know with whom they are dealing," Oceanvine added.

"They are dealing with, Maiyim Acquisitions, LLC," Vestar replied, "A legal entity within the Kingdom of Emmine."

"Speaking as one of those principals that legal entity was attempting to buy out," Oceanvine told him coldly, "I assure you that was not sufficient knowledge especially when my businesses started burning out from under me."

"I already said that was not authorized by my client," Vistar argued.

The judge allowed them to argue on a bit longer before rapping his gavel several times to finally shut both sides up. "We will adjourn for thirty minutes," he told them, "after which, if you have no further information to place before me, I will render my decision."

"It's not going well," Emmings confided to Oceanvine and Saltspray. "He shouldn't even have to think about this one."

"Perhaps he is just trying to appear fair," Saltspray remarked. "I've seen judges appear to favor one side more before ruling against that side."

"I understand His Majesty is taking a personal interest in this case," Emmings noted, "but that's not likely to influence the case in our favor. Just the opposite, I'd think."

"His Majesty will only step in directly if nothing else works," Oceanvine told her. "If he does, however, it will be before the High Court and they almost always rule his way. However, it could take months to get to that stage."

"I think we should call up the prosecutor's office in Tamd," Oceanvine suggested. "Maybe there have been some developments. The two mages who were setting fires were just starting to give their full confessions when we left."

"All right, try that," Agent Emmings agreed.

The judge was just about to reconvene the hearing when Oceanvine rejoined them. "I'm sorry, your honor, but I have further information that needs consideration."

"Very well," the judge nodded.

"I just got off the phone with Doctor Janet Trowel, the forensic archaeologist in Tamd, and she informs me that just this morning, Mister Harres, the attorney for Maiyim Acquisitions there..."

"Former attorney," Vistar interjected. "We take no responsibility for his actions."

"Mister Vistar," the judge admonished him. "This is an informal hearing, not a trial so I have tried to be patient with all of you, but you will at least allow each other to speak uninterrupted."

"Yes, your honor," Vistar replied automatically and the judge motioned Oceanvine to continue.

"Anyway, Harres has confessed," Oceanvine informed him. "He admits to ordering the fires and bombs that killed those people in Tamd and he says he was acting on the orders of Maiyim Acquisitions, LLC."

"He's lying to save his own skin," Vistar claimed. "We've all seen this before."

"And he has produced evidence in the form of several written memos from one Darud Wagoner of Reston, Garresty and Wagoner, PC of Randona," Oceanvine continued, "another agent of Maiyim Acquisitions, LLC, and one you answer to, don't you, Mister Vistar?"

"Well?" the judge prompted Vistar when he remained silent.

"Your honor," Vistar finally responded. "I have never been instructed to do anything illegal on behalf of my client."

"You are not on trial here, Mister Vistar," the judge reminded him.

“Feeling guilty!” Saltspray whispered to Oceanvine.

“Is this Mister Wagoner also affiliated with Maiyim Acquisitions, LLC?” the judge asked firmly.

“Yes, your honor,” Vistar admitted softly in a deflated tone. “But that is not proof of culpability on Maiyim Acquisitions’ part.”

“I remind you this is not a trial, Mister Vistar,” the judge replied. “We do not need to prove your client guilty of anything, just establish reasonable cause for approval to look into the company’s records. Ms Emmings, I hereby approve the search warrant.”

Two

“Willek and Linara Plumber,” Agent Falanda Emmings announced that evening on-board the *Maiyim Bourne*. She dropped a small suitcase on the deck and sat down on the cabin’s roof to speak to the two wizards. “They live and work out of Southport, evidently.”

“Those two are the only principals of Maiyim Acquisitions?” Saltspray asked.

“They are,” Emmings replied. “I also have the names of over one hundred employees, at least half of whom are their legal staff, oh and here’s an interesting tidbit. Maiyim Acquisitions owns those law firms that are ostensibly representing it.”

“What’s the point in hiding that?” Oceanvine asked, “and is it legal?”

“The legality is gray,” Emmings shrugged, “but someone will be looking into that. As for hiding it, well, I guess there could be a number of reasons. They might want their lawyers to seem like independent contractors. I’m fairly sure that isn’t legal by the way, but it also isn’t something I’ve encountered before. Their whole company seems to be cloaked in mystery, misdirection, and secrecy, so perhaps they are just trying to hide their true size. I don’t know, really.

“I’ve called the authorities in Southport and they are keeping the Plumbers under surveillance,” Emmings continued, “so I think we ought to catch a flight to Southport immediately.”

“That explains the suitcase,” Oceanvine remarked, “but I seriously doubt we’ll catch a direct flight to anywhere in South Horalia from here.”

“Not a chance,” Saltspray put in. “The airport here is a small municipal one. We would have to fly to Renton or Keesport, and then get on a connecting flight to Southport. Actually, I might be wrong, but I think we’d have to hop over to Tarnsa or Northport and then catch a shuttle flight to Southport.”

“Flying is still the fastest way to get there,” Emmings insisted.

“Only if we can get tickets and don’t miss a connection anywhere along the way. We can be there just as fast and more reliably if we sail,” Oceanvine pointed out. “We aren’t far from the Quarna Canal. We can sail down to Bolta this evening, catch a few hours of sleep, then slip through the canal and directly across the strait and be there by noontime tomorrow. Do you sail?”

“I’ve never really had the luxury, Wizard” Emmings replied.

“Well, the most important thing to remember is that port is left and starboard is right,” Saltspray laughed. “We’ll have to coach you as to the rest. Hey, it will be good to have someone else to help with the sails.”

“More important than that, Agent Emmings, if we’re going to sail together, get used to calling me Oceanvine, or just Vine if you prefer,” Oceanvine told her.

“Fala,” Emmings replied, sticking out her hand.

“Excellent, Fala,” Oceanvine told her. “Stow your bag in the bow cabin, but don’t put anything in the cabin’s closet. I’ll explain later, just trust me on that.”

“But, why not?” Fala insisted.

“Because it won’t be there when you look again,” Saltspray explained. “It’s magic. If you really want to know how it works, you’ll need at least a decade of classes and even then you won’t know it all. I sure don’t.”

“Sally, call the Harbormaster’s office and let them know we’re casting off,” Oceanvine told her. “We’re paid up until the end of the week, so there’s no problem, but he might appreciate knowing the slip is available again.”

“Aye aye!” Saltspray saluted almost impudently, but she guided Fala down into the cabin as Oceanvine telekinetically unlashd the boat from the dock. By the time they returned on deck the *Maiyim Bourne* was already well out into the harbor.

“That’s a silent engine you have,” Fala remarked, noticing the sails were still furled.

“An engine is one thing we don’t have,” Oceanvine chuckled. “Back in the days of wooden tall ships and even earlier, I guess, it was common to wait for the tide to carry your ship out into the harbor where you could finally unfurl your sails, assuming there was any wind. The busier and the more treacherous harbors, however, could not always depend on a captain catching the tide just right and it was not unusual to have to spend two days or more, waiting for the right conditions, before a ship could actually set her sails. So they employed specially trained mages called pilots who, using a propulsion spell, just like the one I’m using, to guide large ships in and out of tight or busy harbors. It eliminated traffic jams and ships going aground in shallow waters. Anyway, in essence, I got out and am pushing us along. If you two would like to raise the mainsail and the jib, however, I think we can really shock you.”

A few minutes later they were skimming over the waves on the boat's hydrofoils, headed south for the port of Bolta. Once they were underway, Saltspray gave Fala a more thorough tour of the boat, but about halfway through she asked a question that had been bothering her. "Don't you ever dress like a woman, Fala."

"Not very often," Fala admitted. "This suit is a uniform of sorts and I don't have a lot of time off. An agent of the Security Force is always on duty."

"I see," Saltspray nodded, "so you're required to dress that badly?"

"You are a blunt one, aren't you?" Fala shot back.

"It saves time, sometimes," Saltspray admitted. "It just seems to me, you ought to try dressing a bit more comfortably on board and definitely put on a pair of deck shoes. I saw you slipping all over the deck while we were hoisting the sails."

"I only have one change of clothing," Fala pointed out, "and no deck shoes."

"You'll find what you need in the closet," Saltspray remarked. "I think you'll look good in our school uniform."

"What's that?" Fala asked.

"You'll see."

A few minutes later, Fala reappeared on deck in an Orentan silk blouse over cream-colored woolen slacks. She also had a blue windbreaker in her hand, and she slipped it on as she came up into the wind.

"That jacket's a good idea," Oceanvine remarked. "It's starting to get a bit chilly up here."

"I'll get them," Saltspray offered and ducked back into the cabin.

"So is this the school uniform?" Fala asked Oceanvine.

"A variant of it, I guess. It generally involves a skirt, but with the weather like this, slacks are more sensible. Where did you hear about the old school uniform?"

"I told her she'd look good in it," Saltspray replied, returning with an extra jacket for Oceanvine.

"That's explains it," Oceanvine nodded.

"There were certainly a lot of these in the closet," Fala commented. "Is that why you said not to put my stuff in there? No room?"

"No," Oceanvine shook her head. "The closets contain whatever sort of clothing you want or in some cases need in them. That's why you got slacks instead of skirts. I don't know why the closets are almost always filled with duplicates, though. One set of clothing is all anyone should wear at a time. Maybe it's to give the illusion of choice or maybe Wenni prefers her closets to be full."

"Wenni?" Fala asked. Oceanvine and Saltspray took turns explaining parts of what they felt Fala

would need to know to sail on the *Maiyim Bourne*. Over the years they had found it prudent not to say everything about her, but there were certain legends most people had heard, some of which were best to disprove and others which it was best to admit to.

They arrived in Bolta just after sunset and were back on their way in the gray, false dawn of the next morning.

It had been years since Oceanvine had entered the Quarna Canal and on that one occasion she had been headed the other way. As they entered the mouth of the canal, she paused to look over at the site of where the Admund Rainelds had crashed into the luxury liner Queen Otillia. She recalled how they worked to separate the two ships and how she had discovered one of the survivors of the collision.

"I wonder whatever became of her," Oceanvine murmured.

"Who?" Saltspray asked.

"When Six and I sailed through here the first time with your grandfather, of course," Oceanvine began and went on to describe the experience in detail. After a while she finally got to the point of Saltspray's question. "So after cutting a hole in that steel plate, I discovered a young girl named Ima had miraculously been knocked from her bunk on the Otillia and into the very bow of the Rainelds. She had a few bruises, but mostly she was very hungry and probably in a mild state of shock. I stayed with her until we found her father among the survivors.

"It's strange but I haven't thought much about that since then," Oceanvine went on. "After that we only made a slight detour to see Six's folks and then we ran into what's now called Mount Candle in the middle of the Great Bay."

"You discovered that didn't you?" Saltspray asked.

"All three of us did," Oceanvine chuckled, "by nearly falling into it. If it hadn't been for Uncle Candle I doubt we would have survived the incident, then we were down in Sutheria just after the tsunamis there, so maybe I can be forgiven about forgetting Ima, but I do wonder what happened to her."

"I've heard that story," Fala admitted, "about the little girl who was found perfectly healthy after the wreck. I didn't know you were the one to find her."

"I was fairly young myself," Oceanvine told her, "just nineteen and I was still calling myself Elie. It was a lifetime ago and I think the fact that Ima survived is far more important than I happened to be the one to find her."

"Most people would want a statue or a reward for that sort of thing," Fala told her.

"She has statues and memorials all over the world, Fala," Saltspray told her. "You know, after a while it gets to be too much."

"It's just a way for people to say, 'thank you,'" Oceanvine commented, "but I would be just as happy to hear the words."

"But maybe they wouldn't," Fala told her. "The people thanking you want to make sure it's a permanent thank you. At least that's how I see memorials, not that anyone will ever erect one to me."

"You never know, Fala," Oceanvine told her. "I didn't set out to save the world, not even from One Maiyim. It just happened that way. I couldn't have done it alone, either. There were a lot of people just like you there as well. I'm just one of the few who got noticed."

"Being a mage is often flamboyant," Saltspray added, with a chuckle. "Especially the way you toss fire spells around. Maybe you should take up magic, Fala."

"I have enough to do with my continuing education classes," Fala replied. "Agents of the Security Force must take a number of required classes every year. The actual required classes change every year, but there are too many to allow me the time to take still others. I wouldn't mind learning how to do the trick with the hex nut, though. I don't think I need a halo, but the ability to pick something up when my hands are full would be nice."

"I can show you how it's done," Oceanvine offered, "but you'll have to practice for hours to master the trick."

"My off time is hard to predict," Fala admitted, "but there are plenty of times I have nothing to do but stare at the walls while waiting for something to happen. A hex nut is at least more convenient to carry around than knitting."

"Why not?" Oceanvine shrugged and she started showing Fala how to move an object telekinetically. An hour later Fala was still struggling to get her hex nut to move and Oceanvine found herself trying to encourage the Security agent, "Actually you're doing very well. Your thoughts are directing the telekinetic force in the right way, you just aren't concentrating enough and when you concentrate you start tensing up. You need to learn to relax while doing this."

"Vine, traffic is stopped ahead," Saltspray called from the helm.

Oceanvine looked up and saw a cluster of boats and ships waiting for the second set of locks to open for them. "Let's get a bit closer and see if anyone knows what the holdup is."

They soon learned that the next section of the canal had been declared one-way against them. The Quarna Canal had been considered more than sufficiently wide when it was built, but as maritime technology had advanced, ships had grown ever larger until they had reached the stage at which the larger ones could only fit through the canal safely one at a time. When one of these larger ships was in the canal, all the traffic had to go in a single direction. There were ships, supertankers, that were too large to fit in the locks of the Quarna canal and they were forced to go the long way around Rallena Island.

"Uncle Candle used his staff to lift the boat out of the water and by-pass these locks once," Oceanvine recalled.

"We don't have the golden staff with us," Saltspray remarked, "but I'll bet we could do that same trick with our wooden ones."

"No doubt," Oceanvine replied, "but we were in a hurry to assist the Queen Otilia, and the lock operator unwittingly gave us permission. We're not in that great a hurry and I'll use the piloting spell to make up for lost time. We ought to strike the sails if we're going to power our way from here though." After helping pull down the mainsail and jib, Oceanvine went back to showing Fala how to practice basic telekinesis.

Finally a large oil tanker cleared the locks and they were allowed to move on once more. Saltspray

was getting impatient waiting for the third lock to fill so Oceanvine suggested she deploy the hydrofoils.

“You can push this boat fast enough to actually hydroplane?” Fala asked.

“The biggest difference between what you are trying to do and what I’m about to is that you are working entirely with your own energies whereas I will be using external power sources.”

“External?” Fala asked.

“There’s power to be exploited all around us if you know how,” Oceanvine replied. “However, it’s much easier to use your own power. The good news is that basic telekinesis of small objects does not require an external power source.”

“But how do you tap into such a source?” Fala asked.

“You’re not ready for that yet,” Oceanvine told her.

“How do you know?” Fala asked.

“You haven’t managed to even move the hex nut yet,” Oceanvine smiled. “You need to be able to move two or more objects around independently before it’s safe to try using external power.”

“Why?” Fala asked. “What could happen?”

“You could flash burn yourself from the inside,” Saltspray remarked. “It happened a few years ago in Merinne. A freshman was trying to show off by casting a fire spell and he got too ambitious.”

“Did he survive?” Fala asked.

“No and it was a long painful death,” Saltspray told her, “so don’t try it without supervision.”

“Burned from the inside?” Fala asked faintly.

“So if you want to stay warm on a cold night, try finding someone to cuddle with,” Saltspray advised.

Finally the gates of the last lock of the series opened and Oceanvine, staff in hand, applied enough force to push the boat forward at a speed upwards of thirty-five knots. “if you can do that, why bother sailing?” Fala asked.

“Even using external power sources we can’t keep this up for more than a couple of hours,” Saltspray told her. Half an hour later, they had to slow down again and wait for the final set of locks to cycle through for them. “I halfway expected you to pick the boat up and fly us over the final locks, Vine.”

“I’m pretty sure there’s a law against that sort of thing,” Oceanvine replied, taking the chance to rest for a few minutes.

“I doubt the canal authority has any rules prohibiting it,” Saltspray argued.

“No, but the Royal Aviation Commission does,” Oceanvine replied. “This tub doesn’t have a license to fly and neither do I and just as I said before, we may want to get to Southport quickly, but we’re not in enough of a hurry to start breaking laws although, if you want to know the truth, we did strain the limit

a bit on safe canal speeds.”

“And who’s looking for a sailboat to break the canal speed limit,” Fala laughed, “or the record for that matter.”

“You want a record?” Oceanvine asked as she eased the boat into the first lock of the final set. “We have the wind directly astern. If it keeps up, I’ll have you hoist the spinnaker.”

“What’s the forecast?” Saltspray asked.

“It’s supposed to stay east-southeast all day and freshen a bit,” Oceanvine replied.

“Come on, Fala,” Saltspray encouraged her. “Let’s ready the spinnaker. We haven’t been able to use it all trip until now.”

“I thought that sort of sail was only used in racing,” Fala commented.

“I’m not sure Nildar knew that,” Oceanvine remarked.

Just then a motor cruiser pulled alongside the *Maiyim Bourne*. On board that boat were several young men and women playing loud and obnoxious music. Oceanvine winced at some of what passed for music these days. It seemed to be all rhythm and almost no melody. She recalled the music she grew up with was similarly disdained by those of the previous generations too. Well, except for Uncle Candle. He seemed to find something to appreciate in any form of music. Thinking about it, her music was loud and obnoxious too, really, but at least it had a melody and the lyrics weren’t as angry.

The motor boat followed them through the remaining locks and waiting for the last one to drain and open, she decided to shrug the new-style music off as an ignorable noise. But as she came to that conclusion, two of the young men started making comments as obnoxious as their music. They were laughing about the sailboat with the “three old woman” in it. Fala, who was probably not more than ten years their senior looked like she was about to flash her gun. It might have been enough to quiet the people on the motor cruiser, but she was not wearing the shoulder holster this morning as it would have been fully visible over the floral silk blouse.

Just as well, Oceanvine thought to herself. *She’s not supposed to draw her gun unless she intends to fire it.* Another gale of insulting laughter washed over her and she added, *Then again, maybe she did mean to fire it.* However, when Fala opened her mouth to shout back at the others, Oceanvine cut her off by challenging the rowdy young men with a casual, “Wanna drag?”

“You want to race us, old lady?” one of the young men laughed.

“You chicken?” Oceanvine shot back. The remark had the desired effect.

“We’ll race for deeds,” he told her with a sneer.

“You mean when I win, I get your boat?” Oceanvine asked. “I don’t want your boat.”

“Now who’s chicken?” he laughed.

“I’ll take that radio instead,” she told him.

“You want to bet your boat against my radio? Are you crazy?”

“Now who’s chicken?” Oceanvine taunted him.

“You’re on, old lady!”

“Fine,” Oceanvine replied. “First one to the mouth of the canal wins.”

The gate opened and the motorboat shot out like a bullet. Oceanvine piloted the *Maiyim Bourne* gently out of the lock and made sure none of the other watercraft were in her path, then with a smile on her face, she told Saltspray and Fala, “Grab hold of the gunwales, ladies.”

Oceanvine drew in as much power as she could and applied it toward pushing the *Maiyim Bourne* . The boat surged forward and was up on her foils in seconds. Flying down the length of the canal, she caught up to and passed the motor boat in just a few minutes. As they passed, Oceanvine reached out with her mind and snagged the radio. Then with a quick thought, she crushed it into a collection of shards and let it drop into the water.

“So much for the speed limit,” Fala commented.

“Oh we can slow down a bit now,” Oceanvine laughed and slackened back on the force she was applying just enough to stay a quarter of a mile ahead of the motor cruiser.

“There was an easier way to do that, you know,” Saltspray pointed out. “You could have just pinched their fuel line.”

“I could have just held them back with magic,” Oceanvine told her, “but that would have been cheating.”

“Holding them back or pushing yourself forward,” Saltspray asked. “In relativistic terms, it’s the same thing. But you’re right, pinching their lines would have been cheating.”

“I’m just sorry I didn’t challenge them to race for keels,” Oceanvine remarked. “They were the most obnoxious young people I’ve run into lately.”

“If you took their keel, wouldn’t their boat be sinking about now?” Fala asked.

“That’s the point,” Oceanvine replied. “Oh well, a boat sunk in the canal would have been a nasty hazard. Maybe that lot will learn courtesy in the future.”

Three

Southport was the poorer country cousin of Horalia's other major ports, Tarnsa and Northport. While still a commonly used port, it was smaller and badly in need of being dredged to accommodate the newer ships with deeper drafts. There were sufficient smaller ships that called on Southport to make it a prosperous city, but, with the rise of the large superships, it sat in danger of losing its prominence as a port.

"There are people talking about building an artificial island offshore," Fala commented as they approached their assigned slip. "It would feature a deep harbor for the modern ships to dock at without the even more extensive work that would be needed to deepen the harbor."

"An artificial island?" Saltspray asked. "Don't we have enough of the real ones?"

"I suppose if you build it yourself, it will have everything you want," Fala told her.

"If you say so," Oceanvine shrugged. "It looks like we have some of your fellows waiting on the dock."

"Oh, Gods! I'm not dressed properly," Fala fretted.

"I beg your pardon?" Saltspray responded indignantly. She and Oceanvine were both dressed similarly to Fala.

"I meant I wasn't in my work clothes," Fala replied. "Oh well too late to do anything about it now. They've seen me."

"Go grab a matching blazer out of the closet," Oceanvine advised. "It will at least be a suit. And it will allow you to wear your gun underneath. I assume that's required."

"It is, and thanks," Fala told her.

It did not stop the waiting agents from making snarky comments about Fala's clothing. "On vacation are we?" one of the men asked.

"Trying to establish a mode of dress that doesn't scream 'Undercover agent over here!'" Oceanvine shot back. "Honestly, don't you guys ever get tired of dressing like twins?"

"These are our usual working clothes, Lady Oceanvine," one of them replied.

"There's no law that says you must dress that way, you know," Oceanvine replied. "Even the Marine Corps allows more individuality than that."

"Personally, I like this new look," Saltspray added. "It looks businesslike without making Agent Emmings look like a transvestite."

"And these clothes are more suitable for action should it become necessary, boys," Fala followed their lead. "I know you have to wear that sort of suit, but it looks wrong on a woman. Now if you're

finished telling me I dress funny, how about catching us up on what's been going on since we left Lon?"

"We have kept the subjects under surveillance as ordered," the other man replied, "and we are working with the local police and were only waiting for your arrival before moving in to arrest the Plumbers."

"Let's go then," Fala told them.

Maiyim Acquisitions, LLC, it turned out, filled a three-story building in an office park just outside of Southport. A dozen police cars had arrived ahead of them and the men within them had donned riot gear. "Isn't a SWAT team bit extreme for arresting two real estate executives?" Saltspray asked.

"No need to take chances," Fala told her as a shot rang out. "Who fired?" she asked loudly.

Oceanvine and Saltspray hastily cast impenetrable wards up around themselves and the nearby men and women. "It came from inside the building, ma'am," one of the cops told her as his companions returned fire. Bullets splashed against the wards from both sides. Saltspray immediately adjusted the size of her protective shield, but Oceanvine recast hers to allow the police bullets to pass through, while blocking any coming from the outside.

"How are you doing that?" Saltspray asked.

"New technique," Oceanvine replied. "Lakeside came up with it during the summer session."

"Sorry I missed it this year," Saltspray admitted. "Is it completely permeable from this side?"

"Well it blocks a bit of light," Oceanvine admitted, "but I did that intentionally so others could see where it was." Another round of automatic weapons fire rang out.

"Very nice, so I can cast a binding ward through it and into that building," Saltspray concluded. She tried, but, "It didn't work. I cast the spell but it fell apart before it reached the building." Guns and rifles were going off all around them and the SWAT team was rapidly establishing a protected position.

Without bothering to figure out why, she sent a fireball at the offices of Maiyim Acquisitions only to see it fizzle out short of its target. "Sally, look at the building!" Oceanvine told her.

"I am looking at it," Saltspray retorted.

"Not that way," Oceanvine corrected her.

This time Saltspray understood and for a brief moment she shut her eyes and cast her mind forward to examine the office building. "That's the single biggest null magic field I've ever seen."

"Not seen is more like it," Oceanvine commented, "but yeah. That's why your spells aren't working."

"It's impossibly huge," Saltspray argued. "That cannot be a personal aura."

"I suppose it could be several Magic Nulls working together," Oceanvine speculated. "Cover me while I use a trance state." When she was satisfied Saltspray had a ward around her, Oceanvine sat down on the ground and closed her eyes to concentrate in spite of all the noise and activity around her. The trance state was a learning tool and as a wizard, she had not needed to use it in years.

However, there was one trick Oceanvine had been able to do since she was young and that no other mage had been able to duplicate. She could operate to an extent against a null magic field. Ksanya had often teased her by reaching out and tripping Oceanvine up when attempting to levitate an object such as the pearl she spun around her head on formal occasions, so she knew she could still do it, although not on this scale.

The large null magic field was not only stopping Oceanvine and Saltspray from attacking but would also nullify the tech-magic weapons of the SWAT team if they were to charge through it. They ought to be using normal firearms, Oceanvine thought. In the future they probably will. There's been too much reliance on tech-magic of late.

As she applied herself, Oceanvine began to glow a deep red as her aura expanded around her. "Sally, drop the ward," she instructed. Saltspray did so and a bright red shaft of light surged toward the null magic aura. The two interacted with a shower of bright green sparks as they met and then the red beam pushed a hole through the null magic field. "All right," Oceanvine shouted. "That's our way inside."

"Now there's something I really wish you could teach me," Saltspray remarked.

"I've tried, Sally," Oceanvine reminded her, "but I don't really know how I do it either. I just do."

Inside the building the fighting was door-to-door and there were several deaths on both sides, but gradually the building was taken and the survivors arrested. Even handcuffed, the Plumbers were defiant as they were led away from the building.

Searching through the now quiet building, Oceanvine and Saltspray found the large machine that had been casting the null magic field. It filled the basement of the building and Saltspray opined, "That wasn't really a perfect defense, you know. It would keep most mages from attacking remotely I suppose."

"We could have dropped boulders on them," Oceanvine pointed out as she finally turned the machine off.

"But SWAT teams all over the world are using those new tech-magic weapons to throw fireball bullets and plasma bursts and what not," Saltspray argued. "It works against those."

"Perhaps, but I think they were primarily concerned with defending themselves against mages," Oceanvine told her, "and I want to know why."

"That's a job for tomorrow, Vine," Fala told her. "For now we're establishing a cordon around the building to keep people out and we'll start checking their records in the morning."

"If the Plumbers don't get a court injunction to stop us," Saltspray remarked.

"Not this time, Saltspray," Fala shook her head. "We had the warrants before storming the building and even if we hadn't, we have the right to search for evidence here since this is where they resisted arrest."

"Well, I am tired," Saltspray admitted, "must be getting older."

"I'm already too old for this," Oceanvine added. "And it's getting late. Let's get back to the boat."

“I need to be debriefed this evening,” Fala told them, “but I’ll drop you off and rejoin you when I can.”

Four

“Well, we already knew Chastigon was not the only place Maiyim Acquisitions, LLC was buying up property,” Oceanvine noted the next day as they went through the records, “but we might never have known they were doing pretty much the same thing all over the world under a variety of names.”

“On the surface, they seemed just like any other business,” Fala remarked. “They bought cheap and had started building all manner of money-making businesses in place of the ones they bought. Casinos and hotels seem to be their favorite sort of business although I think they had the entire entertainment industry covered as well. And while they didn’t target only non-humans everywhere as they did in Tamd, they evidently did resort to a number of strong-arm and illegal tactics.”

“What bothers me is how like One Maiyim this is starting to sound,” Saltspray told them.

“In what way?” Fala asked as she entered the cabin from outside.

“Well, they didn’t do everything themselves,” Saltspray replied, “but when they did deal with other entrepreneurs, they were inevitably people and companies who have been on the record as being pro-ecology but anti-magic.”

“This isn’t One Maiyim, Sally,” Oceanvine maintained, “although their views are similar. This anti-magic sentiment is something we’re going to have to live with for a long time, I fear. It’s an infection of the mind and a lasting one bolstered by both fear and envy. It’s going to take generations to cure. Of course, I wouldn’t be surprised if an organization similar to One Maiyim rises to take its place, though.”

“Actually there are several such organizations,” Fala informed them, “but the Royal Security Force has its eyes on them. So far as I know we’ve yet to find any signs of subversive activity from any of them, nor have they employed the use of rogue mages, but we keep watching.”

“Well, I suppose people have a right to believe what they want,” Saltspray remarked uncertainly, “wrong-headed as that may be.”

“And rogue mages will always be a problem so long as there are any mages at all. That’s just the nature of people, I fear. Look at poor Basket. He was young and idealistic, but he was forced to go

rogue. Even the good ones can be subverted if we're not careful. And there will always be some who either cannot make a legitimate living or else who cannot be bothered to try."

"Or are just plain greedy," Saltspray added.

"Well, rogues are a normal sort of problem so long as they don't band together in a secret cabal," Oceanvine told her. "This null-magic field generator bothers me far more. Someone must have built it. Is it patented? I doubt that, though in the right hands it would probably very useful."

"How many people could duplicate it?" Saltspray asked.

"I imagine most good tech-magic firms could put a team together and manage that," Oceanvine remarked.

"It's a shame we can't find out from the Plumbers, though," Fala remarked.

"We could ask," Oceanvine told her.

"Only if you want to hold a séance," Fala replied.

"What?"

"They were found dead in their respective cells two hours ago," Fala told them with a yawn. "I've been up all night, this was just the capper."

"We should check for spell traces," Oceanvine told her. "Where are the bodies?"

"The city morgue," Fala replied. "I told them to hold off on the autopsy until you could be consulted."

"I haven't been involved in many autopsies," Oceanvine admitted.

"I've never been present at any," Saltspray added.

"I'll be sure there are sufficient buckets," Fala told them.

"Buckets?" Saltspray asked, confused.

"For when you lose your breakfast," Oceanvine told her, getting up and preparing to leave the boat. "I can take the sight of all but the most gruesome deaths and if this is an exception at least I should have time to recover before lunch."

"I need to lose a few pounds anyway," Saltspray shrugged.

"Since when?" Oceanvine laughed. She closed the cabin door behind Saltspray and warded it to prevent intrusion.

"Since the start of this trip," Saltspray admitted. "We may be running our legs off, but I'm eating more than a bit too well."

"You could always have a salad," Oceanvine suggested, climbing up to the dock.

“When I can enjoy the finest meals in the world?” Saltspray retorted, following.

“On your own bottom be it.” Oceanvine pronounced.

“It already is,” Saltspray complained, “That’s why I need to lose a few pounds.”

“I’m surprised the boat hasn’t been serving you up dietetic foods,” Oceanvine told her.

“Nobody’s perfect.”

“Is it far?” Oceanvine asked.

“How would I know?” Fala asked. “I’ve never been here. That’s why I hired a cab.”

Ten minutes later, they were in the basement of the largest hospital in Southport. “Oh good,” the coroner, Doctor Barry Canner, remarked as they entered his office, “you’re here. I’m getting all sorts of pressure to come up with some answers.”

“My bosses want to know what killed the Plumbers,” Fala nodded.

“Your bosses are being comparatively polite and patient, Agent Emmings,” Doctor Canner told her. “The local police and the mayor, on the other hand are expecting me to do magic. It takes at least two weeks just to properly prepare the brain before it can be examined and we need to make a whole host of slides to be examined later. But ever since that mystery show about ten years ago, the one that starred a crime-solving coroner, they think I can do the whole thing in an hour or two.”

“Well, we can start with the external examination,” Oceanvine remarked, “If I haven’t spotted any magical cause of death by the time you’re ready to start opening the trunks, we will be able to get out of your way.”

“You’ve done this before, my lady?” the coroner sounded surprised.

“Only a few times,” Oceanvine replied. “General mages tend to have a very wide range of experience. Autopsies aren’t my favorite activity, but I’ve had to assist on several over the years.”

“Good, so you’ll know what to expect,” Doctor Canner replied. “Well, come along, I asked the diener to put the bodies on a pair of tables.”

“The diener?” Saltspray asked, awash to the term.

“The morgue attendant,” Doctor Canner replied. “I’ll be the prosector, the autopsy examiner, today. His honor, the mayor insists, although that sort of procedure is more often performed by one of several certified examiners associated with the hospital.

“You know we don’t actually perform as many autopsies these days as we used to,” Doctor Canner continued as he led them into the examination room. “We rarely need to if the deceased died in the hospital, for example, unless the next of kin insist and are willing to pay for the procedure. So it is only when the cause of death is entirely unknown that we find it necessary.”

The bodies of Willek and Linara Plumber lay side by side on separate tables – essentially large slanted trays with raised edges – where the diener, a middle-aged man in a hospital gown sat quietly

waiting for the coroner to begin. The bodies were still wrapped but from the way the cloth fell, Oceanvine could see they were positioned on their backs and their chest seemed higher than normal. From her experience, Oceanvine realized that was because the diener had placed a block of rubber or plastic under them to facilitate the autopsy.

“You’ve already weighed and measured them, Nyron?” Doctor Canner asked the diener.

“I have, Doctor,” Nyron replied, handing him a pair of clipboards.

Canner studied them for a bit before handing them back. “Thank you, Nyron. All right, ladies. Are you ready?”

They nodded and Doctor Canner began his examination of Willek Plumber’s remains. “A few contusions here and there,” he commented into a hand-held voice recorder, adding the precise locations and sizes. Switching off the recorder he added to Fala Emmings and the mages, “I understand they resisted arrest?”

“Fairly strenuously,” Fala answered. “My guess that is where the bruises came from.”

“Mine too,” Canner admitted, “but it is far too soon to start drawing conclusions.” He picked up the recorder again and continued to dictate notes.

When he was done, he began to cover the body up again, but Oceanvine stopped him. “This would be a good time to conduct the magical examination. Saltspray, you may be better at this than I am. You always did have a talent for healing.”

“It might not be the same thing,” Saltspray replied. “We should both look for ourselves.”

They both looked at Willek’s body and then at Linara’s but in neither case could they find any trace of magic.

“It’s odd,” Saltspray remarked, “there’s not even a trace of old healing spells or even blessings. Normally we can pick up all sorts of little background traces, but not this time.”

“True enough,” Oceanvine agreed. “There’s no trace of magic on either of them. Could they have been wiped of all traces by their null magic generator?”

“Probably,” Saltspray nodded, “but if they were killed by a spell that should have left traces.”

“Maybe long term exposure to a null magic field is harmful?” Fala suggested.

“I don’t think so,” Oceanvine replied. “Magic Nulls, like my cousin Ksanya live inside one all their lives. Perhaps there’s something about an artificially generated null magic field that is harmful, but why would they have died now?”

“I think they just were not killed by magic,” Saltspray concluded. “It’s the most likely explanation. If it was magic, it would have had to be something entirely new, something that leaves no traces. I would be more inclined to believe they were poisoned.”

“There’s no outward sign of that,” Doctor Canner told her, “but not every poison leaves a visible trace that can be detected from an external scan. Most don’t, actually.”

“Well, I think we should get out of your way, Doctor,” Oceanvine told him. “If you don’t mind, I’d appreciate knowing what, if anything, you eventually learn.”

“Of course,” he replied, “I will send you a copy of my report.”

They stayed in port for another week and a half and while Doctor Canner’s tests still had a way to go before he was completely finished, his preliminary findings had ruled out poison as a cause of death. “Cardiac arrest,” Oceanvine read the preliminary verdict out loud as she and Saltspray sat in the cabin of the *Maiyim Bourne*. Fala had flown back to Randona two days before, but Oceanvine wanted to be on hand for this report. “All that means is their hearts stopped,” she translated. “I knew that already. I can’t help think we’re missing something here.”

“Well yes, of course we’re missing something, Vine,” Saltspray agreed. “If we weren’t, the verdict on that report would probably be different.”

“I suppose,” Oceanvine sighed.

“I think we’ve done as much as we can here, Vine,” Saltspray told her.

“I hate leaving a mystery behind, though,” Oceanvine admitted. “It’s not something I’ve had to do very often, you know.”

“I know,” Saltspray nodded, “but while we have a month yet before the winter session in Olen, the weather is getting colder and the first of the winter storms can’t be too far away.”

“Good point,” Oceanvine agreed. “You know I think you were right. Maiyim Acquisitions did sound a lot like One Maiyim. They even used rogue mages and various forms of tech-magic.”

“Yes,” Saltspray agreed, “but you’ve convinced me that One Maiyim is dead and they left a legacy of fear and distrust of magic and mages.”

“It’s not as bad as it was when we were kids, Sally,” Oceanvine told her. “We beat One Maiyim and we’re making headway against anti-magic sentiment. That’s a very different sort of fight, you know.”

“Yes, it’s a fight we need to accomplish with words and our own good examples,” Saltspray agreed.

“That sounds familiar,” Oceanvine told her.

“It ought to,” Saltspray laughed. “I was quoting you. What’s wrong?”

Oceanvine was looking around the cabin with an odd expression on her face. “This was our last trip on the *Maiyim Bourne*, wasn’t it?”

“No!” Saltspray denied automatically. “We’ll have time to do this again someday.”

“When?” Oceanvine asked. “This is the first time I’ve been able to do more than sail around Keesport harbor in years and it’s been even longer for you. We just don’t have the time any more. I think it’s time to figure out what to do with her. My kids aren’t interested in pleasure sailing, and the grandchildren have never even seen the boat.”

“True enough,” Saltspray agreed. “Well, we can think about that on the way back to Keesport.”

Epilogue – Keesport

“Are you really sure you want to do this?” Terry Carter asked for the third time. His son, Geraint, was supervising the team that was packing up the mast. The *Maiyim Bourne* was still in her slip across from the Skate, but with her mast unstepped and her rigging removed, she looked like she had shrunk in on herself. “Once I put her away like you’ve asked, she won’t be so easy to get out again.”

“Uncle Candle kept her in your dad’s warehouse for decades,” Oceanvine replied. “Given the nature of this boat, I think I’d better take every precaution I can.”

“Well, hiding her in the new one will be as cautious as you can get, especially when Geraint and I wall her in afterward.” Terry replied. “From the outside no one will even know there’s a room in there.”

“Good,” Oceanvine nodded. “Now about the matter of payment...”

“Dad never took your money,” Terry replied.

“He did once,” Oceanvine replied, “from Uncle Candle. Besides, this time I intend to keep her stored and hidden away perpetually. It’s only fair I pay for the permanent storage.”

“Permanent?” Terry asked. “Nothing lasts forever. I suppose I can leave a note in the records so we won’t forget.”

“No, it might be better for everyone to forget she’s here,” Oceanvine decided.

“Even so,” Terry argued, “she’s indestructible. She will eventually see the light of day again when the warehouse is demolished.”

“Do you have plans for that already?” Oceanvine asked.

“No, of course not,” Terry laughed. “We haven’t even finished the building, but we can tuck her away on the first floor, next to the furnace room, I should think. The weekend is coming up, so Geraint and I can throw up a quick wall of steel braces and sheet rock around her and it will look completely natural. Anyway, the new warehouse won’t stand forever, you know, but we are building for durability. Assuming Carter Imports stays in business it ought to be good for at least a century maybe two.”

“Will that be long enough?” Saltspray asked Oceanvine.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Nildar and Wenni always said to think of the *Maiyim Bourne* as a test.”

“The power to run the spell complex that enchants her comes from movement,” Saltspray reminded her. “Maybe a century or two of inactivity will cause the spells to wear off.”

“I seriously doubt that,” Oceanvine replied. “The magic of the Gods does not wear off that easily. I have to face it; the next person to use this boat, if anyone ever does, probably will not know what she is nor understand the great responsibility they will undertake by choosing to use her.”

“Maybe you should leave them a note,” Saltspray shrugged, only half-seriously.

“Good idea,” Oceanvine agreed.

“I was only kidding,” Saltspray admitted. “Who’s to say they’ll even find it?”

“They’ll find this one,” Oceanvine replied. “They won’t have a choice. Excuse me. I’ll need to do this in private.”

“I’ll load up the car then,” Saltspray told her.

“Thanks,” Oceanvine replied, disappearing back into the cabin and closing the hatch behind her. She remained inside for the next hour and when she re-emerged, staff in one hand and one of the boat’s ever-filling money bags in the other, she was looking very tired. Then she closed the hatch once more and raised her carved wooden staff to cast a ward over the hatch to keep people from entering the boat.

“That’s one heck of a ward,” Saltspray remarked when Oceanvine had finished.

“It’s nothing complex,” Oceanvine replied tiredly, “just impermeability, but I want it to last as long as possible.”

“You put enough into it to last a century, maybe longer,” Saltspray pointed out.

“That’s the idea,” Oceanvine told her. “Terry, take this.” She thrust the bag of coins at him.

He looked inside and remarked, “That should cover storage for a millennium and college tuition for all my descendants besides.”

“Hardly,” Oceanvine disagreed, “and I owe you and your family so much. This is really just a token.” She climbed up to the wharf with a bit of difficulty, but Geraint offered his hand and helped her. “Thank you,” she practically whispered. Then she turned back to take one last look at the *Maiyim Bourne*.

Oceanvine paused there for such a long time that Saltspray became concerned. “Are you all right?” she asked.

“Just tired, Sally,” Oceanvine replied. “That spell took a lot out of me. More than I expected.”

“Not the ward, I’m sure,” Saltspray remarked. “What did you do in there?”

“I’ll explain it on the drive home,” Oceanvine promised. “Let’s see if we can get to Renton tonight and maybe spend a week there this time.”

Saltspray agreed, “Jill will like that.”

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