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World of Water

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Forward

Having started writing these forwards I feel somewhat compelled to keep doing so. I've said before that a well-written book really ought to stand on its own merits without further explanation by the author (usually followed by a joke explaining that was why I wrote them), but in this case the book probably can stand on its own. I think the maps will actually require more explanation than the story itself.

Speaking of which, for those with no interest in studying the cartography of invented worlds, the world this story takes place on is called Maiyim. The name comes from the Hebrew word for water, although there was no intention to imply the world had any connection to Earth in our or any reality. It just seemed like a lovely name for a world whose surface was mostly water and whose land masses are mostly grouped into three large archipelagos. Actually Earth's surface is mostly water too and I think that's part of what helped me decide on a name. We live on Earth, so this story would take place on "Water," but that sounded like a silly name for a world. I considered several languages but quickly decided on "Maiyim."

There are no continents on Maiyim and only a few large islands. Aside from the three main archipelagos, there are a few much smaller island groups and several islands that just sort of sit there minding their own business. By the time the series is concluded the characters and readers will have visited or heard about most of them, but in this first book of four, they won't be traveling very far; just from one island to the next.

The only feature about this story that might need explanation is that when I was planning the "Maiyim Tetralogy" I decided I didn't want to follow the historic fantasy stereotype of placing it in a pseudo-medieval world. I've read many such stories and while I liked most of them, I wanted something different. Little did I understand that this particular subgenre had stricter rules than I knew. Professional proof readers would write to tell me how tobacco and coffee weren't medieval. Well, heck! I know that. That's why I threw them in, to establish this world was not medieval. I was tempted to write back that they were medieval in North America and the Middle East respectively, but decided it wasn't worth the hassle. Strangely, these same professionals had no trouble with barque-rigged ships and tea. Go figure.

Anyway the cultural and technological level is roughly pseudo-nineteenth century. However, there is one major difference. There are very few gunpowder weapons, although they do exist in the world. Canons have been used for warfare, although there has not been a really big war on Maiyim in quite some time, but muskets, rifles and other hand-held guns never gained popularity. There hasn't been much need for them in warfare and they are considered too loud and unaesthetic for hunting with. This hasn't stopped some enterprising craftsmen from making and trying to sell them, but hopefully those craftsmen have a day job to pay the bills. Elsewhere on Maiyim there are also inventors working on a number of modern inventions such as steam engines, automobiles, telegraphs, the electric lamp, aspirin and so forth, but as this story takes place these are either still in the research stage or so new they have not yet hit the open market. Maiyim is on the cusp of a technological explosion, but you'll only see it if you look hard. I imagine that one hundred years after the stories planned for this series Maiyim will be an entirely different world. It might be interesting to set a story in that world too...

Finally, this book really is offered to you free. However, if after reading it you feel it was worth a dollar or two, rather than sending it to me, why not make a donation to the New Bedford Whaling Museum? The New Bedford Whaling Museum is the world's foremost museum devoted to the historic interaction of humans with whales worldwide. The Museum explores the history of whaling worldwide and the rich cultures -- and conservation issues -- it inspired. Their address is 18 Johnny Cake Hill, New Bedford, MA 02740-6398 Tel. (508) 997-0046 <http://www.whalingmuseum.org/>

Jonathan Edward Feinstein
Wesport, Mass April 29,2003

World of Water

Prologue

Two men stalked silently through the paths of a tract of sub-tropical forest that had been set aside centuries earlier as a game preserve.

"Your grace," one man whispered gently to the other pointing off to one side. There in the bright light of a full moon stood a magnificent ten-point buck. The rack would make an excellent trophy and the venison would make a welcome change from the domestic meats that had been served at the ducal tables recently.

The duke nodded. His long hair shimmeringly reflected the moonlight as though made of fine silver. He carefully selected an arrow from his quiver and knocked it on the silken bow string. As he drew back on the powerful bow, something spooked the animal and it bolted before he could get off his shot.

"Damn," the duke said, not really feeling it. Hunting, a somewhat archaic activity, was only an excuse to get away from the stress and tedium of administering the duchy in the name of His Majesty. He had asked his eldest son to join him, but the lad had begged off. There were visitors to the ducal court and one was a pretty young lady of suitable rank and status. Good for him, Duke Astel thought to himself. Far be it from me to stand in the way of love. There was little enough love within noble marriages as it was. Astel had been one of the lucky ones and encouraged his children to do the same. It was too bad that social rank was such an issue. So much had changed over the last hundred years or so, why wasn't it time for that to change as well? Astel laughed to himself over his radical thoughts. It was funny. He was widely regarded as one of the most conservative of nobles and yet what could be less conservative than the abolition of the royal marriage laws?

"What is so funny, your grace?" the gamekeeper asked politely.

"Hmm? Oh, nothing, Aistan. Shall we follow the buck do you think?"

"Whatever your grace wishes."

"Let's. It's early yet and it is an excellent night." The gamekeeper nodded and they followed the path left by the buck.

It was a perfect night. A warm front had swept across the island earlier that day with balmy breezes that gave lie to the winter season, carrying with it a short mild shower that cleaned the air. The air was delightfully scented with the aroma of rotting pine straw that was stirred up by their footsteps. They were able to follow the buck almost silently and with ease. Both men were excellent trackers from their years of experience and they soon found the buck about a mile away where it had once more taken up its browse.

Duke Astel knocked another arrow and drew back on his well-oiled yew wood bow. Then just as he had the deer in his sights the beast suddenly collapsed.

Both men looked at each other in astonishment and then ran to where the buck had fallen expecting to see another's arrow in its flank. When they arrived, however, what they saw was a strange glowing symbol on the side of the buck that slowly faded and left a black mark of the same shape.

"Odd," Duke Astel whispered.

"Tis evil, your grace!" Aistan replied in horror.

Part 1 QUARNA

One

"Come, pretty Nellie, and sit thee down by me," Silverwind drunkenly sang, unsuccessfully attempting an obscure little dance normally practiced only by the sailing elves of Quintituc Island, but succeeding only in knocking over the drinks on the next table in the crowded tavern tap room.

The room became noticeably quieter. It was a typical summer crowd; the locals stayed on their side of the taproom and the transients - traveling merchants and such - took whatever was left. The major difference was in their attitude toward Silverwind. The locals knew him, he'd been living in Renton for years. They were glad to have a magician of his standing among them when there was trouble. The rest of the time, however, they were perfectly glad to keep a polite distance, watching him out of the corners of their eyes when he was in sight. The transients just plain didn't know any better, so when Silverwind spilled his neighbors drink the locals all stopped talking and the transients carried on as usual.

"Here now!" a large dark-haired wagoner protested indignantly over the conversion of his ale into a garment. He got out of his chair, fists clenched, ready for the fight he believed was inevitable.

"Oh," Silverwind replied looking sadly at the empty glasses and ignoring the man. "Sorry. I'll fix that." He stared blearily at the spilled glasses for a moment until they suddenly disappeared to be replaced by a single dove which, panicked by the noise and confusion of the tavern, squawked and flew up to the ceiling of the room where it perched on one of the exposed beams. "Oops," he hiccupped and shrugged. "Why does that always happen?" Earlier in the evening he had been morose and had been drinking to forget. Whatever it was he wanted to forget, however, was now very much forgotten.

"What about our drinks?" the dark-haired man demanded, grabbing Silverwind by his tunic. The man's

two female companions were still complaining unintelligibly while mopping themselves off. Silverwind turned the same gaze at the man that he had previously turned on the spilled beer.

"Here you go," a pretty blond-haired woman in her mid-twenties said crisply, placing three new glasses of thick dark ale on the table along with a large bowl full of the dark red pretzels indigenous to the Quarna region. It finally occurred to the man that perhaps he was in big trouble and he tried to disengage himself from Silverwind's gaze. "Silverwind," the blond admonished the wizard, turning his head around to face her, "let the nice man go!"

"Ah, Oceanvine," Silverwind smiled, letting his erstwhile captive drop back into his seat. The hush over the dark and smoky room persisted for another two seconds and then everyone in it simultaneously returned to whatever they had been doing before the incident. The locals especially avoided looking at the dove that still perched on the beam, although a few of the transients found themselves constantly glancing at it, wondering whether it was real and if it would soon disappear as easily as it appeared.

The woman's long hair almost glinted of gold as it contrasted against her smooth well-tanned skin. "Sweet Oceanvine, and did you bring a refill for me as well?"

"You've had enough," she replied curtly.

"I have?" Silverwind asked, puzzled. "Oh well, you ought to know. Come, pretty Oceanvine..." he returned to his song as Oceanvine returned him firmly to his seat. Many men tried to sing while drunk, but Silverwind was the only man she had ever met who tried to dance and practice magic when in that condition. The floor around their table was heaped with trampled flowers that Silverwind had materialized earlier that evening, imagining them being presented to the lady of his song. Sadly, to her knowledge, he had never displayed much aptitude for dancing, although his voice was a pleasant baritone, and he was one of only a handful of wizards on all of Maiyim.

While he continued his song, now substituting Oceanvine's name for "Nellie", she threaded her way gracefully to the tavern bar, pausing only to burn the fingers of one drunk who tried to take liberties as she walked by. Obviously not a local. She soon returned with two large mugs of honey-sweetened coffee and gave him one. It would do nothing toward sobering him up, but in his current state he would drink just about anything and maybe she wouldn't have to carry him home again.

Silverwind was also one of only a handful of magicians in the world capable of mustering up the necessary concentration to perform magic while drunk, although his judgmental skills predictably degenerated with each drink. Oceanvine knew for a certainty that she could never do it, and like most mages she was very careful about the amounts of alcohol she consumed.

More than once over the past three years since she came to study and work with Silverwind, he had surprised her with his abilities. She had felt so honored that the great Silverwind - the man who had been the all-time youngest to attain the rank of wizard - had allowed her to assist in his research. She had come to recognize a pattern to his drinking. Normally, he behaved like any other mage, never drinking more than one or two in an evening and that only very rarely. But every so often he needed to get well and truly plastered. These occasions had become gradually less frequent in the last year and a half, but the ninth day of Midsummer, it seemed, was a constant. Tonight she was determined to learn why.

The tavern door opened and a young man dressed in the manner of the nobility walked in. He paused by the door while his eyes adjusted to the dim smoky light of the tavern's front room. He placed his hand on the right doorpost, muttered a quick blessing, and then made his way between the closely packed tables to the bar. The locals stopped talking again and turned to watch the newcomer's every move. The

transients, of course, paid no attention to him. He tossed the bartender a few coins and Oceanvine saw the bartender point toward the table she shared with Silverwind.

Silverwind finally stopped singing when he realized that he had forgotten the lyrics several minutes earlier and had lapsed into nonsense syllables. Instead he just sat in his chair sipping his hot coffee with a bemused smile on his face and winking at the serving girls as they walked by his table in hopes they would bring him another ale. Oceanvine would glare at him and them whenever he did this. The serving girls knew both of them well enough not to mix in and restricted their reactions to an occasional wink back at him, when they thought they could do so without Oceanvine catching them at it. Only a fool would intentionally cross a mage, and even a fool would think twice before crossing Oceanvine.

The young noble started toward them but one of the wagoners shoved a spare chair out as he passed and the nobleman landed face-first in the pool of spilled ale. The entire room erupted in laughter at the young man's misfortune. Noblemen were scarce in the little village of Renton - just one of the reasons Silverwind had chosen to set up shop in the area - and were not generally held in high esteem here.

The young noble got up and gave a faint embarrassed smile to nobody in particular; he really wanted to start a fight with the man who had tripped him, but his mission was too important to get distracted now. He eventually arrived at Silverwind's table after narrowly avoiding a second fall by slipping on the now forgotten flowers. The locals continued to scrutinize him as he began to speak to Silverwind and Oceanvine.

"Good even, gentle folk," the noble addressed the two nervously. He hoped that would be a safe enough greeting; regardless of their blood all mages were considered gentry by courtesy at least.

"Even, stranger," Oceanvine replied shortly. His clothing she noted was well made, but lacking the frills and trims she would have expected from a nobleman. It was as if he had told his personal tailor to make clothing more suitable to a man of lower rank, only to have him omit the ornamentation from a suit that was already in progress. The gold and onyx signet ring he wore on his well-manicured hand, however, told her what she wanted to know. She couldn't make out the details of the device but the overlying label clearly marked him as an eldest son. As she studied the man, Silverwind just smiled with drunken pleasure.

"I am looking for Silverwind the Wizard," the noble continued.

"What for?" Oceanvine asked.

"You found him," Silverwind said at the same time, waving him to a seat. Oceanvine just shook her head in frustration. Drunk or sober, Silverwind was rarely cautious with strangers. She wondered once more just what sort of life he led as a child that made him so open and friendly. Her own childhood had taught her to trust no stranger, especially one who hadn't even identified himself yet.

"Oh good," the noble said, taking the offered seat. Once he sat, the locals ceased to pay attention to him; it was no longer any of their business. "You're not an easy man to find, sir."

Silverwind shrugged, "I've been here all evening."

"I've been searching for two weeks, sir. Do you have any idea of how many small villages there are in this part of Quarna?"

"Twenty-one, unless you count Golton. I don't. Nobody lives there anymore." The noble just stared;

Silverwind winked.

"Who the hell are you, highborn," Oceanvine snapped at him, "And what do you want with Silverwind?" He spun in the chair and faced her and as her eyes caught his he felt the blood drain from his face as though he were looking at his own death. Silverwind looked on with interest, wondering if he should interfere; Oceanvine was rarely this hostile toward strangers. Oceanvine was very much surprised herself; there was something about this young noble that deeply bothered her.

"I, uh," the noble began. He gulped visibly, shut his eyes for a long moment and then started again. "I am Jason, heir to the Duchy of North Horalia. We have a problem and I was sent to find him." Jason turned to face Silverwind. "To find you, that is." Silverwind resumed his smile and finished his cider. "The problem is that our deer have been dying."

"Sounds like a bad case of poachers to me," Oceanvine replied.

"Does a poacher kill an animal and then leave the carcass behind almost untouched?" Jason countered, staring her down. Now it was Oceanvine's turn to feel uncertainty. Jason pulled a piece of paper from a pocket in his tunic and handed it to her. "Each one had that mark on it."

Oceanvine unfolded the paper and shrugged. She passed the paper to Silverwind. His face went white briefly, then the color rushed back and his laughing eyes went bleak as he turned toward Jason.

"Do you know what this is?" Silverwind asked with only a trace of the ale that still coursed through his veins showing through in his voice.

Jason nodded. "I've been told. Look, can I buy you a drink? I sure need one."

"Of course," Silverwind agreed happily. Before Oceanvine could stop him, Jason was up and going to the bar.

"Silverwind," she admonished him, "do you think that's wise?"

"Wise, Vine?" His voice was beginning to slur - starting to show just how drunk he was. "No, I don't think it is wise at all, but it is necessary."

"Why, Silverwind?" she asked, not bothering to correct him like she usually did when he called her Vine. She had chosen her name with care and pride and didn't appreciate anyone taking liberties with it. She hated that almost as much as being called by her given name, Elinor. "Why is it necessary?"

"No, Vine, not yet. Not tonight." Jason returned with two pints of ale and a half-pint of hard cider for Oceanvine. A serving maid followed him back to the table with a bowl of pretzels, dropped it off, and promptly absented herself.

"No," Oceanvine told Jason coldly as he placed the glass in front of her.

"Drink it, Oceanvine," Silverwind told her firmly. She started to protest, but his eyes stopped her. When had they become so hard?

"Thank you, Jason of North Horalia," she said formally but with less hostility than before. "Perhaps I shall have a drink."

"The bartender said that was your favorite," Jason said quietly. Oceanvine snapped a quick glare at the bar, but Old Jack stood there with that big grin on his face that always made her feel better. She turned back to Jason and Silverwind and nodded quietly, taking a quick sip of the beverage to mask the secret smile of pleasure that threatened to break out.

"This really isn't my field, you know," Silverwind told Jason a few minutes later after drinking down over half of his pint. "You would have been better advised to have consulted Meadow of Orent on the matter. That would have involved the longer trip to the Bellinen Archipelago, I'll admit, but he charges considerably less and his knowledge is far superior to mine in the maladies of animals." He finished the remaining ale.

Jason watched the wizard drain the glass in a single draft before answering. "We did hire the Wizard Meadow, sir. He is a guest in my father's castle even now. He was the one who recommended you."

"Oh," Silverwind smiled, feeling the ale's effect in full force once more, "how nice of him." Having said that, he slumped facedown on the table. The locals, who always kept watching Silverwind out of the corners of their eyes, nodded knowingly as he passed out and then subtly relaxed. No one was getting turned into a fairy tale tonight.

"Wonderful," Oceanvine remarked staring at the comatose wizard. "This is all your fault, highborn. Well I hope you're stronger than you look because you're going to have to help me carry him home tonight. Damn."

"My fault? How was I to know he would pass out?"

"What sort of world do you live in, highborn? No, don't tell me. Well, here in the real world when you have too much to drink, you eventually pass out. I'm just thankful he didn't choose to get sick first this time."

"He didn't act very drunk," Jason said defensively. Oceanvine gathered herself up to blister him with words, but stopped herself when she realized that Silverwind had stopped singing and dancing just before the young noble had entered the tavern. Since then he had just been sitting, letting the room spin quietly around him. Somehow he had gathered enough control to speak intelligently to Jason; more of Silverwind's legendary will, no doubt. Too bad he couldn't have held out until they got home.

"You should have seen him just before you got here," she told Jason finally. "Finish up your drink and we'll get him home."

"Is he really the great Silverwind?"

"Of course he is. Nobody around here would dare to impersonate him. Why?"

"Oh, nothing, I guess," Jason replied. "I supposed I was expecting someone a little more impressive. He looks so ordinary." Just then a white and gray glob plopped down on the hard wax surface of the oaken table. Jason looked up and saw the dove still perched on the joist.

"Like I said, you missed the main show," Oceanvine told him. "All sheets to the wind and he still managed a creation spell that only a handful of mages in the entire world are capable of."

"That dove?"

"You got it. Old Jack's not going to appreciate the droppings though. Come on, help me get him out of the chair. I don't suppose you got here in a private carriage like most highborns."

"No, on a horse," Jason replied.

"It'll do. We walked in tonight. Damn! He promised me he wouldn't drink too much tonight."

"Does he always drink this much?"

"Hasn't been this bad in a year." A few minutes later they had him up, slumped over the back of Jason's horse, and they started walking down the road. "We live a couple miles outside of town," she told him.

"Your name is Vine?" Jason asked innocently.

"That's Oceanvine, highborn!" she snapped. "Get it right."

"My name is Jason, Oceanvine!" Jason returned in the same manner, heedless of the dangers inherent in angering a magician, "Not 'highborn'. My friends call me Jason. Don't care to be my friend? Then m'lord will do, but don't give if you can't take!" Oceanvine glowered at him and for the first time he remembered who he was talking to. *Is she the wizard's apprentice*, he thought, *or his associate?* Either way he could be in deep trouble. Uncertain whether he should back down, he returned her angry stare. Fortunately Oceanvine gave up first.

"You're right and I'm sorry, Jason," Oceanvine apologized after full minute. "I always was a little too quick to take offense, even when it wasn't offered. Thought I'd grown out of that years ago. It's just that you remind me of another nobleman's son some years ago, before I entered the university. I think that's why I went, in fact."

"May I ask what happened?" Jason's manner made it a polite request.

Oceanvine paused to consider that for a moment. It wasn't a story she liked to tell. "All right," she replied at last. "It's a long story but I'll keep it short. We're practically neighbors; I grew up on Kern just outside the County seat of Medda."

"Kormac of Medda," Jason sneered.

"Oh, you know the man?"

"Not well, but better than I like. Actually we're first cousins and now that you mention it, there is a slight family resemblance."

"Just enough to set me off. Even before his father died, leaving him the coronet, he figured he owned the place. Well in a sense maybe he did, but we've come a long way since the nobility owned the people as well. Most of the girls were afraid of him and what he could do to their families, but I thought I was different.

"You know we're not permitted to practice magic above the common level without formal instruction either at University or from a graduate." Jason nodded. "Well I always did have a natural aptitude and my father scraped together enough to pay for instruction from the town master after my other schooling. Actually he only managed enough for the first two lessons, after that it was up to me to earn the money for lessons. I spent that first year running errands, cleaning houses, and well just about anything else I

could to earn the cash. I must admit that I very much looked the part of scruffy apprentice. Finally, Master Sunbear told me that he was sponsoring me to the University at Randona. It was the happiest day of my life." Even in the nighttime light of Midbar, Jason could see Oceanvine's eyes shine with the memory. "He actually gave me some money and told me to go buy a new wardrobe. No student of his was going to arrive at the University in rags, he said.

"Well, I went right out and bought my new clothes, two sets of everyday clothes and one special outfit for the holidays. I wasn't much to look at before. I wore loose hand-me-down clothes that hid my figure and I think my nose and left cheek had an almost permanent smudge on them - not the sort to attract Kormac's eye to be sure. I cleaned myself up and put on one my new outfits to show Sunbear. It wasn't the special dress, just an everyday blouse and skirt ensemble in shades of red and gold.

"I was on my way to Sunbear's office when I ran into your cousin. He made a few lewd comments and when I wouldn't play along like some of the other girls did, he got angry; tried to command me to go to bed with him."

"I think I see where this is going," Jason interrupted. "You're the one who cursed him with impotency."

"Nothing so obvious," she replied with a self-satisfied smirk. "I gave him a gift."

"A gift?"

"Oh yes, one that would have made him the finest ruler Medda ever had if he used it correctly. I merely gave him the ability to feel whatever the person closest to him was feeling. Of course he had no control over the ability - he couldn't turn it on and off - but it could still have been a gift.

"That's horrible!"

"It was his own tendencies that made it a curse," Oceanvine replied calmly. "Whenever he frightens some young girl, he becomes frightened. When he hurts someone, he feels the pain. I guess he never learned how to make anyone happy. Such a waste."

"You can do that with magic?" Jason asked in awe.

"As Silverwind says, you can do anything with magic if you have the will power and the control. I'll tell you right now that a mere apprentice should not even have been able to think up such a spell, much less attempt it, but I was a bit of a prodigy. I had to stand trial for using an unauthorized spell, my punishment was several hours of menial chores on top of my regular studies each day the first year at Randona, but I served that sentence gladly even though the time came out of my sleeping schedule. We turn here." She indicated a small path that left the main road out of town and wound its way up a mountain.

The path ended outside a small brick cottage and a slightly larger wooden structure that Jason might have called a barn if this were a farm, but aside from a small well-manicured lawn and a scenic nighttime view of the valley below, there were no fields. Maybe it was a carriage house.

Jason paused at the doorway to the house to lay his hand on the right door post and just as he did at the tavern, prayed, "Emtos and Emmine bless and protect this house and those within it." It was a common practice across the Emmine Archipelago when entering another's home, but the fact that he performed the blessing at a public tavern as well marked him as Horalian. Then he helped Oceanvine lug Silverwind upstairs and into his bedroom where they took off his boots and put him to bed in his undertunic.

"You can have the guest room," Oceanvine indicated an open door across a narrow hallway. "Well, we call it a guest room. It has a bed and a nightstand. You're the first guest we've had since I came here."

"What about my horse?"

"There are a couple of unused stalls out in the workshop. I'll help you set one up if you'll promise to clean up after the beast."

"Still testing me, Lady?" Jason asked with a grin. Oceanvine started at the title. It was hers by virtue of her degree in spite of her common birth, but she hadn't heard it these past three years and only rarely in the two years after graduation.

"Maybe," she grinned back, "but I also don't care to have the workshop smell like a barn, even if it is one."

"I've worked in a barn before," Jason told her. "Father insists that we take care of our own horses, at least while we're at home."

"This doesn't look like a nobleman's personal mount," Oceanvine commented bluntly and then flinched, hearing the rudeness in her own words.

"She isn't," Jason replied without taking offense. "I bought her when I landed in Keesport. She's a fine traveling horse - a good healthy filly - but as you so aptly pointed out she's no thoroughbred."

"One moment," Oceanvine said as they reached the front door of the cottage. She walked briskly into the next room and soon returned with a large cloth bag that was about one quarter full. "Oats," she explained. "We don't have too much hay or other fodder here, but..." She'd show what hospitality she could to a guest was what her expression said.

An hour later, when they were finished with the horse Jason wanted to talk, but Oceanvine was exhausted and merely replied, "Not tonight, highborn. I'm sorry, Jason. It's been a long day. You can stay up if you like, but I intend to get some sleep before dealing with a hung-over wizard."

Two

Silverwind gradually rose to the surface of consciousness as the sun rose in the sky. Still sleeping lightly, half dreaming, he knew something somewhere was terribly wrong. A feeling of wrongness pervaded his dream like an oily black shadow. Then he saw it - a shadow the color of lamp black that seemed to absorb all light, greedily reaching out and pulling it all in. The shadow grew until that was all he could see and then he too was drawn into the inky depths. He was trapped, unable to move. And then the mind-numbing blackness began to glow red. A dusky choking red at first and then the color of freshly spilled blood and finally the color of iron as it comes out of the blacksmith's forge. Silverwind felt stifling heat envelope him, roasting him to a fine turn. And then he opened his eyes to the full light of the sun, streaming in through his bedroom window in all its glory.

"Ocean..." he started to shout. She knew he normally kept that window shuttered. She must have left it open last night. And then he became aware of something that was really wrong. "Oh my head." His

temples pounded out a good stiff dance beat that might have saved his failed attempt of the previous evening, a sickeningly sour taste pervaded his mouth, and a shooting pain screamed in the space between his eyes. Dizziness, nausea, yes, it all seemed so familiar. *Was I drinking last night?* he thought. *Stupid question.* He got carefully to his feet and closed the shutter on his window. There, that was a little better.

Oceanvine knew that he liked a tall glass of tomato juice with salt and pepper after a night of drinking, therefore she went out of her way to make sure that there wasn't one waiting for him when he woke up. There was, however, a robe over the back of the chair in the corner. He put that on and made his way downstairs, wishing once more that he had managed to take the time to get the squeak out of the third one from the top.

He paused to concentrate on a proper spell that would tighten the step once and for all and changed his mind. The way his head was pounding he was just as likely to turn it into a dove, like he did the spilled beer last night.

Last night? Something else happened last night. What was it? Silverwind thought as he continued down the stairway. Then he caught sight of Jason sitting in his favorite chair with a large steaming mug of something hot in his hands.

"Who the hell are you?" Silverwind asked sharply, promptly wishing he hadn't.

"Uh," Jason replied intelligently, "Jason of North Horalia. We met last night."

"Not so loud! We did? Oh, yes, so we did. You'd better not have finished up my tomato juice!" Silverwind winced at the sound of his own voice as Jason silently shook his head.

"No," Jason whispered carefully, "there's still a pitcher full in your magic box."

"My what? Oh, the ice box," Silverwind replied, making the connection. "Nothing magic about it." He stumbled into the kitchen as Jason followed him in. "You see," he explained softly as he helped himself to his usual morning-after drink, "the melting and subsequent evaporation of the ice and water keeps the contents of the insulated cabinet cool. Simple physics - the sort most people tend to ignore, relying on magic instead." Silverwind mixed salt and pepper into the tomato juice.

"But where do you get the ice in the middle of the summer?"

"Quietly, please!" Silverwind begged, drinking half the thick red liquid. Jason tried to look apologetic. "All right. That part is magic; I produce it myself or Oceanvine does. But if there were enough demand for it, I'm sure a way could be found to store it without magic over the course of a summer." He finished the juice and looked around and saw his coffeepot on the stove. "You made the coffee?" he asked. Jason nodded. "Thanks, son, I think I like you already. I don't suppose I could offer you a job? Oceanvine detests coffee; I have to make my own." He filled a mug full of the dark brown liquid. "You didn't put sugar or honey in this, did you?" he asked, suspicious of such good fortune in the midst of his slowly receding hang-over.

"No, sir."

"Good." He took a sip, and then another. "Yes!" he sighed happily. "Let's see if there's anything to eat." He opened the icebox. "Roast venison?" Jason shook his head. "I guess you're right, not for breakfast. How are you at pancakes? I could really go for pancakes!"

"If you have a written recipe, I can follow it," Jason told him.

"Hmm. Oceanvine has a few cookbooks over the counter there." Jason opened a cabinet to discover a dozen neatly bound volumes, but none of them dealt with anything so basic as pancakes. "Oh well, bacon and eggs, I guess." Together they managed to crisp a few rashers of bacon and put a fair approximation of a cheese and mushroom omelet together.

"Good morning!" Oceanvine announced her presence with a cheerful loudness, coming down the stairs just as the two men sat down to eat. This was another of her finely calculated ways to convince Silverwind to stop drinking by negative conditioning.

"Good morning yourself, Vine," Silverwind replied equally cheerfully. He really was feeling much better now that he was on his second mug of coffee and with the prospect of some real food in the immediate future. Oceanvine let her smile slip a bit. This was the first time Silverwind had recovered this quickly from a drunk. "We left yours on the stove," he told her, indicating the food on his plate, "and the water ought to be boiling for your tea by now."

"Oh, thank you," Oceanvine replied uncertainly, forgetting to correct Silverwind about her name and still a bit surprised by his mobility but deeply pleased none-the-less at the chance to eat somebody else's cooking for a change. Silverwind smiled as she went to serve herself. He was fully aware of her campaign to reform him and even appreciated the fact that she cared enough to try, but it was still a pure joy to rob her of the chance to practice her particular form of beneficial torture on him.

"So, Jason of North Horalia," Silverwind said while Oceanvine was in the kitchen, "what are you doing here?"

"My father sent me. The ducal deer are dying."

"No, I remember that. I mean what are you doing here? In this house. I would have thought the heir to the Duchy of North Horalia would have taken the royal suite in town."

"I brought him here," Oceanvine said, entering the room with a plate full of pancakes. "I needed help getting you home and we do have a guest room after all. Call me silly, but I figure that it was time we tried having a guest in."

"Fine by me," Silverwind shrugged, "but it's not the first time I've had a noble visitor. You're very unusual, Jason. Most people of your rank would have insisted on staying in town rather than bunking in with commoners."

"I've never understood that prejudice," Jason replied. "People are people, aren't they?"

"So I've learned. Vine, where did you get the pancakes?"

"The kitchen," she replied. "And that's Oceanvine!"

"We left eggs in the kitchen. Have you been practicing transformations without supervision again?"

Oceanvine laughed, "Not hardly, I made the batter yesterday afternoon and left it in a pitcher in the icebox. Didn't you see it there?"

Silverwind looked at her askance for a moment and then glanced at Jason. Jason raised his eyebrows

but otherwise kept a straight face. "We decided on eggs and bacon this morning," Silverwind said at last.

"Good, you can have a second helping."

"I don't think I'm that hungry anymore," he replied. "How about you, Jason?"

Jason glanced quickly back and forth between the two of them and correctly decided that there was no correct answer. He quietly went into the kitchen to get the rest of the eggs and bacon.

When breakfast was over, they walked across the lawn to the barn/workshop. The view of the valley, Jason noted, was even more beautiful by daylight. The site had been carefully chosen for a commanding view of the town below - the sort of view that normally only the noble-born could afford. Renton, however, was very much out of the mainstream of activity. It was a sparsely populated mountainous area, even for Quarna. Silverwind had obviously wanted isolation with a view. He had found it here.

Silverwind opened the door to the workshop and held it for Oceanvine and Jason. As Silverwind entered behind them, his eyes began to water; just a little at first. He ignored that early warning.

"Welcome to our laboratory," Silverwind said, rolling each syllable of the last word across his tongue. "Although we usually just call it the workshop." The barn was mostly one large room with two large stone-topped tables in the center and numerous cabinets, neatly marked, along the walls. The loft had long ago been cleared of the hay that had once been stored there and now held various devices that the two mages had built for one reason or another but no longer had an immediate use for. The two stables in one corner hadn't been used, but were a structural part of the barn and so had been left empty until Jason's horse was placed in one the previous evening.

Jason had already respected Silverwind - the man was a legend across Maiyim - but a new respect, perhaps even awe, for Oceanvine dawned in his eyes. Magical research was perhaps the most dangerous occupation in the world. The average researcher didn't survive his first year and these two had been working together for three years now. How much longer had Silverwind been doing this sort of work? Jason wasn't sure.

"What sort of research do you do?" Jason asked politely.

"Very unusual," Silverwind told him. "We study the laws of science and look for new magical applications."

"Science?" Jason asked, "I didn't know anyone took that seriously anymore. No offense of course," he added quickly. Silverwind and Oceanvine chuckled as though sharing a private joke.

"That's pretty much what I said," Oceanvine told Jason, "when I first came here. We have become too obsessed with the idea of magic. We depend on it; even those who don't know how to do common household spells, most of which aren't truly magic anyway. And most of us, even journeymen and masters of the art, use magic without truly understanding how it works. Magic is merely one way to accomplish certain tasks. For example, you can lift a heavy object by magic or with a block and tackle. Which would you choose?"

"The block and tackle," Jason replied quickly.

"Why?"

"I'm no mage. I don't know how to use magic to do much more than light a fire or to purify food and water."

"Would it surprise you to learn that levitation is actually an easier spell than the two you just mentioned? It is, once you understand that the spell works by the same principal as the block and tackle - leverage. I'll bet you don't know the theory behind the fire and purification spells either."

"Well, I have had some schooling," Jason said defensively. "I've heard the theory behind the fire spell, but I still have to apply it to charred cloth, or if I really concentrate I can manage small twigs."

"That much?" Oceanvine asked, surprised. "Okay, Jason, I'm impressed, most can't do even that much. Concentration and will power are only part of the key, the other is that you must be totally relaxed to bring out your full magical strength."

"It is very hard to relaxed when you are concentrating," Jason countered.

"Yes, it is," Oceanvine agreed, "but there are certain mental disciplines that you can learn that might help. Perhaps I can show you one on the way toNorth Horalia."

While they had been talking Silverwind had methodically started searching for the reason that his eyes were tearing and his sinuses were closing tighter than an after-hours bank vault. Finally his rapidly swelling eyes came to rest on the mare in the first stall in the corner.

"A horse?" he asked. "You brought a horse into my workshop?"

"Yes," Oceanvine replied. "I didn't think it would be a problem."

"I'm allergic to horses!" Silverwind wheezed, "I'm allergic to most animals. That's why I rarely work with them."

"I didn't know," Oceanvine tried to apologize. "How could I? You never told me and we never had any sort of animals here."

"It's all right. Just get the horse outside and open all the doors and windows." Jason and Oceanvine did that while Silverwind quickly rummaged through one of the cabinets. They re-entered the barn in time to see Silverwind drink a strange potion out of a glass tube and then breathe in the vapors of a boiling red liquid. "That's better," he told them. His eyes were still swollen, but his wheezing had stopped now.

"I'm sorry," Oceanvine said sincerely, "I really didn't know."

"No reason you should have known. I usually take this potion when I have to travel. It provides temporary relief for a day at a time, but since I haven't gone beyondRentonfor the last five years there hasn't been any use for it.

"Now let's discuss this problem you have with your deer," he said to Jason.

"I showed you this paper?" Jason pulled the folded piece out of a waist-level pocket in his tunic.

"Bellinen, Emtos, and Gran!" Silverwind swore. "You still have that thing? Didn't I tell you how dangerous it is?"

"No, sir," Jason replied, dropping the paper on the table as if it burnt him. "As a matter of fact you didn't."

"What's so bad about a mere symbol?" Oceanvine asked, reaching for the still folded piece of paper.

"Don't touch it, Vine!" warned Silverwind.

"Oceanvine!" she replied automatically, but she left the paper where it was.

"It's dangerous to even look at this sort of thing. Who drew this symbol, Jason?"

"Meadow the Wizard did. He didn't say anything about danger."

"It should be safe then," Silverwind replied. "Meadow knows what this is. He wouldn't send such a power out into the world without precautions." He unfolded the paper and closed his eyes, cautioning the other two to do likewise. Then he carefully slipped into the trance state, allowing his magic to flow and study the symbol on the paper. A moment later he opened his eyes again and said, "It's all right. Meadow must have placed a nullification spell on this. Oceanvine look at this and memorize it. This is the Bond of Aritos. It is not very widely known and normally I would not show it to anyone who has not yet been authorized as a master, but we might be encountering it again and I want you to be able to recognize it and be able to defend yourself against it."

"The Bond of Aritos?" Oceanvine asked. "What is it? What does it do?"

"Nothing good," Silverwind replied. "It's most common use is to steal souls. The victim becomes a mindless hulk, subject to the will of the person who cast the binding spell. It can grab at the unwary at a moment's glance. How did this mark appear on the dead deer, Jason?"

"The fur of the beasts turned color to form that pattern," Jason replied.

"How odd. An internal application, I think. Why would anyone want to do that? Oceanvine, have you finished studying it?" She nodded. Silverwind picked up the piece of paper, crumpled it in a ball and threw it into the air. When it was ten feet above them it burst into a horrible white flame and was consumed in an instant. "Never, under any circumstances," Silverwind cautioned her, "make a copy of that sign, until you become a wizard and are instructed in the proper protective spells. To do so will literally bind your soul to Aritos." Oceanvine gulped and nodded. "I will instruct you in personal protection against the sign this afternoon."

"Why not right now?" she asked.

"We have to prepare for the journey. Jason, I'm going to make up a list of things we will need. I want you to go into town this afternoon and buy them for us. Oceanvine, you have the rest of the morning to pack up for an extended journey. Pack light, and take only what you'll absolutely need, try to keep it down to one bag that you can carry, but don't leave anything behind that you think you'll need over the next year. Tomorrow we leave at first light." Oceanvine nodded.

"Don't you even want to discuss your fee?" Jason asked.

"My lord Jason," Silverwind replied, "The lives and souls of your entire duchy are at stake. Trust me, whatever I charge you, will be a fair price."

Three

If the three left at "first light", then the sun chose not to rise until almost noontime the next day. Oceanvine insisted on packing twice as much as Silverwind told her to and his load was nearly as great. Jason left them arguing over that and returned an hour and a half later with a wagon so they could carry as much as they wanted. Finally, the three got the wagon loaded and Oceanvine and Silverwind set the protective wards up on the house and barn.

"What will those wards do if, say, an animal innocently bumps up against them?" Jason asked as he rode his horse along side of the wagon.

"They aren't destructive battle wards," Oceanvine told him. "They'll just cause anyone who touches them to find an excuse to go somewhere else. No thief can get in unless he's also a mage and if he is, then wards wouldn't keep him out anyway." That seemed to satisfy Jason's curiosity. "What sort of land is Horalia?" she asked Jason.

"North Horalia," He corrected her. "We're mostly an agricultural district. We grow all manner of tropical fruits for export, but we also have a strong tourist industry; natural white sand beaches and a surf heavy enough to be exciting."

"Palm trees?"

"Oh yes, we have about fifty recognized species of palms and palmettos," Jason replied casually. "Why?"

"I've always wanted to see a palm tree," Oceanvine said wistfully. "Aside from going to University and then coming here, I haven't traveled much."

"Why, you've practically crossed the Emmine Archipelago!" Jason exclaimed. "That's more than I can say."

"There's a lot I haven't seen yet," Oceanvine countered. "Some day I'd like to travel all over the world; to see the tidal bore of Quirmlia, cross the Great Desert of Ellisto, face the final exam of wizardry in the Five Demons, and so much more."

"It is said that it would take five lifetimes to do all that you wish," Silverwind told her in a quiet voice.

"Then I shall live five lifetimes," Oceanvine replied defiantly, "or die trying!"

Silverwind smiled. "Me too," he told her. It was Oceanvine's spirit that had caused him to accept her as both partner and student three years earlier and it was through her that his own spirit had returned.

The road led them quickly out of the mountains and on to the western coastal plain of the Quarna peninsula. The dry mountain air gave way to the moisture-laden sea breezes.

"I'd forgotten what summer could be like down here," Silverwind commented as he changed into a lighter tunic.

"Indeed," agreed Oceanvine. She had worn a cloak over a summer-weight dress. The cloak she now let slide off her shoulders. "Tomorrow I think I'll be wearing shorts. This will be a good opportunity to work on my tan."

"I'd have thought you were well-tanned already," Jason told her.

"Thank you, but I'm usually much too busy to afford the luxury of sufficient leisure time to develop a natural tan, so I have to enhance the effect by magic."

"Is tanning fashionable among the women of Kern?" Jason asked. "The women of Horalia keep completely covered when outside and apply various lotions to maintain a milk-white skin tone."

"It is that way on Kern as well," Oceanvine admitted.

"Across most of Emmine, for that matter, except in the northeast," Silverwind added.

"Then why," Jason began.

"Why tan?" Oceanvine interrupted him. "My roomie at University was an Orentan girl. I always admired the beauty of her long blond hair and darkly tanned skin. Mine won't tan to as deep a shade, of course, but I like the effect anyway."

"It is quite exotic," Jason admitted. "Don't the elves have their own university?"

"They prefer to be called Orenta, Jason," Oceanvine corrected him. "Yes there is a university in the Bellinen Archipelago and one in Granom as well, but there is no reason why an Orente, or a Granom for that matter, can not come to Randona. Many humans attend their universities."

"There were trolls there as well?"

"Granomen," Oceanvine corrected him.

"Whatever. That must have been exciting with both elves and trolls in the same classes."

Oceanvine sighed. "Jason, the racial antipathy between the Orenta and Granomen is not necessarily held by all the individuals of those races."

"Oh?" Silverwind asked pointedly. "Have things changed that much since I was in school?"

"Well, no," Oceanvine confessed. "There were incidents, but not very often and there were Orenta and Granomen who were friends."

"But not very many, were there?" Silverwind asked.

"Not very many, but some. We keep hoping to end the hatred between those two races."

"Their enmity goes back a long way, Oceanvine. Your 'One Maiyim' movement has made a start, but it will be many years before any real progress is made."

"I suppose you're right, but that's no reason to stop trying to end prejudice," she insisted.

"Indeed," Silverwind agreed.

"I don't believe I ever heard of this 'One Maiyim' movement. What is it?" Jason asked.

"Our primary goal," Oceanvine told him, "is to foster understanding and tolerance between the intelligent species. Our name was taken because we believe that only together can all the people of Maiyim achieve the true greatness that the gods intended for us. Understand?"

"Sounds reasonable, I guess."

"Really? The nobility comprises our greatest opposition."

"Perhaps," Silverwind broke in, "but Duke Astel, Jason's father, has always been an unusual man. You'll see when we get there. He has both elves and trolls on his personal staff."

"Really? That is unusual."

Late that afternoon they found a small inn next to a large stone bridge. The inn-keeper was an old sailor, a veteran of the Succession War of sixty years earlier. He had lost the lower portion of his left leg, but a peg and his indomitable spirit enabled him to move about as freely as ever.

"I don't believe I ever seen a guest bless my inn before, stranger," the innkeeper said after Jason finished the entrance ritual. "Thanks. Now what can I do for you?" The inn, smaller than the tavern in Renton, had a single public room on the first floor. The room was a study in wood; floors of carefully finished oak planks and walls of walnut panels. There were several empty round tables of some indeterminate heavily lacquered wood scattered to one side near a large fireplace. On crowded nights it would not be unusual for the poorer or more frugal guests to sleep on the floor at the end of the evening. A narrow staircase led to the upper floor where a few small private rooms were available.

"Private rooms for the night," Silverwind told him, "and dinner when you're serving."

"Aye, sir," the innkeeper replied. "Plenty of rooms tonight. The middle of the week is always a bit slow, don't you know. Dinner will be ready in an hour. Just enough time to settle in and freshen yourselves up. We've a bath-house out back if you like and the bar," he pointed at a counter under the stairway, "is always open. I'll have my boy look after your horses if you like. And if there's anything else you'll be needing, Jim-peg," he tapped his own chest to indicate that was his own name, "will see to it."

Once they'd put their bags in the rooms, Oceanvine excused herself and made for the bathhouse, implying that Silverwind and Jason should do likewise. Instead the two men made a pilgrimage downstairs to the bar.

Silverwind's normal drinking habits were far from what they had been the other night and he spent the better part of an hour nursing a pint of the dark Granomish-style ale that the landlord proudly offered as his own brew. The man knew his Granomish ale, having cultivated a taste for it during his years at sea, and served each pint in the ceramic tankards favored by the trolls rather than the glasses preferred in Quarna.

"An excellent brew, Jim-peg. Just the sort to end a hot summer day with," Silverwind complimented the innkeeper who had joined them in the otherwise empty room. "It's almost a shame you haven't any Kamo biscuits to go with it."

"The hell I haven't, sir," Jim-peg replied in mock indignation. "You just wait here a moment." He got up and went the swinging door to the kitchen. Five minutes later he returned with a small basket full of hard-crust dark brown biscuits. "There you go, sir! Fresh from the fry-pan."

Silverwind took one and broke it in half, scattering crumbs from the crisp crust. Sharp-smelling steam rose from the soft interior. He paused to inhale the aroma and then took a bite. "Excellent!" he said at last.

"Thank you, sir," Jim-peg replied. "Aside from myself and one of my regulars, you're the only one who's ever known enough to ask for Kamos with his dark ale, but I can see you're not a sailor, sir. May I ask how you know so much about Granomish ale?"

"I spent some time on the north fork of Quirmlia some years back," the wizard replied.

"Ah!" the landlord nodded his understanding. "That's where I learned how to make Kamo biscuits."

"That's not where you learned about brewing though, is it?" Silverwind asked. "This tastes more like the ales of the northern islands."

"Right you are, sir! I was stuck on Marga for two years after my accident," he nodded toward his missing leg. "I didn't have enough money to buy passage home so I worked for a brewer there. I could have left sooner, but I wanted to learn more about brewing."

"Your guild rank?" Silverwind asked.

"Journeyman. Only a troll can be admitted to the ranks of the masters in Granom's guild."

"A pity, and the Emmine guild won't recognize your rank in Granom." It wasn't a question. "Well, Jim-peg, for what it's worth I think your brew is as good or better than that of any master brewer."

"So moved, seconded and carried!" cried a voice from the open doorway. Standing there in a drab brown short tunic and light-weight trousers, stood a large man with salt and pepper hair, a matching beard, and a spark of life bright enough to light the room shining out through his eyes.

"Geraint!" Jim-peg called back. "I was hoping you'd be passing through today. Come in! Come in and meet the only other man to ever grace this inn with a taste for a real ale!"

"Gladly," Geraint returned striding boldly forward, hand outstretched. "Always good to meet another man who... Silverwind? My god, man, it's been years!"

"Windchime?" Silverwind asked after studying the man, "is that you under the beard?"

"Windchime?" Jim-peg questioned the name.

"Yes to both of you." Geraint replied. "I haven't been called Windchime in years."

"Sounds like a mage name," Jim-peg noted. "You're a wizard?"

"A wizard? Me? Not hardly. I did make it as far as master rank, but I haven't practiced in over seven years now, not much anyway."

"What happened, Windchime?" Silverwind asked. Jim-peg got up to draw another round of drinks.

"Same as happened to you, old friend. After that disaster on the Isle of Fire, I just didn't have a taste for magic anymore."

"You just gave it up? Completely?"

"Well not completely, but I took down my shingle about the same time you dropped out of sight. I looked around and decided that the one thing I'd always enjoyed was the traveling, so I bought myself a wagon and a pair of horses and I've been making a comfortable and more relaxed living with them ever since. There's a big demand for special deliveries of delicate cargos and I can charge premium rates for fairly simple work because magic is an excellent preservative force."

"Ah ha!" Jim-peg cried. "So that's how you manage to bring in all those fine wines that don't travel well."

"Exactly," Geraint replied.

"But why stop using your mage name?" Silverwind asked.

"Got in the way," Geraint replied. "Look, people hold magicians in awe and they give them respect, but it's respect from a distance. The average guy doesn't want to have anything to do with a mage unless he's in trouble. Then there's the other part of the image problem. People wouldn't come to a mage to act as a carter because they know we charge high rates for our services."

"You charge the highest rates in the business," Jim-peg told him, returning with four fresh tankards.

"True. But my customers see it as premium prices for a premium service performed by an ordinary man. To tell you the truth I can actually charge more than I ever could have as a mage in the carting business because I've built up a reputation for dependability."

"Why is that?" Jason asked, breaking his silence for the first time since the discussion had turned to Granomish ale.

"Image problem again, lad. A mage working as a wagoner is an obvious failure and you don't pay failed mages top prices to do anything. However, an ordinary man in the same business who can transport breakables and perishables reliably can ask for the world and get it. How about you, Silverwind? Until two days ago I didn't even know you were still alive. What have you been up to?"

"I went away for a while; found a small island away from civilization just to be by myself. It took me a long time to come to grips with what happened on the Isle of Fire. I didn't know if I could ever get myself to accept that sort of responsibility again. I stayed there on that island until I knew every grain of sand by name. By then I was sorely sick of the place and needed to see another human face. So I came back."

"Only part way back," Geraint commented between gulps of ale.

"I decided that I had pushed myself too hard. A wizard with his shingle out never gets a rest, you know."

"You could have taken a vacation."

"No. As a matter of fact I couldn't," Silverwind replied. "I never could turn down an interesting problem."

"Your problem is that you find them all interesting," Geraint replied."

"It's true," Silverwind admitted. "So I found a nice quiet place where very few people knew where I was and let those few who did know that I was now primarily engaged in research. I always wanted more time for research anyway, and the pace of life in Rentonis..."

"Absolutely dead!" Oceanvine finished for him as she entered the room. She looked disdainfully at his tankard but didn't comment on it. "Well it is," she added defensively when the four men turned to look at her. She had changed from her dress into a brightly colored short-sleeved tunic and short pants of the style favored on the Bellinen Archipelago, and frowned on by the majority of women over the rest of the world.

"Yes, lass," Geraint said, winking at her when she stiffened slightly at being called "lass", "it is dead there, but I'll wager it allowed Silverwind here to relax." Oceanvine nodded. "Funny," Geraint commented on her attire, "you don't look like an elf."

"Master Windchime," Silverwind cut off Oceanvine's reply, "my associate and sometimes-student Oceanvine. Vine, this is an old friend of mine."

"Pleased to meet you, Journeyman," Geraint correctly guessed. If Oceanvine were a master, Silverwind would have said so. "I'm called Geraint these days."

"Likewise, Geraint, and I prefer the title 'journeywoman'," Oceanvine replied with a smile to show she took no offense.

"Whatever," Geraint agreed easily. Oceanvine's use of the feminine form of the title, like her desire for a tan, was very much counter to established tradition, but her quirks were what set her apart from dozens of other gifted young mages. At the very least she was remembered. "You're certainly prettier than his last associate."

Oceanvine asked, "Who was his last associate?"

"Me." Geraint laughed, soon joined by the rest of the table.

"Geraint, do you have my last order with you this time?" Jim-peg asked.

"A bundle of Marga hops, and two bales of Kantaleaf, yes," Geraint replied. "Just came in on the *Randona Star*, along with the real reason I'm here. You see there's not much coincidence that Silverwind and I showed up here on the same day, just good timing since I'm here looking for him anyway." He turned to Jason, "And you'll be the duke's son?"

Jason nodded. "Is there something wrong?" he asked, worried.

"I don't know, but I have letters here for both you and Silverwind. Must be damned important if they were willing to pay my rates." He handed a pair of oilcloth envelopes to Silverwind and Jason respectively. They quickly extracted the messages within.

"Mine seems to be a repeat of what you've told me, Jason," Silverwind said without looking up from the document he was reading. "Insurance, I would say, just in case you weren't able to find me. How about yours?"

When Jason didn't reply, Oceanvine noticed that the blood had drained from his face. His hands were shaking slightly and his eyes were staring at a point somewhere beyond the letter that he still held.

"Jason, what's the matter?" Oceanvine asked. His only response was to close his eyes and lower the piece of paper to the table in front of him. "Jason?" she repeated, putting her hand gently on his forearm.

"It's my father," he told them at last. "He was found collapsed in his study with the Bond of Aritos tattooed on his forehead."

Four

"No, Silverwind, I won't join you this time," Geraint told him late that night. "I can't."

Jason had excused himself and went to sleep just after dinner. Silverwind privately suspected that Oceanvine may have administered a sedative spell on him, but he didn't pry. The normally out-going young man had become extremely somber at the news of his father's malady and wouldn't speak unless pressed for a reply.

Oceanvine herself had stayed up only a little while longer. Silverwind was not so subtly trying to get Geraint to join them and it was obvious to her that Geraint wasn't having any. She had at first felt a stab of jealousy concerning Geraint. He knew Silverwind before she did and had been his partner when she was just a little girl doing her best to earn lesson money. But even before it became obvious that he wouldn't replace her, she found herself charmed by the older man and his similarities to Silverwind.

Geraint and Silverwind had been through some great tragedy together. She didn't know what it was, but it had left its mark on both of them. Most masters and wizards were very intense men who acted as though driven by some unseen force. Silverwind's greatest virtue to her was his casual relaxed attitude. It was one that she had never before even partially understood. A mage must concentrate and relax in order to control magic effectively.

Concentrate and relax, it was a difficult combination to master. It was why many never got beyond the apprentice or journeyman level. There was a fierce competitive spirit at the university and those who graduated took that spirit with them into the world as a heartfelt need for accomplishment. She wanted to be a wizard herself someday as soon as possible. Maybe then she could take a more relaxed attitude toward life as well.

She saw now that both he and Geraint must have once been driven to the breaking point by the pressure of a mage's lust for achievement and each man had found his own way to escape that pressure. Both men had repeatedly weathered the storm, and had been broken by it in the end. It was how they put themselves back together afterwards that made the difference. Silverwind had retired to research, but Geraint had fled the practice of advanced magic altogether. Now, years later, Silverwind was prepared to go out into the world again when it was necessary, but Geraint might well spend the rest of his life in this safe harbor he had fashioned for himself.

Still, it was the similarities between the two men that struck her the most. After their shared storm, each had separately found serenity. She eventually fell asleep still wondering if she would ever be so at peace

with herself. Had she stayed up, she might have begun to understand the price of their outward serenity.

Now Silverwind and Geraint were sitting together at a table, each with a mug of Jim-peg's ale. No other guests had arrived at the small inn that night so they were alone in the room except for Jim-peg who sat quietly a polite distance away behind the bar. He had a small staff who work for and with him, but most had gone to bed by now.

"Why the hell not, Windchime?" Silverwind persisted.

"Damn, Silverwind! Stop calling me that; it warps your thinking. I'm not Windchime anymore; he's dead and buried on the Isle of Fire!" It was the first time all evening that Geraint had spoken in anger. "My name is Geraint," he continued more calmly. "Perhaps it would be best for you to call me that, old friend."

"I'm sorry, Win... uh Geraint."

"Silverwind, the one thing I had to come to grips with was how I failed you on the Isle of Fire. No, don't interrupt me. After that every time I used magic it reminded me of what happened there. I started drinking heavily for a while just so I wouldn't be able to cast a spell. Without working I was running out of money fast. Then one day I was drinking with a merchant in Keesport who had a customer who wanted a case of paperfruit from Midlon. Well, that stuff is very delicate and hard to transport and I was drunk enough to brag about how easy it would be for me to do the job. When I woke the next morning the merchant showed up with a copy of the contract he had gotten me to sign. I couldn't afford to renege and I needed the money anyway so I went through with it. The spell to keep paperfruit properly chilled can be done by any journeyman; so simple it was almost like not doing magic at all. I only had to check to make sure that the cooling spell was still working. It was then that I discovered that it wasn't magic that was bothering me. It was all our adventures. Every time we turned around we were out saving the world yet again. I tell you there is only so much of that sort of thing a man can bear until it starts to destroy him. Do you have any idea of what I go through every year on the day we met the demons?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I do," Silverwind replied bleakly. "It was just two nights ago."

"Oh gods, don't I know it. The dreams, Silverwind. Those damned dreams every year."

"Even the drinking doesn't really stop them, does it? It just makes them a little more bearable."

Geraint looked at Silverwind, a light dawning in his eyes. "You have them too?" The wizard nodded. "How can you go on?"

"I haven't been traveling much these last few years. Sticking to research mostly."

Geraint shuddered. "That's even worse. Are you trying to kill yourself and that pretty girl too?"

"That isn't the sort of research I've been doing. Remember the sort of work we used to dream of? Theoretical applications?"

"But now you're off in the field again. How can you? And so soon after... that night."

"I do what I must, Geraint, as always. Are you sure you won't join us? We may need your talents."

"Please, Silverwind," Geraint pleaded, "don't ask me to save the world again."

"I seriously doubt that it will come to that, Win... Geraint. More likely it's some blood enemy of the ducal family employing poison and making it look like sorcery to mislead us."

"In that case, old friend, you don't need me, do you?"

"All right," Silverwind relented. "I won't ask you to come with me, or to even come back to magic, but I do want your help."

"What is it this time, Silverwind?" Geraint asked, draining what was left of the ale in his tankard. He signaled to Jim-peg for a refill while listening to Silverwind's reply.

"How far do you range in your cartage service?" Jim-peg arrived with two fresh tankards and a basket of Kamo biscuits, then returned to the bar.

"In theory all over the world if the price is right, but I'd say about half my work is here on Rallena and most of the rest never gets me off the Emmine Archipelago. I can only be in one place at a time after all. Why?"

"I need someone to know where I am at any given moment or at least where I'm expected to be in case something comes up."

"What's likely to come up, Silverwind? I think I have a right to know that before I agree."

"You do indeed, my friend. The truth of the matter is that I haven't the foggiest notion. The last time anything happened in my life, Oceanvine was requesting permission to join me in my research. It's been three years - three very quiet years. I don't expect anyone to come looking for me while I'm on Horalia, but I don't know what I'll be doing after that. Probably we'll be returning to Renton, but if not..."

"If not, you want some sort of home base with someone on hand to forward messages. All right, but it will cost you. For friendship's sake I'll discount my usual rates, but it still won't be cheap. My wife - I've been married for almost five years now - handles my own home office in Keesport and is a damned good business manager to boot. If I'm not in, she'll either forward messages to me or handle them herself. I've come to trust her discretion. That better be suitable."

"Agreed," Silverwind smiled. "I hope I get to meet her as well."

"You will," Geraint smiled back. "I expect you to stay with us in Keesport before you board ship."

"Suits me. So you're a two man operation?"

"It seems to work well. Why?"

"I just thought that you could probably hire a handful of journeyman mages straight out of university and expand your business. You said yourself that any journeyman could do the work and what with the difficulty in getting jobs for new grads, they'd probably be grateful for the work."

"They'd use the job to get experience for a year or so and then move on, leaving me with extra wagons," Geraint pointed out.

"So you'd hire new people. How much experience is necessary?"

"Hmm," Geraint considered, "I'll take it up with Elewys when I get home even if I do think you're only suggesting it so I can give you better service?"

"Who me?" Silverwind laughed. "I'm only trying to help an old friend become even more successful."

"I'd never put it past you to try to do both," Geraint replied.

"Ah," Silverwind drawled, "you just have a suspicious nature, I think."

They finished their ale and soon Jim-peg was able to close up for the night.

Five

Two wagons rolled through the warm fields of the Quarna western coast; a small convoy headed north through fields of tobacco. Silverwind and Geraint were riding together in the lead, laughing at old jokes and catching up on each other's lives while Oceanvine and Jason rode in the rear wagon with Jason's horse following on a tether. Oceanvine's jealousy reasserted itself with every laugh that floated back toward her from the front wagon.

"Listen to them," she complained late the second day since they had left Jim-peg's inn, "laughing like they were heading off to a party."

"Leave off, Oceanvine!" Jason finally told her. "You've been going on like this for two days now. They're old friends and they've been through a lot. What's it to you anyway?"

"Oh?" Oceanvine turned on Jason. "Have we finally decided to wake up? I suppose that two days of sleep walking would be enough for anyone."

"As bad as all that? Well at least I've had just cause for my behavior. How about you? Are you really all that worried about Geraint? He's Silverwind's former partner, not his lover!"

"You don't know what you're talking about, highborn!" Oceanvine snapped.

"I don't, huh? It's obvious to everyone but Silverwind himself just how you feel about him. Just as it's obvious to everyone but you that Geraint isn't about to become a practicing mage again. He likes his life the way it is."

"You just can't give up magic like that," Oceanvine replied. "It gets into your blood - becomes a part of your very life force."

"Correction, Oceanvine, you can't just give up magic like that. Whatever happened to Geraint caused him to give it up and I suspect he's all the happier for it."

"You know nothing about advanced magic, highborn!"

"True, Vine," Jason replied, calmly stressing the hated contraction of her name, "but I have learned a little about people. Geraint may or may not have problems, but he isn't going back to following Silverwind

across the world. You, on the other hand, are going to have to come to terms with your own jealousy and your feelings for Silverwind."

"That's none of your business!" she hissed heatedly.

"Normally I'd agree, Oceanvine, but you forget I'm the one you've been bouncing complaints off of for two days now. If you didn't want my reaction, you should have kept your comments to yourself." As he said that he turned and looked her straight in the eyes. He had heard the old line about the eyes being the mirrors of the soul, but as he stared into the depths of Oceanvine's eyes he wasn't sure if he was seeing her soul or his own. Whichever the case he began to fear he had pushed the fiery young mage too far, but having started this contest of wills, he would be damned if he gave in first.

They held each other's angry gaze for a long time while the horses pulled the wagon on down the road. At last Oceanvine dropped her eyes, admitting the truth in what Jason had said. At least he had the decency not to rub her face in defeat. They rode on the wagon in silence until they were well within the boundaries of Keesport an hour after sunset.

Keesport was a large and prosperous port town. Its streets were paved with cobblestones of granitic dolomite. Even at night the streets were kept illuminated by natural gas lamps - the largest such system of public lighting in the Emmine Archipelago.

The south end of town was a residential suburban area as quiet as any small town at night. Couples strolled hand-in-hand through streets in the warm early evening and friends played board games in neighborhood taverns.

Gradually, as they headed closer to the center of town, the streets became busier as the wagons and horses of townsfolk and merchants continued to move even after the sun had gone to its own rest.

"Doesn't this town ever sleep?" Oceanvine thought out loud, breaking the silence between Jason and herself.

"Not if it can help it," Jason replied. "Actually, it quiets down around midnight and stays that way until dawn. You haven't been here before? I'd have thought this was the obvious port to arrive at from Kern."

"I didn't get here from Kern," she told him. "Haven't been back there since I left for the university and came to Renton overland from Randona."

"Overland? Why didn't you take a ship across the Great Bay? It's faster, safer, and probably cheaper."

"Faster and safer, yes, but not cheaper. Besides, the Innercoastal Highway is one of those wonders of the world I wanted to see."

"But the danger for a solitary traveler..."

"You mean a single woman."

"Not at all," Jason protested. "I wouldn't travel that road alone even if I were a magician."

"Well, actually I joined a merchant caravan. The expenses aren't really a problem for any mage of journeyman level or higher, you know. We can get virtually free passage by any means of conveyance we choose if we're willing to work our way."

"If you're working it isn't really free," Jason pointed out.

"Do you have any idea of how seldom a magician has to do more than start the evening fire for a caravan?" Oceanvine asked. Jason shrugged. "That's all I had to do and for it I got to see the silver sands of Grinnel, Mount Mira - the tallest mountain in Emmine - and the headwaters of the River Nildar. Not bad for a three month trip."

"The trip by ship would have lasted less than a week."

"And all I'd have seen would have been salt water and the occasional porpoise. No thank you!"

They made their way into the harbor area where the two and three-story painted brick buildings were tightly packed, often so closely that there was no discernable alley between them. Carved wooden signs over their doorways proclaimed a myriad of ship chandlers, freight services, a few shipping companies, and a large number of taverns and social clubs for the sailors.

The man who came sprawling out the open door was fine evidence of a brawl in progress inside one of the taverns as they passed. The noise from within was not much different that of the other nearby establishments save that the staccato din of voices and furniture movement assaulted the ears with a faster tempo and was punctuated with the random clatter of breaking glass.

"And my brothers wonder why I hate cities," Jason muttered as they passed.

"How often does that sort of thing happen here?" Oceanvine asked.

"Oh. Probably no more often than two or three per night."

"That often?" Jason nodded. "It happens once every few months in Renton, usually in the summer when the caravans are passing through and never in the streets," Oceanvine told him.

"What about in Randona?" Jason countered. "It's even larger than Keesport and you were there for years."

"I stayed out of the parts of town where that sort of thing happened," she replied primly.

"Well, Keesport has a worse reputation than most port towns, but they all have the problem to one extent or another. The men who make their living at sea seem to need a place to blow off steam when they come ashore. Maybe it's because they have to maintain such strict discipline at sea. At least this town keeps its streets clean."

"They are very clean, aren't they?"

"I understand that a day of street cleaning is one of the most common forms of punishment for drunks and brawlers. It's a pretty nifty solution to a problem. The town is rich enough that it can do without the fines and it actually saves money on street cleaning. I noticed the streets when I first landed here and asked about it. Evidently the system was developed through a deal with the local seafarers guild. Sailors get drunk in port - it seems to be a universal constant - but captains and ship owners are loath to pay for their damages; it's cheaper to just hire another sailor and let the first one rot. The guild, however, is there to protect its members, so instead of a fine, brawlers have to spend a day cleaning the streets."

"What if their ship leaves before they put in their day of cleaning?" Oceanvine asked.

"They miss the boat, literally. However, in this port at least, most sailors make a habit of staying on board their ships last night in. If they get in trouble there, it's a matter of dealing with the captain. The system seems to work. I plan to see about having it introduced to the cities of North Horalia; maybe it will work there too."

Finally they came to a halt outside a large green wooden doorway that, when opened, lead to another world. Between the closely packed buildings were park-like courtyards, gardens, and stables for the use of the people who lived within. The two wagons followed the cobblestoned pathway around to the far end of the dark courtyard.

"Geraint?" a woman's voice called out from a lit second floor window.

"Here with company, Elewys," Geraint called back. "We'll be in as soon as we've taken care of the horses."

"Have you eaten?" Elewys asked.

"Some."

They heard her mutter something that didn't quite carry intelligibly over the night air and the light in the room was soon extinguished.

Geraint and Silverwind brought the horses into the small stable while Oceanvine and Jason were put to work backing the two wagons up into a protected corner of the building.

"Is all this yours?" Silverwind asked his former partner as they finished with the horses.

"The whole block," Geraint confirmed. "I've done pretty well. We use the entire second floor of this side of the building as our living quarters and one of the shops downstairs as an office. We rent out the other shops and apartments. When it's light you'll see that there are several small gardens kept by some of our tenants."

"It's a nice little set up," Oceanvine said as she and Jason joined them, "Are all the buildings around here built like this?"

"Yes, it's fairly standard in the northern ports of Emmine," Geraint informed her with pleasure.

"It's a bit surprising, isn't it? I mean from the street you would never know it was like this inside."

"Indeed," Geraint agreed, "and the open construction helps makes the summer heat more bearable." He led the way inside one of the buildings that lined one full side of the courtyard, paused while the three others performed the customary blessing at the door, and then went up a flight of stairs.

A short chubby red-haired woman was just stirring the contents of a large pot on top of a wood stove as they entered the very hot kitchen.

"Elewys," Geraint began, "I'd like you to meet our guests; Silverwind, Oceanvine, and Jason of North Horalia. Folks, my lovely wife Elewys."

"Geraint," Elewys admonished him after exchanging greetings with their guests, "Did you ride these people halfway into the night without letting them stop to eat?"

"We had some travel rations," Geraint replied defensively.

"Travel rations?" She echoed him. "Geraint, that junk food might satisfy you, but any normal person needs something real to nourish him!" So saying she ushered the party into the dining room where she had already set the table and put out bread and cheese. As they sat she started filling a large bowl of thick beef stew for each of them.

"Stew?" Geraint asked. "Isn't it a little hot out for stew?"

"Never you mind that," Elewys replied with a smile that belied her cross manner and headed back for the kitchen for something to drink. "There," she said when she returned. "So eat!" The travellers, tired after the long day on the road, were stunned by Elewys' fiery vitality and had been sitting around the dining table in a daze. Oceanvine was the first to recover, quickly followed by Jason. They quickly dug in to their stew, but Silverwind continued to sit there carefully appraising Elewys.

"Any problem, wizard," she asked him lightly.

"Hmm?" Silverwind replied. "No. No problem. Why?"

"The way you were watching me," Elewys told him with an unfathomable smile, "I thought that perhaps I had sprouted horns or developed a rash of purple dots all over my face. I haven't, have I?"

Silverwind laughed, "Not hardly. Actually I was just wondering what this old fool," he indicated Geraint, "did to deserve a wonder like you."

"We met in Hell, old friend," Geraint answered first.

Elewys nodded. "And together we found our way back," she finished, exchanging a loving glance with her husband. She quickly changed the subject before Silverwind could ask anymore. "Has your journey been pleasant so far?"

"Yes, quite," Silverwind replied. "Good weather all the way and the king appears to maintaining the roads."

"The merchants are maintaining the roads, Silverwind," Geraint said suddenly. "It's no secret but it isn't widely known either. Never knew it myself until I went into business, but it's the Merchants' Association that keeps the roads open. It's all politics, court intrigue, a little money in the right hands, that sort of thing. Anyway, since it is in our own interest to keep the roads open and in good repair we make sure our lobbyists keep that near the top of their agenda. Also most of our tax money goes toward road maintenance. We consider it a worthwhile investment."

"And there I thought it was a case of the king's beneficence," Silverwind said wonderingly.

"In some ways most mages live sheltered lives. It's just like the way most people see the higher magics as unfathomable mysteries. You just aren't aware of something out of your realm of experience and for the most part the only mages who have any real political experience are the Kings' Wizards and there are only three of them at any time. Besides, why should you know about the ins and outs of public works?"

"Because it's knowledge," Silverwind replied seriously to Geraint's off-handed explanation, "and knowledge is always useful. Remember?"

"Of course. I was just pointing out why you wouldn't necessarily have that sort of knowledge. The universities ignore it even more than they do the physical sciences."

"Physical sciences?" Jason asked, surprised. "Silverwind said something about that before, but I still don't understand. Why study that superstitious nonsense?"

"Because it isn't nonsense, my lord," Elewys told him. Silverwind started to say something but she stopped him, "No, wizard, let me tell it. I'm no mage and can put it in terms a layman can understand. Lord Jason, most people think magic is just a matter of waving one's hands or going into a trance and putting in a few good words with the gods, but actually that's not the way it works at all. How do you start a fire?"

"Well, I can do a simple ignition spell, it's far easier just to use my tinder box, of course."

"And how does that work? Magic?"

"Of course not," Jason replied. "the action of the flint against the steel produces sparks which in turn light the tinder."

"Good. Now where do the sparks come from?"

Jason was uncertain but made a try anyway, "The steel?"

"Right. Why?"

"All right, you have me," he admitted.

"Friction."

"Huh?"

"Rub your hands together. They get warmer, right?" Jason nodded. "Well when the flint strikes the steel, enough heat is built up that very small particles of the steel actually start to burn. Those are your sparks, so it is heat built up from friction that actually starts your fire."

"The Orenta still light their sacred fires by rubbing two pieces of bamboo together," Oceanvine added.

"That's right," Elewys confirmed. It's called a fire saw. One piece of bamboo has a sharp edged slot in the top of a half-round piece. The other is a cut slat of bamboo that is sawed back and forth edge-on against the slot of the first piece. The principal is basically the same - the friction from all that rubbing ignites small particles of bamboo dust, but it takes a lot of effort and patience to produce fire that way."

"How does that apply to magic?" Jason asked.

"More to the point," Elewys corrected him, "how does that apply to physical sciences. Geraint told me that the very smallest particles that make any substance up -atoms - vibrate against one another."

"That is Silverwind's theory," Geraint added. "It was the basis of his wizard's thesis."

Elewys nodded at the wizard and then continued, "Anyway when something gets warmer, its atoms vibrate even faster. When a mage lights a fire by magic, he is actually causing the fuel of that fire to become warmer until it ignites."

"Okay, I can follow that," Jason acknowledged, realizing that starting a fire would be easier for him now, "but physical sciences?"

"Magic is the motive force," Oceanvine told him, "but we are now coming to understand that the laws that govern the basic workings of magic are contained in the physical sciences that have been so long ignored as worthless superstition."

"That's right," Silverwind put in. "Remember the ice box? That was Geraint's idea. It works, by the way," he said to his former partner.

"I know," Geraint replied, smiling.

"It was another application of heat transfer."

"But wasn't it the coldness of the ice that kept your food cold?" Jason asked.

"No. There's no such thing as cold, only the absence of heat. If you'll recall I told you that it was the melting and evaporation that kept the food cold. You see in order to melt, the ice needs to pick up heat from somewhere. A lot of that heat comes from the room around the box, but enough of it also comes from inside the box where the food is and of course from the food itself. So when the heat is transferred from the food to the ice and the water, the food becomes cold."

"That's hard to follow, but I think I see. So the creation and transfer of heat is not a magical phenomenon, but a physical one. But you could keep the food cold by magic, couldn't you?"

"Of course, it's the opposite of a fire spell. In fact that's how I produce the ice in the middle of summer. But if I apply the spell directly to the food, I'd have to keep doing it every hour or two, whereas I only have to make ice every few days.

"Now this is only one, well, two examples of the physical laws applied to magical theory. The more we learn about the physical sciences, the more we understand how magic works and the better our control is. You see? Then you're already two steps ahead of half the masters of the magical arts and wizards on Maiyim."

"Your theory isn't widely accepted?" Jason asked.

"There are conservatives in any field," Silverwind allowed, "but like other controversial theories before, it is slowly gaining support."

"It is already being taught in advanced magical studies in the Bellinen and Emmine Universities," Oceanvine added. "The Granomen have always been a little harder to convince."

"Perhaps we should be teaching it to children before they even get to the universities," Jason suggested.

"Now there's a radical idea," Elewys smiled.

"Well it just seems to me that if you want it more widely accepted, you should teach it to everybody, not just the few who make a career out of magic. After all it isn't magic we're talking about or any of the techniques that it takes to work magic, merely the laws by which you say the world works. Right? Then why shouldn't everyone know about it? It seems to me that there must be some way to apply physical laws to our non-magical technology. You ought to call it something other than science, though."

"Oh?" Silverwind asked, "Why's that?"

"The word has a negative connotation with most people. It summons up images of ancient alchemists trying to turn lead into gold and succeeding only in producing poisonous air that killed entire villages or trying to invent new weapons that would explode and kill the user. Science seems so unreliable to the common man, but if you can come up with another term for the same thing, it will probably be more readily accepted."

"An interesting notion. You're saying that it's a matter of perception rather than reality?"

"Right."

"Thank you, Jason," Silverwind said at last. "I'll consider that. The whole thrust of science was originally to come up with reproducible results; the superstitions came later. Maybe something like duplicative technology?" Jason nodded, but Elewys shook her head.

"Uh uh!" she disagreed. "Sounds too high brow for the average man. Try something like dupology."

"And that doesn't sound too high brow?" Jason countered. "Besides it's meaningless."

"No, just an easy-to-say contraction of what Silverwind said, and because it's a made-up word it comes complete without any negative images to distort people's thinking about it."

"Amazing," Silverwind yawned with fatigue. "In a matter of minutes, you've given me the basis of a whole new book on the subject. Thank you. Dupology? I'll have to think about that, but," he yawned again, "now I think I need some sleep."

"Geraint," Elewys directed, "show your friend to a guest room and I'll make up rooms for Jason and Oceanvine. They're looking rather tired now too." No one protested.

Of the three guests, Silverwind was the first up the next morning. However Elewys was already up and working in the kitchen.

"Good morning, Elewys," Silverwind greeted her.

"G'morning, wizard," she returned. "Coffee?"

"Please, black." She brought him a steaming cup of the dark brown liquid and a large platter stacked with fresh baked muffins. "You get up early," he remarked, indicating the muffin he had already helped himself to.

"Not all that early," she laughed. "I've only been up long enough to put the water on for coffee and to run downstairs to the bakery for the muffins. Fifteen minutes maybe." Silverwind nodded and sipped his coffee. "Silverwind, may I ask you something?"

"What you have in mind?"

"Geraint. What was he like? Before, I mean."

"Windchime. That was his mage name."

"I didn't know that," Elewys whispered. "He's told me so little about that part of his life."

"We met at the university; he was a freshman during my senior year and we worked together on old Wizard Saltmarsh's research project into the speed of light. He was a very serious student; spent every waking moment living and breathing magic. He had a pretty poorly developed sense of humor too, but that's not uncommon among magicians. Anyway, a few years later we met again just after I became a master of the arts and he graduated as a journeyman. I was looking for an assistant of my own and he needed a job. I was a field magician back then. Most of the work was forensic in nature and much of the rest involved the removal of curses or the installation of security spells. Together we were very good at forensic work and after a couple years that was all we were doing. We stayed together when we went back to the university for advanced work, paying for it by working nights and during weekends and vacations. Most of our jobs by then were coming from the Royal Guardsmen Investigative Branch anyway so they found it quite convenient to have us in Randona and usually at their convenience.

"Well, we were both very serious young men, but unlike most of our colleagues, I think, we started to loosen up a bit. Not so much that it showed, unfortunately, because it was that seriousness that brought us both down much later, but between us we learned a little about the concept of fun that we had forgotten from our childhoods. By the time I became a wizard and he passed his master's exams we were into board games, card games, even billiards."

"Sounds perfectly healthy," Elewys commented.

"Yes indeed, but very rare among mages. Most of our colleagues think of nothing but their art."

"Sounds horrid."

"It is. But you wanted to know what he was like. Sort of like he is now, but he didn't laugh as much. He took everything a bit too seriously then - we both did - but now I think his perspective is better balanced. I know mine is."

"You make mages sound like such a stolid bunch, but Oceanvine seems pretty normal to me."

"You should have seen her three years ago. I shocked her, I think. She was so serious and I kept laughing at her. I didn't think she would last out the first week, but she did and after a year or so she learned to laugh as well. She still has along way to go but she won't have to go through the sort of hell Windchime and I did, at least I hope not."

"What happened on the Isle of Fire, Silverwind?" Elewys asked gently but insistently. Silverwind said nothing but took a bite of the muffin and washed it down with more coffee. "Geraint has never told me about it," she continued, "but sometimes he talks in his sleep. He has such terrible dreams and I want to help him if I can."

"Elewys, I would tell you if it were my place, but it isn't. When Geraint is ready, he'll talk about it. I haven't told anyone about it either although it's getting harder to deny Oceanvine the right to know. Perhaps one day..." he trailed off and then shook his head to keep from falling back into the mental abyss

that still threatened when he dwelled on that one past experience.

"It's still there, isn't it?" she asked. The wizard nodded and finished his coffee. She refilled his cup and went on, "Then perhaps what I suffered was not as great as what he has been through." Silverwind did not ask. It was none of his business unless she wanted to tell him.

"Morning!" Oceanvine greeted them from the doorway as she strolled into the kitchen.

"G'morning, Oceanvine!" Elewys replied brightly, showing no signs of her serious conversation with Silverwind. "Please have a seat. Coffee?"

"Do you have some tea?"

"Of course, let me put the kettle on. Any particular type of tea? I don't have anything herbal in stock, but..."

"A black tea would be just fine," Oceanvine said quickly.

"Orente wiry leaf? Good. I think I'll join you."

"Coffee?" Geraint said plaintively from the doorway, where he stood with Jason.

"You can help yourself," Elewys told him, "and pour something for Lord Jason while you're at it."

As they ate, talk turned toward the business of getting to Horalia. Geraint thought that the *Randona Star* should still be in port and ready to begin her return trip to Tarnsa, but Elewys said otherwise.

"She's still in port all right, but she's going to be here for another few weeks at least. She has a slightly deeper draft than most of the ships in port and suffered damage to her rudder during the extreme low tides the other day."

"Odd," Geraint commented, "I'd have thought Captain Willelm would know his ship better than that."

"He does," Elewys replied, "but Port Captain Neild forced him to tie her up to one of the inner wharfs. Willelm is bringing charges of malfeasance against him. I think Neild's been getting greedy and accepted a sizable bribe from the Quarna Line. They've been trying for the Tarnsa contract for years. If the Star Line can't fill it, they'll probably get it this time, but I think Neild is for the chop this time."

"Can't say I didn't see it coming. So who's in port and heading for Horalia?"

"Just one ship," Elewys replied, "the *Skate*."

"Could be worse," Geraint conceded with a smile.

"Care to let us in on the joke?" Silverwind asked pointedly.

"No joke," Geraint told him, "It's just that the captain of the *Skate* is also Elewys' cousin."

Geraint led Silverwind, Oceanvine, and Jason through the tar-laden air of the busy wharf in the middle of Keesport's large harbor district. All around them ships' officers were supervising the disposition and stowage of cargo. Threading their way between numerous wagons they eventually made their way to the brigantine "Skate".

"What are you trying to pull, bosco?" a woman's voice could be heard coming from within the ship as they walked up the gangplank. A large black-haired man on the deck saw Geraint and waved him aboard before he could ask for the customary permission. "We paid you already this month." A low gravelly voice said something in reply that didn't carry understandably.

"What's going on, Madoc?" Geraint asked the man who had allowed them to board.

"Skipper's having trouble with the bank. They want another month's payment before we leave port."

Before Geraint could reply they heard the woman's voice again. "What do you mean you want payment every time we make port? We have a contract!" Geraint moved purposefully toward the cabin with the rest of the party close behind him. As they approached they were able to make out what the bank's loan collector was saying.

"...tract says that we have the right to collect in advance if we have just reason to believe your next payment will be late." He was a slimy eel of a man - a weak-willed toady too long accustomed to thrills of being able to bully others, especially those larger than he was. His wide bald spot was ringed by oily black hair just barely too long to leave him any vestige of a respectable appearance, and his deep scratching voice that grated on the auditory nerves of anyone within earshot should have been attached to someone twice his size.

"And what makes you think her next payment will be late, Archel?" Geraint asked, walking up to the human eel.

"When a ship prepares to make sail on a trip that might take it out of port beyond the next payment date we are entitled to exact the next installment in advance," Archel replied stiffly.

"I've never missed a payment, bosco!" the woman barked at him. Her bright red hair blazed as a ray of light shot through the doorway to ignite it. She bore only a slight resemblance to Elewys around the eyes, but had been cast out of a rougher medium. Where Elewys was round and soft, Jocey was sharp, lean, and muscular.

"My employers have noted that you've been losing money on your last few trips, Captain Jocey. They do not believe you are a good credit risk."

"I guaranteed her note personally, Archel," Geraint snarled. "If you're calling me a credit risk then you and your employers will have to prove it in court. I'll not be slandered by the likes of you."

"You?" Archel sneered. "A failed magician, good for nothing now but hauling turnips? Now, captain, pay up or lose your ship!"

Silverwind closed his eyes for a moment and Oceanvine quietly moved back out of the cabin, dragging Jason along with her.

"Failed magician?" Geraint chuckled, advancing on Archel. "Maybe so, but I still know enough to turn you into a turnip before I cart you away."

"You wouldn't dare!" Archel sneered, waving a finger in Geraint's face. Then he absent-mindedly started scratching his arm.

"I would," Silverwind quietly informed Archel, "but it would be a rather permanent solution to the problem and you wouldn't suffer much either. Starting to itch?" Indeed Archel was scratching himself vigorously all over. "Don't worry," Silverwind assured him kindly, "It will only get worse." Oceanvine poked her head back into the cabin and giggled.

"Silverwind," Geraint said, "this really isn't necessary. I can handle this fool without magic."

"Oh? Very well." Archel had been reduced to squirming on the floor. He now abruptly stopped and slowly got to his feet.

"I don't know who you are, magician," he managed to whine in his basso voice, "but I'm an important person in this town. You'll pay for that impertinence."

"You're a worthless toad, bosco!" Geraint snapped, "and should know better than to threaten Silverwind the Wizard"

"Who? Right, a wizard. Another has-been if he's associating with you. Well, wizard, you don't scare me. I have friends..."

"I doubt it." Silverwind laughed.

"Why you," Archel sputtered and recklessly attempted to punch the wizard. Suddenly he was lifted into the air and slammed backwards against a dark wood-paneled wall.

"Silverwind," Geraint admonished him with a smile. "That was really not your style."

"I didn't do that," he replied glancing at the groaning Archel, still on the floor.

"I did," Oceanvine grinned, stepping back into the room.

"Vine," Silverwind laughed, "I do believe you're mellowing with age."

"Oceanvine," she corrected him automatically. "It was the best I could do on a moment's notice. Unlike you I'm not up to spontaneous transformations."

"Not to mention the fact that as a journeyman you aren't allow transformations without proper supervision," Silverwind smiled.

"Petty details."

"Ones we should do something about," he replied with tones that implied it was an old conversation. "Well, what should we do with that?" He pointed at Archel who had stopped groaning long enough to try

unsuccessfully to get to his feet.

"Could you sort of do the same thing to him again?" Jocey asked, "Only this time toss him into the harbor."

"That wouldn't solve anything," Geraint said. He turned to Archel, grabbed him by his tunic, and dragged him to his feet. "You go back to your bosses and tell them that they'll be receiving a final payment on Captain Jocey's loan before the Skate leaves port. Furthermore, you tell them that we demand a full and public apology for this incident."

"I'll see you in court," Archel threatened.

"Yes, I'm afraid you will," Geraint replied. "Until then, however..."

"Madoc!" Captain Jocey called sweetly, interrupting what Geraint was saying. "Archel has concluded his business here. Please escort him off the ship. I don't care in which direction," she added somewhat less sweetly.

Madoc came in and approached Archel with a large grin and a larger fist. The human eel slithered out the door as fast as he could with Madoc in hot pursuit.

"I don't know who you are, girl," the captain said to Oceanvine, "but I think we're going to get along just fine." Geraint formally introduced Oceanvine, Silverwind and Jason to the captain. "Geraint, I appreciate you trying to help with Archel, but I can't afford to pay off my loan. I really have been losing money lately."

"Don't worry about it," Geraint assured her. "I'll take out a loan on some of my property and buy your certificate. Then you can pay me on your regular schedule instead of that bank."

"Won't that stretch your own finances?" Jocey asked

"Now don't you worry about that," Geraint replied. "Elewys and I can handle it. It's the least we can do for family. Or if you prefer, we could use the balance to buy in. We've been considering expanding the business and your ship would be the perfect addition."

"Now wait!" Jocey protested. "I'm the captain aboard this ship and I'll keep controlling interest in her. Of course, if you'd like to buy a minority share, perhaps we could come to an arrangement."

"We can discuss it next time you're in port if you like," Geraint said smoothly. "For now, however, my friends here need passage to Horalia soonest."

"They've just earned it."

"No way!" Geraint disagreed, "I know it's customary to give free passage to a working mage, but you have bills to pay. Charge what you normally would."

"What I normally would? Then only the lordling there would get charged, unless you're a mage too?"

"No I'm not, captain," Jason replied, "but if I understand correctly, a magician's passage is usually minimal. I want these two traveling first-class. I'll pay their way."

"All right," Jocey replied. "Normally I'd refuse, but like Geraint says, I need the money. We'll be sailing with the evening tide. Be here two hours before sunset. We'll be casting off soon after."

"Done!" Jason said, extending his hand to seal the deal.

"Well," Geraint said cheerfully later when they told Elewys about what had happened, "this has been a productive morning. Ready for lunch?"

"Hold it just a second, dear," Elewys stopped him. "You know Archel as well as I do."

"And knowing him at all is more than anyone would want to," Geraint interrupted, smiling.

"Yes, dear," Elewys agreed patiently, "and I'd have dearly loved to see him flying into the wall, but the point is do you really think we've heard the end of this?"

"I suppose not."

"Definitely not. In fact, I see his retaliation coming up the street," she said looking out the office window. "Looks like he opted to have you arrested."

A moment later the front door opened and Archel walked in behind two city constables in their bright red uniforms.

"There they are," Archel said in his deep voice. "Arrest them!"

"Trouble, constable?" Geraint asked innocently.

"Terribly sorry, sir, but this person," one of the red-suited men replied with a disgusted look toward Archel, "has leveled some serious charges against you. Come with us please."

"Of course," Geraint replied getting up.

"And the rest of them," Archel demanded. "Arrest them all."

"Sir," the constable replied with exaggerated patience, "you only swore out a complaint against Master Geraint and two magicians. Accordingly, I will arrest only three."

"But he was there too!" Archel indicated Jason. "I saw him. And that other woman is an accomplice."

"Very well," the constable shrugged and turned to Jason. "Sir, you will accompany us too please. Mistress Elewys, however, I will not take into custody."

"But..." Archel complained.

"Was she there?" the constable asked sternly. "Remember the penalty for false accusations, sir."

"No, but..."

"Very well. We will take these others for questioning."

Geraint and Elewys exchanged a knowing glance before he allowed himself to be escorted out the door.

"I'll be back for you," Archel said nastily to Elewys and left.

The party walked peacefully between the two constables while Archel gloated all the while. The local constabulary was only a few minutes walk away and the prisoners were escorted politely to a small but comfortable room without a door.

"What's this?" Archel asked sharply. "They're under arrest. Lock them up!"

"And what good would that do, sir?" the constable replied. "You said that one is a wizard. None of the cells here can hold a wizard if he wishes not to be held."

"I demand you put them in a cell!"

"Oh shut up, Archel," another constable said as he approached them. His uniform, encrusted with gold braid across the shoulders, proclaimed him the captain of this precinct. "I have heard enough out of you today. Either be quiet or I'll arrest you myself for disturbing the peace." Archel shut up. "I'm sorry to have to detain you, Master Geraint, but I must follow procedure."

"Of course, Captain Milon. So what's the drill?"

"Well I figure that all this is a waste of time, but I've summoned the municipal master magician. He can verify your statements, and we'll settle this in an hour or less. Ah, here he is now."

Through the open doorway they saw a bald portly man in a the archaic-style robe that some magicians affected as a mark of their profession. Captain Milon walked to meet him halfway and then escorted the mage to the room where the prisoners were sitting.

"Now, captain," the master asked seriously, "What is this little problem you asked me here to solve?" Then he looked at the people in the room. "Silverwind, is that you? I heard you were dead."

"Hello, Firefly. Coming up in the world I see," Silverwind replied.

"Here, what's this?" Archel complained. "You know these people? Captain, how can I expect a fair hearing?"

"Archel," Firefly said disgustedly, "I am the master mage of this city and accordingly I serve its interests first and foremost." He did not add that he had never liked Silverwind but only because he disliked Archel even more. "Captain, I am incapable of ascertaining whether a wizard is telling the truth. I doubt any mortal could muster the power to so match Silverwind."

"What about these others, Master Firefly?" the captain asked.

"I see no problem. As usual I will let you know if I detect a lie. Otherwise I'll remain quiet." He sat down in one corner of the room and closed his eyes and entered a meditative trance. Most mages found such a trance necessary in order to build up the disciplinary control needed to perform higher-level magics.

"Very well," Milon nodded. "We'll start with these others. Please note, everybody, that this is not a trial nor can your statements here be held against you. This is merely a preliminary hearing to ascertain whether any of Archel's accusations have sufficient bearing to charge you. Archel, you may make your allegations."

Archel told a strangely twisted account of what had happened on board the Skate but Firefly agreed that it was the truth so far as it went. Archel was very experienced with this sort of interrogation, having learned from a very early age, and he knew that Firefly's spell would not tell whether he was omitting anything. The captain, however, was equally experienced and conducted the questioning personally.

"Mistress Oceanvine," he said respectfully, "Archel's accusations against you seem to be the most serious. Did you indeed use magic to attack him in the way that he claims?"

"After he tried to attack Silverwind physically, yes," she replied.

"Left that part out did you, Archel?" the captain asked archly.

"After he attacked me with magic."

"Oh? How did he do that?"

"He made me itch all over!"

"It was a simple and harmless spell, captain," Silverwind maintained, "meant merely to get his attention and to dissuade him from threatening Captain Jocey and Master Geraint. It would have worked on a more intelligent man." Silverwind permitted himself a slight smile which was mirrored by the captain.

"Ah!" Captain Milon replied, "then you accuse Archel of threatening Master Geraint, a respected member of this community and Jocey, a reputable captain of the Skate on her own ship?"

"Yes, captain," Silverwind replied smiling. "Quite correct."

"Mistress Oceanvine," Captain Milon turned to her, "Is Wizard Silverwind telling the truth?"

"Yes, captain, he is." Oceanvine smiled as well. Milon glance over at Firefly who continued to sit calmly maintaining his truth spell.

"So he is. Archel," the captain's voice became hard, "only a fool would threaten the captain on board his own ship. You wouldn't have a case against them even if they had killed you. I could arrest you for your attacks on Master Geraint, Captain Jocey, and the Wizard Silverwind, but if none of these gentles will press charges then the matter is out of my jurisdiction for now."

"They are lying!" Archel insisted.

"No," said Master Firefly for the first time since going into his trance. "That is a lie."

"Thank you, master," Captain Milon said. "I believe you can drop your spell now. Archel get out of here before I arrest you for wrongful accusation again."

"You wouldn't dare! As for the rest of you, enjoy your little victory because in less than an hour that worthless ship will be repossessed."

"And how do you propose to do that?" Elewys asked from the doorway. "Especially since I now hold the deed to the Skate."

"You little whore, just you wait. Think you've come up in the world? I'll show you what the Hook really means!"

"I no longer work for you, Archel." She stepped into the room as she spoke and circled halfway around Archel. "Your control ended years ago, slime!" Elewys put a peculiar emphasis on that last word.

"Slut!" Archel screamed and attempted to slap her. Then Elewys surprised everyone except Geraint, by gracefully ducking under Archel's intended blow. She then executed a lightning fast high spin kick which connected full force with Archel's temple. Archel, thrown back by the force of the kick, hit head first against the doorpost and then fell limply to the floor.

Captain Milon examined Archel and pronounced, "He's dead." The group stood, dazed by the sudden turn of events until Milon continued, "Such a shame he slipped and fell. Right?"

"Unless you care to call it self-defense," Elewys countered.

"Normally I might, but I would have to detain your friends and they might miss the evening tide. Mistress Elewys, I didn't know that you used to work for Archel."

"It was in another precinct," she replied. "We both left that business years ago."

"But the Hook, that's supposed to be permanent."

"Anything can be accomplished by magic and love," Elewys replied serenely, giving Geraint a loving glance.

"Mistress Elewys," Milon continued, "it would do you irreparable harm if your past became common knowledge. I just want you to know that your secret is safe with me."

"Thank you, captain."

"Master Geraint," Firefly called as the party turned to leave the room, "You have developed a cure for the Hook?"

Geraint nodded, "More accurately a technique by which a cure might be effected, but yes."

"Your mage name, sir?"

"Windchime."

"Master Windchime!" Firefly gasped. "I was going to ask you to teach it to me, but if this was your own technique then perhaps I do not have the control."

"Oh, it's not a difficult technique," Geraint replied, "but a long and protracted one. It requires much patience and an intimate relationship with the victim. For a time it replaces one dependency with another."

"But you could teach it? It would save so many lives." Geraint stiffened at the words. "You know what happens to victims of the Hook when the string is cut."

"When the controller is caught? Yes. They lose all will to live and are usually gone within days."

"Please, Master Windchime, you must teach me!" Firefly pleaded.

"He's right, husband," Elewys agreed. "You do not have to cure anyone else, but you must not keep the cure to yourself." Geraint closed his eyes and thought for an eternal minute. Silverwind and Oceanvine watched him closely for their own reasons.

"Very well, Firefly," Geraint said at last. "Come to my office tomorrow and I will begin showing you the technique."

As they left the constabulary, Oceanvine drew Elewys aside and indicated that they should follow a fair distance behind the others.

"If you don't mind my asking," Oceanvine began hesitantly, "What is this Hook? I've never heard of it."

"I wish I could say the same," Elewys replied. "It's a highly illegal form of black magic used by slavers of various sorts. First a victim is addicted to one of several drugs and when at their weakest they are given to a magician. It takes over a week to complete the spell, but when the magician is done, you belong utterly to him or to anyone he gives you to. You must obey the slightest whim of your controller. You even try to anticipate his or her needs. Your every thought is to please the controller, except that somewhere down deep in your soul you know and while on the Hook you can forever hear your soul screaming in agony."

"What sort of magician would do such a thing?"

"A desperate one. I ran away from home when I was twelve. I came here to Keesport looking for a job. I did all sorts of odd work, but couldn't find anything regular. Eventually, half starved, I was picked up by Archel; put to work as a prostitute. He had several girls like that. Then one day he found a magician who had somehow gotten addicted to Mindclear. You know what that is?"

"Yes," Oceanvine replied, "some students used it to help increase their powers of concentration. It's very dangerous because most who try it are tempted to do so again. It isn't long before the physical addiction sets in. It's very hard to get and addicts will do almost anything to get more."

"Archel found a large source of the stuff," Elewys continued, "and convinced the magician to Hook his girls for which he would give him all the Mindclear. Archel spoon fed him the drug while he Hooked each of us in turn, and then gave him the rest. He took it all at once."

"Overdose?" Oceanvine gasped.

"Dead in minutes," Elewys agreed.

"Horrible."

"Indeed. After Geraint rescued me, we tried to have Archel arrested and executed for slavery, but he cut the string on the other Hooked girls. They were dead for weeks before anyone found them and Archel had moved on to other enterprises. We had no proof against him."

"Well you took care of him today," the young mage smiled with ever-growing respect in her eyes.

"Sure did," Elewys smiled, "but we've lost most of the day. We still have to get you packed up and on board the Skate and you haven't eaten since breakfast."

"Well," Oceanvine allowed, "I am feeling a little peckish."

Seven

"Permission to board?" a thin young man wearing a simple bright red tunic emblazoned with the arms of Keesport requested from the gangway.

"Permission granted, pilot," First Mate Madoc replied, smiling, "and right on time. This way please. Madoc's the name, by the way."

"Quarterdeck. Pleased to meet you, first mate." They shook hands. "My dinghy arrived I see." The small red-painted boat was lashed at deck height on the brigantine's port side.

"About an hour ago." They met Captain Jocey on the bridge of the small ship. "Captain Jocey, this is Pilot Quarterdeck."

"Good," she said as they shook hands. "The tide's turning. Let's get under way."

"Aye, captain." He turned and barked off a series of commands that brought all hands to their stations. The flurry of activity brought Oceanvine, Silverwind, and Jason up on deck to watch the sailors at work.

"Cast off lines!" Madoc shouted the command and the men stationed along the dock did just that. Slowly the ship began to drift away from the wharf, pulled out into the harbor by the currents of the receding tide.

"Who's the guy in red?" Oceanvine asked.

"The pilot," both Jason and Silverwind replied. Silverwind continued, "Admittedly it doesn't happen very often, but if a ship leaves the dock and finds insufficient or unfavorable winds she has to drop anchor and wait. However, Keesport is too large and busy to rely on a fortuitous combination of winds and tidal currents every time a ship wishes to leave port. The main channel must be kept relatively clear so the harbormaster requires that no ship may enter nor leave without a pilot to guide her. He's a rather specialized magician, journeyman level usually. If the winds are wrong, he will power the ship out beyond the mouth of the harbor. Once out of the harbor, he'll leave in the red dinghy."

"Strange I've never seen that before," Oceanvine commented.

"As I recall," Silverwind replied, "neither Medda nor Midlon feel it necessary to employ pilots. Randona does, but you traveled overland, didn't you?" Oceanvine nodded. "Does Tarnsa require pilots, Jason?" Jason shook his head. "Then Captain Jocey may ask us to help out when we get there depending on the wind conditions. It's a shallow harbor with a narrow channel."

A stiff breeze came up as they entered the outer harbor and a large jib was deployed. The ship slowly picked up speed.

"Well, it looks as though we won't be needing the pilot much longer," Silverwind commented. He was

proven right a few minutes later as the pilot's dinghy was lowered over the side with him in it. Oceanvine stood at the rail watching the pilot magically propel the small red boat back into the harbor.

"I'll have to try that some day," she said softly. "It looks like fun. Is it a difficult technique to master?"

Silverwind replied, "Depends. If your boat has a rudder it's fairly easy. Without one, the way he's doing it, takes some practice."

Once the pilot had disembarked, Jocey ordered that the square sails of the foremast and the fore and aft rig of the mainsail be set and the ship quickly picked up speed. A regular running watch was established as the sun became an inflamed ruby off the port beam.

"You're my only passengers this trip," Jocey told them as she joined them. "Care to join me in my cabin for a drink and then dinner?"

"Delighted," Silverwind spoke for all three and they followed her below deck to the captain's cabin.

The modest but tastefully appointed cabin was a model of neatness and order. Oceanvine silently approved, believing that a well kept home was indicative of an ordered mind. Jocey went straight to a smoothly finished cabinet with simple lines and only a few brass corners to act as any form of decoration and opened it up to reveal a well-stocked bar within.

"Name your potion," she said, turning to her passengers.

Silverwind shrugged, "I suppose rum and sourfruit is traditional."

"On the long voyages," Jocey conceded, "when citrus is needed to stave off scurvy. This is a three-day run. The chances of scur..." she stopped when she saw the disappointment on Silverwind's face. "Oh very well. You want ice?" She poured a healthy measure of thick dark rum over a handful of shattered ice that she explained came from Geraint and squeezed in the juice of a section of a small red citrus fruit. Jason decided to have the same, but Oceanvine only allowed herself a small glass of a spicy chilled wine from Killarn. Jocey poured herself a double shot of whiskey and drank it neat.

"Ah!" Jocey sighed, slouching back into the carved wooden chair. "I never quite feel alive unless I'm at sea."

"Is this your regular run?" Oceanvine asked. "Keesport to Tarnsa?"

"I have no regular run," Jocey replied. "That's part of the reason why I'm having trouble making my payments. I suppose I'll have to let Geraint and Elewys buy in."

"Would that be all that bad?" Jason asked. "It seems to me that they could solve the problem of finding sufficient work for you."

"It isn't just the *Skate* I'd be selling, my lord, but my independence as well. Right now I'm the captain of this ship and there're no bosses above me and no partners to answer to. The moment I sell part of the ship, I won't be able to say that."

"Geraint has already agreed to you continuing to hold controlling interest," Oceanvine pointed out.

"No, he said we'd talk about it. The truth is if I have to come back empty again, I'll have to sell at least

an equal share."

"I've known Geraint for years," Silverwind told her. "He might want an equal partnership with you - he probably wants control for that matter - but the one thing he would never do is interfere with your function as captain of this ship. He might tell you where to sail, but he won't tell you how even if he is on board at the time. As for the business part of it, well I don't know, but I suspect that Elewys is the real brains of the outfit."

"Your right!" Jocey laughed. "She's the one who arranges his schedule. She's even sent a little business my way from time to time. I spoke with her briefly when they dropped you off this afternoon and she made a pretty persuasive argument for selling. She's all set to expand operations, something about hiring some young mages just out of school to do the sort of special handling that Geraint does; said it was your idea, wizard."

"I planted the seed with Geraint," Silverwind nodded, "but I suspect Elewys had plans along those lines all along. I suggested putting a few more wagons on, sold him the one we brought here, for that matter, but I never mentioned buying a ship. I will make one suggestion to you, however, captain."

"I'm listening."

"Do sell half your interest in the ship, but take a share in their business as part of the payment, rather than just wiping out your debt."

Jocey took a healthy sip of her whiskey and thought about that. "I like it," she said at last. "Yes. Not just getting money, but putting it to work for me. If nothing else it would be a novelty and I'd still be one of the top bosses. Who knows, if the company prospers, we'll be able to buy more ships, larger ones maybe. They'll need me if we go that way. Elewys knows how to use money, she knows nothing about buying a ship. Thank you, wizard!"

"My pleasure."

"You know," Jocey continued, "I wouldn't mind captaining a larger ship. Hey! I'd be the senior captain of the line, wouldn't I? I must remember to stipulate the position of commodore should we buy more ships. Look at me. Dreaming again. It was dreaming that got me into this mess in the first place."

"Nothing wrong with having a dream," Oceanvine put in.

"Maybe not," Jocey agreed, "but I have to remember that merely thinking up a possibility doesn't make it so."

"Why do you want a larger ship?" Jason asked. "The *Skate* seems to be a fine one to me."

"Oh she's a fine little ship," Jocey said. "She's the best ship my credit could buy. I insist on quality. I could have bought a larger ship, but I'd rather have this brigantine in excellent condition than a four-masted full rigged ship in need of repair, which was my only other choice at the time. She's tight and we keep her well. And just because she's smaller than many of the other ships we have to compete with, don't ever doubt that she's as seaworthy as any of them. The problem is that we've lost too many jobs because her cargo bays won't hold enough. Also she's not as fast as she could be and I don't push her. Do you know what the major cause of leaks is?" No one hazarded an answer so Jocey continued. "It's putting up too much sail for the wind conditions. You know that putting up full sail in a storm can tear a ship apart? Well less extreme over-uses of sail put a strain on not only the mast, but the entire hull. The

timbers creak. They bow. They warp. Gaps form and water gets in.

"I'm a conservative captain when it comes to laying on sail. We had a stiff breeze as we left the harbor. It wasn't all that strong and I could have put up full sail; all three jibs, the stay sails, and the studding sails." She pronounced the phrase "stunsils". "But I'm not sure what the wind will be like tonight; think it might get windier. I dislike having to shorten my sails at night and Midbar will be setting in an hour so it will be even darker than usual. Too dangerous; no need to take a chance we don't have to. So we're sailing with short sails; taking a little longer to get where we're going but we'll get there safer and this ship will outlast most others sailed under captains who take their chances not reefing until the deck planks start to buckle. Anyone for seconds?" Only Silverwind took her up on it.

"It seems to me that this ship would fit in perfectly with Geraint's and Elewys' business," Oceanvine said as Jocey poured drinks for Silverwind and herself. "They seem to specialize in small cargos of rare or delicate commodities and they get a premium price for them."

"True," Jocey agreed. "And by owning their own ship they get to import at cost and by merging with them, I get a cut of the end price as well. The deal's sounding better and better all the time. Well, I'll have to wait and see what my cousins say." Outside they heard the sound of a gong from a navigational buoy they were passing. "The voice of the inner seas," Jocey sighed. "I've only sailed beyond the outer reaches of Emmine twice on the *Skate*, just not enough business to take me to Granom or Bellinen. The outer seas are so quiet. They live and breath to their own silent rhythms, but the inner seas throb. Their every movement is echoed by a thousand bells, gongs, and horns." They listened to the gong grow faint until it receded beyond their hearing.

Eight

Dawn arrived with the same brilliant hues that had accompanied the *Skate's* departure from Keesport. The evening winds had picked up as the captain had predicted, but shortly before dawn they had dropped to a light breeze barely capable of filling the sails and moving the two-masted ship through the unusually smooth waters of the Quarna Strait.

"G'mornin, skipper," Madoc greeted Jocey as she joined him by the starboard rail. "I think we're in for a big one."

"Could be." Jocey replied noncommittally.

"Not much wind at the moment though, and the sky's are still clear, think we should put up all the canvas we've got?"

"Good idea, Madoc. I wish now we'd gone for a studding sail for the upper topsail."

"Could we have afforded it?" the first mate asked.

"No," Jocey replied simply. "Sure, fill the rigging. Hell, put out the laundry if you think it might help, but you'd better have all hands ready to pull it all down again when the weather turns."

Madoc gave the necessary commands and then accompanied Jocey in her daily circumambulation of the

deck. Every morning at sea and often while in port, they would get together at the start of her day and walk the deck. Madoc's rank allowed him the luxury of an easier watch, but he found he preferred the normally quiet hours of the dogwatch so he was just getting off watch as his captain was getting on.

"Hmm, a ship off the stern," Jocey noted with mild curiosity. "Any idea of who it might be?"

Madoc squinted toward the southern horizon. "No, captain. She wasn't there last time I looked." A shout came down to them from the crow's nest, alerting them to the other ship's presence.

"Better late than never," Jocey shrugged. "Here, let me have the spyglass." Madoc handed her a tarnished, telescoping brass tube with glass lenses mounted in it. Jocey pulled it open to its full length and expertly focused it in on the distant ship. "Too far away to make out the fine details. She's a three master - a bark, I think. No, the angle threw me. She's a barkentine; fore and aft rigs on the main and mizzen, square rigged only on the foremast. She was headed due west, but she's coming about now. Gods, they've got that thing over-rigged. I don't think I've ever seen a barkentine rigged with a skysail and studding sails to the upper topsail. That ship won't last another five years if they keep abusing it that way. Madoc, what's wrong?" The first mate was staring intently at the speck on the horizon.

"Skipper, I heard some talk while we were in port. Just rumors, mind you, but... Are you sure the foremast has six courses, not five?"

"I'll count again," she shrugged and peered through the glass again. "No, ran out of fingers on my right hand. Must be six. Why?"

"It might just be talk, but two nights ago I overheard two crewmen from the *Laura G.* while I was at the 'Wheel and Rudder'. They claimed they had limped into port on a jib and two stay sails. All her other sails, supposedly were in shreds."

"That would have bankrupted us for sure. What happened?"

"Piracy." The word sent an involuntary shiver through Jocey. "They said they were attacked by an armed barkentine whose foremast had six courses."

"Armed? How?"

"Pair of cannons; one on each side of the ship."

"Not exactly a man-of-war is it?" Jocey shrugged.

"It's still more than most merchantmen carry and that includes the *Skate*. But it wasn't her guns that destroyed the *Laura G.'s*. According to the sailors' story there's a mage aboard the barkentine, master level at least."

"The average sailor wouldn't know a master magician from a town clerk's waste basket," Jocey pointed out.

"Maybe," Madoc agreed, "but something happened to the *Laura G.* I went over to Hector's Wharf the next day where she was moored to have a word with Captain Malize. We were both midshipmen aboard the *Dragon's Tooth* ten years ago. I thought he might tell an old mate the straight story. There were municipal guards all over the place and wouldn't let me near the docks but I got a look at the *Laura G.* or rather what was left of her rigging. The masts looked more or less intact, although she had a couple

broken spars, but half the shrouds and ratlines were missing, and those that were there looked like they'd been tied together and jury rigged just enough to keep her masts upright while supporting the few sails she had left."

"How did they get away?"

"Before the pirates could board, a fog came up and the *Laura G.* was able to slip away."

"It doesn't wash, Madoc. If it was piracy, why wouldn't the guards spread the word as fast as possible? Letting ships go out without at least a warning would be criminal."

"It wouldn't be the first time that someone with money and power decided to invest in that sort of venture," Madoc said darkly.

"Well, it may be nothing but it won't hurt to be alert. If they are pirates, I hope they do try something. We have two mages aboard and Silverwind's a wizard. In any case, they won't overtake us until at least midmorning, even with all that sail. You go get some rest."

"Aye, aye, captain," Madoc replied. "I'll wake Esmond first though. If we're going into battle you'll need your second mate to help prepare. Sure wish we could have afforded to hire a third."

"Wishing won't make it so. Get some sleep," Jocey replied. "I'll have someone wake you at least an hour before they overtake us, assuming they don't change course."

As the morning grew older, clouds began to drift in from over the eastern horizon and the mysterious ship continued to bear down on the *Skate*.

"It's the waiting that kills me," Jocey complained privately to Oceanvine and Silverwind two hours later. I just wish I knew their intentions."

"Mind reading isn't one of my talents," Silverwind replied smiling. "Sorry."

"Is it possible, though?"

"I've heard of people who claim they can, but I'll believe it when I see it. It is said that the gods can see into a man's heart, but even there I'd want hard proof."

"What do the gods say about it?" Jocey asked.

"How would I know?" Silverwind replied. "I've never met one."

"But the stories," Jocey protested. "Why I've read..."

"Don't tell me you read those trashy adventure stories that woman wrote about me. They're fiction. She made them up as she went along."

"They aren't true?"

"Not hardly!"

"Silverwind," Oceanvine corrected him, "you told me they were loosely based on some of the events in

your life."

"Very loosely based. Ysemay took the stories I told her when she interviewed me and embellished them."

"Ysemay? Who's that?" Jocey asked, "The books I read were by a man named Astil of Randona."

"Her pen name. Her publisher feels that books by men sell more readily than ones by a woman, so they made up Astil of Randona."

"Oh. Then we're in more trouble than I thought," Jocey admitted. "From the stories, I thought you could just wave your hand and make any pirates just disappear."

"Invisibility? Why would I want to do that?"

"No, Silverwind," Oceanvine said laughing, "I think she meant something like disintegration. A bit drastic, I'll admit, but possible."

"Possible, yes," he agreed, "but they would have to be directly abeam and practically touching for me to pull it off. Another solution perhaps. Your idea about invisibility maybe."

"I always thought true invisibility was impossible," Oceanvine argued.

"It is," Silverwind confirmed, "and even if we could render this ship invisible you would still see a hole in the water where we are, but there are alternatives that effectively will do the job even better. An illusion, perhaps, something easy like a visual displacement. I'll be back in a bit."

"What's he talking about?" Jocey asked Oceanvine.

"I'm not sure. True illusions the way I learned to do them would be readily apparent. To make them seem real you need a solid-colored, preferably black, background with a well-lit foreground because they are transparent and you would see the real world right through them. But don't worry, he'll think of something."

"I was a lot more relaxed when I thought those stories were true," Jocey admitted ruefully.

"At least you didn't find out about them the same way I did," Oceanvine laughed. "There I was, a young woman in my senior year at the university. Silverwind came to give a lecture one day - the great Silverwind of song and story. After the lecture, I managed to talk to him. It was my wildest dream come true when he agreed to let me work with him after graduation. I took the scenic route across Rallena and where do I find him the first night I got to Renton? In the tavern, nearly falling-down drunk shooting small magical fireballs into a wine bottle on the far side of the room while the people bet on how many he could get in the bottle before he missed."

"I always thought a mage couldn't perform while drunk, that alcohol inhibited the talent."

"Close. Most magicians are unable to perform while drunk. To perform, a magician must be able to both concentrate and relax at the same time."

"Sounds tough," Jocey commented

"It is," Oceanvine replied, "and the harder the spell the more you have to concentrate, and the harder you concentrate the less you relax. That's why there are so few wizards in the world."

"How will you be able to both concentrate and relax while we are under attack?"

"We are taught certain mental disciplines that help and we use a form of self-mesmerism that puts us into a trance and allows us to emotionally separate ourselves from the world."

"Good." Jocey looked a little relieved. "Oh, by the way, how many fireballs could he cast into the bottle while drunk?"

Oceanvine smiled. "The bottle melted on the forty-third fireball. I suspect he was becoming bored and did it on purpose."

"I see your point; one doesn't expect legends to be caught playing games."

"Actually, that by itself wouldn't have bothered me. He was the first magician above the apprentice level I'd ever seen laughing and playing games. We're a rather stuffy bunch."

"No kidding," Jocey agreed dryly. "You're not the first mages I've sailed with, but" she continued with a smile, "you are the first I'd invite to my cabin more than once. It's getting windier. We're going to have to reef the sails soon. Damn, why are they still running under full sail? I'd have thought this wind would have torn them apart with all that canvas up. I'll be back. I want to talk with both you and the wizard again before that ship gets within range."

Oceanvine nodded and Jocey left to talk with Esmond, her second mate. The young mage found herself left to her own thoughts for the first time in days. Leaning out over the gunwale she contemplated the sea and the approaching barkentine. Captain Jocey seemed to know as much as any seafarer, maybe more, but if she was correct why was the approaching ship still running with all their sails? An idea crossed her mind and she went to find Silverwind to discuss it.

Jason paced the quarterdeck near the stern of the ship, tripping over his sword and feeling particularly useless. The crew members all had their assigned tasks and like any good team they worked together with casual precision. He could admire their work, but he could not join in. The two mages were also getting ready for the potential battle. The last time he looked Oceanvine and Silverwind were discussing various magical tactics and strategies. They didn't shoo him away, but they might as well have been speaking in ancient Orenta, for all he could understand their technical jargon. As a passenger it was his duty to defend the ship he traveled on, but his part would only begin if and when they were boarded.

Jason drew his sword, a heavy-bladed affair that had been in his family for generations. It had none of the ornate etching common on the ceremonial blades of most noble families. It was just a good serviceable weapon that had been passed down to the heir of the duchy. Family tradition required him to keep it sharp and ready for battle, although lighter and shorter swords had become more fashionable in the last three centuries since it had been forged.

Inspecting the edge, Jason found a small nick in the blade that he overlooked when he sharpened it an hour earlier. It wasn't much of a nick, it just barely showed as a sparkle of light when seen from the right angle, but it would give him something to do. He climbed a short ladder and sat down on the edge of the poopdeck. Pulling a small soft leather pouch out of his belt, he opened it and dumped two sharpening stones and a tin of oil out on to the deck beside him. Dutifully he went to work on the nick.

"That's a fine sword you have there, my lord," a friendly voice told him. Jason looked up and saw Madoc standing above him. "Heirloom?"

"Aye," Jason replied. "If you believe the story, it was presented to the first Duke of North Horaliaby King Azer before the Battle of Parda."

"Battle of Parda? It looks to be of the right vintage. A bit long for shipboard use; you sure you wouldn't like to borrow a cutlass?"

"I've never used a curved blade, Madoc. Thank you anyway."

"Aye, tis best to use what you know. This isn't a practice session we're going into after all, but aren't you going to feel a little cramped. There's only a few places on board you can get in a full swing."

"One of my ancestors modified it a bit - ground in a good thrusting point and lightened the blade a bit as well. I should have enough room to use it, although not to its best, I admit."

"Let me see," Madoc said suddenly. Jason started to hand him the weapon. "No. I mean show me how you plan to use it." Jason got to his feet and went through a series of modified fencing maneuvers. "Aye, you'll do well enough if it comes to that," Madoc allowed, "but watch yourself on those parries. A good opponent will use the length of your blade against you and foul you up in the rigging. That's why a cutlass is better suited. Watch." Madoc drew a short curving sword from his belt and went through a close approximation of the moves that Jason had done.

"I see. When this is over, perhaps you can give me a lesson or two."

"We can do that right now," Madoc replied. "I'll just get you a spare and we'll get started, my lord."

"I appreciate that, and please call me Jason, but don't you have other work to do?"

"I'll let you in on a secret, Jason," Madoc replied conspiratorially, "Most of the activity on board right now is just to give the crew something to think about besides pirates. I'm not actually on watch right now, but if I do have an important job to do it's to keep an eye on that barkentine. Now where better to watch it from than right here on the poopdeck?" Jason agreed and Madoc went off in search of a spare cutlass. A few minutes later he returned and spent nearly an hour showing Jason how to use it.

"Thank you," Jason said at the end of the lesson and attempted to hand the cutlass back to the first mate.

"No, lad, you keep it. Slide it under your belt so you'll have a spare weapon, just in case." Then he went off to talk with the captain. Jason, once more alone, noticed a few nicks in the blade of the cutlass and promptly went to work on them.

Madoc found the captain in her cabin with Silverwind and Oceanvine. The door was open, but he knocked politely on the frame before entering.

"Come in, Madoc," Jocey said. "Any news?"

"Not a bit, skipper," Madoc replied. "That ship is still bearing down on us under full sail. I don't understand it. I would have thought she'd have been torn apart by the strain under these winds."

"The seas don't seem too rough yet," Oceanvine opined.

"They're rough enough for fair weather," Jocey replied, "and that's in the process of changing too. The wind is getting gusty and we'll have some big swells to contend with soon. The Quarna Strait is known for that; naught but what you can expect with the winds off the Nildar Ocean being funnelled in here with hardly any land to block them. We have more sail out than I feel comfortable with. I'd like to shorten it still more, but if we're being chased..." she trailed off.

Madoc finished for her, "They're likely to break off if we can stay ahead of them before the storm breaks."

"Maybe," Silverwind nodded, "but if we lose them in a storm, we'll only have to worry about finding them again afterwards."

"Besides," Oceanvine added, "we might miss the full brunt of the storm. It looks to me like the center may be passing to the south of us."

"All right," Jocey replied, "do you have a better idea?" She directed the question at Silverwind, but Oceanvine replied.

"Maybe, I'll leave that to you. I was thinking that if that ship is carrying too much canvas as you insist she is..."

"She is," Jocey told her tightly.

"Then some counteracting force must be keeping her from being driven under and keeping her from breaking up and I seriously doubt that the ship's own cohesion is up to that."

"Magic?"

"What else?" Oceanvine returned. "You've said they're reputed to carry a mage, right?"

"True," Madoc replied and Jocey nodded.

"We believe that there are at least two spells at work here; one that is keeping the ship from being driven under and another that is reinforcing the ship itself to keep it from breaking up. The spells that would do that sort of thing are the sort that the mage would need to continuously maintain, because the stresses and strains change constantly. Now what do you think would happen if the mage were suddenly distracted?"

"Something bloody spectacular, I'd wager," Jocey answered.

"Exactly, especially if we helped it along by magically encouraging it."

"Now that's just part of our plan," Silverwind put in. "One of the easiest illusion spells is displacement - changing the apparent location of an object."

"That's easy?" Jocey asked incredulously.

"Compared to what I'm going to do, yes. It's just a matter of bending light."

"Wizard," Madoc remarked, "the captain and I are just common sea-folk. How do you bend light?"

"By changing the density of the medium it travels through, of course."

"Thank you so much," Madoc replied flatly.

"It's quite simple," Oceanvine explained. "In fact you do it all the time yourself without magic."

"Come again?"

"Do you know how your spy glass works?"

"The lenses make things look bigger," Madoc replied.

"But how?" Jocey asked.

The first mate may have been uneducated, but he was not a stupid man. "By bending light?" he hazarded uncertainly.

"There you go," Oceanvine approved. "The glass of the lenses causes the light to bend; it's called refraction. I could explain the mathematics of the whole thing but we haven't got the time. Oh, here's another example of bent light and it's more closely related to what we're going to do. Have you ever looked at a fish in a pool of water? It isn't exactly where it seems to be, is it? That's because the light is bent at the surface of the water. Well, I'm going to do roughly the same thing only with the air between us and them."

"So you'll make us seem to be closer to them, when actually we'll be getting away?" Jocey asked.

"Just the opposite, actually," Silverwind told her. "I'll need to be very close to them, before I can use the potential energy in that ship against it. Also it will have to be before they start furling their excess sails."

"Wait a minute. We still don't have proof that ship has any hostile intentions toward us," Jocey pointed out.

"That too," Silverwind agreed. "We're going to have to force them to tip their hand."

An hour later found Oceanvine sitting on the poopdeck in a trance and Silverwind standing on the bridge with Jocey watching the approaching ship.

"You're sure they can't see where we really are?" the captain asked.

"Positive," Silverwind replied. "Oceanvine knows what's she's doing. As far as anyone on board that ship knows, the *Skate* is at least a half a mile away. She'll gradually let that distance seem to decrease until we're actually directly off their starboard beam. That's when the fun begins. Your crew knows what to do?"

"Yes, they go about their normal business, except no shouting that might carry across the water and betray our true position. How close will they have to come in order to start their attack?"

"From what Madoc describes, it sounds like their mage will first cast a wind spell to blow out our sails."

"He can control the wind?"

"Not the way you think. A lot of basic magic involves the redirection of force. He'll just concentrate what's already blowing at us for a brief instant. If we were where we'll appear to be, we'd be instantly hit with a gust of hurricane force."

"Madoc said the masts of the *Laura G.* appeared to be burnt," Jocey pointed out.

"Yes. The wind will be very hot because the spell also excites the air," the wizard explained unhelpfully. Jocey decided to let it pass.

"How does Oceanvine know where to keep the image of the *Skate*?" she asked instead.

"She's fully aware of what's going on around her, maybe more so than anyone else aboard this ship. She's in a trance but she is not unconscious."

"If you say so," Jocey muttered, glancing at Oceanvine who was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the deck, eyes shut, her long blond hair neglectedly blowing freely in the wind. To Jocey's eyes the young mage was completely oblivious to her surroundings, but suddenly without opening her eyes, Oceanvine smiled and waved at the captain. Self-consciously Jocey waved back.

"See?" Silverwind smirked. "Well, I'd better join her, it's almost time for my turn. Ah, Jason, just the man I wanted to see."

Jason was just finishing his seventeenth circuit of the *Skate's* maindeck and found it a depressingly short walk. He looked hopefully at the wizard.

"Yes indeed," Silverwind continued, "I have a job for you."

"All right," Jason replied. Anything was better than boredom.

"Very important job. It isn't widely known, but a magician is quite defenseless while actually casting a spell. If we are boarded, Oceanvine and I are going to need protection, so it'll be your job to keep any boarders from reaching us."

"What about magical attacks?" Jason asked.

"Know any defensive spells?" Silverwind asked. "No, of course not. We'll just have to manage as best we can on that count. Besides, if my plan works we won't have to worry about defenses."

"What is your plan, wizard?" Jason snapped. Silverwind looked at him strangely and Jason quickly backed down. "I'm sorry, Silverwind. It's all this waiting putting me on edge."

"You're young yet, my Lord of North Horalia," Silverwind replied with uncharacteristic formality. "I believe that one day you will hold the title of duke with great distinction, but first you must learn that impatience is a luxury that only the young can afford, especially in warfare."

"I don't follow."

"The key to any victory is not in amassing a superior force nor is it in tactics and strategy. The key is in knowing exactly when to use what you do have."

"Good point," Jason conceded, "but if you don't mind my asking, what's the plan?"

"Oh that," Silverwind grinned. "Wait a few minutes and you'll see for yourself." Jason wanted to protest but after the deserved lecture on patience he didn't dare.

The barkentine bore down on the *Skate* now with amazing speed. As it came along side, Silverwind could hear the orders given on the pirate ship to furl most of her sails. He concentrated briefly and suddenly the *Skate* appeared to be under full sail again.

"Now!" a rough voice shouted on the pirate ship, "Before they get out of range!"

There was a brief pause and then a loud whistling sound could be heard as a sudden blast of wind was sent toward the image of the fleeing *Skate*. Silverwind made the image look as though the sails had been hit by the wind, but that they had withstood the blast and Oceanvine made the image seem to recede from the pursuing ship, which was now slightly behind the *Skate* again, having been slowed down when the sails had been shortened.

Silverwind heard the unmistakable canvas boom as the barkentine's sails were quickly unfurled again. He waited until the pirates were slightly ahead of the *Skate* again and then said simply, "Step two."

Oceanvine and Silverwind dropped their illusions. Then as planned Oceanvine sent a gust of wind into the barkentine's sails. They were filled to near bursting and she and the others on board the *Skate* could hear sound of overstressed wood coming from the deck and hull of the pirate ship. Then, before the pirates had time to react, Silverwind delivered the final stroke.

A horribly brittle crashing sound accompanied the spectacle of the barkentine rapidly folding up on itself. The ship's bow was driven down under the surface of the sea while the stern was lifted into the air ever so slightly faster. Within seconds the ship was explosively reduced to a sea of flotsam punctuated by the cries of the few men aboard her that survived her rapid destruction.

Nine

Silverwind and Oceanvine opened their eyes to survey their handiwork. "Good teamwork, partner," Silverwind told her.

"Oh my," Oceanvine gasped when she saw the destruction. "I didn't realize that we were going to be so drastic."

"Neither did I," Silverwind confided. "Her hull must have been in worse shape that I thought."

"What did you do?" Jason asked.

"Well Oceanvine did to them pretty much what they tried to do to us, except that she kept it less intense but made it last longer, and I cast two fairly easy spells. The first one reinforced the strength of the standing rigging. The second spell was even simpler. All I did was this."

"Hey!" Jason jumped, startled by a sudden fluttering sensation along his side.

"First time I ever found a practical use for that spell," Silverwind chuckled.

"You tickled the pirate's mage?"

"You got it. The point was to distract him from his protective spells. Anything would have done the job. I was originally planning to give him a hot foot, but that would have involved knowing exactly where he was and whether he was sitting or standing. This spell is more generalized."

"You tickled everyone on board?" Jason asked.

"You might say they died laughing," Oceanvine said tightly.

"What about the survivors?"

"I'll give them a better chance than they'd have given us," Captain Jocey said as she approached them. "I won't turn back to kill them."

"They'll drown!" Jason protested.

"I hope so," the captain replied coldly. "I don't give quarter to pirates. The only difference between us and the king's justice is that if caught by the navy, they'd have been given a trial before being hanged. We just saved his majesty a little time and money. It's in the Laws of the Sea, my lord. Look it up."

"On land they would have had the right to a fair trial," Jason insisted.

"On land you have the space to imprison brigands while they await their trials. This is a small ship, my lord. We don't have a brig. The laws concerning a man-of-war are different. They are required to pick up survivors. We're not." Jason turned and walked back to his cabin. "He's a good man," Jocey said when Jason was out of earshot, "but he's led a sheltered life so far. Well, wizard, I must say that was spectacular. What do you plan to do for an encore?"

"Take a nap," Silverwind grinned and followed Jason.

"How about you?" Jocey asked Oceanvine, who was still gazing at the sea of debris they left behind them. "You're looking a little pale."

Oceanvine turned toward Jocey slowly. "I've never killed anyone before."

"It was us or them, girl."

"That doesn't help!" Oceanvine suddenly broke down and started crying. Jocey reached out and Oceanvine fell into her arms. The captain held her, rocking slightly and making comforting noises. A few minutes later Oceanvine realized that her world hadn't actually crashed about her and regained her composure. "Thanks," she said quietly.

"You didn't kill them, girl," Jocey told her kindly. "They did it to themselves when they took to piracy. Sooner or later they were bound to run up against somebody stronger or smarter than they were if they stayed at it long enough. This time it was sooner. Look, have you ever had to deal with a bully?" Oceanvine nodded, remembering Kormac of Medda. "Well pirates are bullies too, very nasty murderous bullies. They know that, if caught, they face death by hanging, so they have nothing to lose and no atrocity is beneath them."

"You're right," Oceanvine admitted. "They got what was coming to them, but I still don't have to be happy about it."

"What you need," the captain told her, "is time. Time and a good stiff drink. Come on, I'm buying."

"Thanks," Oceanvine refused the offer, "but I'd prefer to keep my head clear." Jocey's expression showed concern. "I'll be all right." She paused a second and changed her mind. "Well, how about a cup of tea instead?"

The *Skate* sailed on under heavily overcast skies and gusty winds. Only once did it rain that afternoon, large cool droplets that contrasted with the driving warm summer wind. It might have been a soaking rain as well were the drops not so widely spaced and infrequent, but it was only just enough to make being on deck an uncomfortable experience.

After taking tea with Jocey, Oceanvine felt considerably better and decided to emulate Silverwind and take a nap as well. However as she walked past Jason's open doorway, she saw the young noble playing Solitaire with a deck of cards.

"Care for a game?" he invited.

"Why not?" she shrugged. "I warn you, though, I don't have much money to gamble with."

"That's not a problem," Jason replied. "We'll play for points; loser to buy the first round of drinks when we arrive in Tarnsa." Oceanvine agreed and wondered idly whether or not that would include a round for Silverwind as well and decided that it probably would.

They were within sight of Mek, one of only two sizable islands in the Quarna Strait, by the time the clouds started breaking up at sunset and the lights of its small eastern port were visible as they passed by that evening.

"I would normally stop there to see if I could drum up a little more business," Jocey told Silverwind, "but I understand your mission is urgent, so I'll pass it up this time."

"I appreciate that, captain," he replied.

"Well, we don't find very much there, but there are no port fees, so it usually only costs us an extra day."

"Any idea of when we'll make Tarnsa?"

"Depends on the winds. We're a bit ahead of our usual first day position. I think we may make port by dusk tomorrow, at least I hope so. If we come in after dark, we'll have to drop anchor outside the harbor and wait until morning."

"I could hurry us along," Silverwind offered. "Use the same spells the pirates did."

"It's tempting, wizard, but after seeing what happened to the pirates, I'd rather not. Are you really in that big a hurry?"

"Not so that a few hours would make a difference, no."

Jocey woke early the next morning with an inexplicable feeling of wrongness. A career at sea had trained her to trust such feelings and she quickly got dressed. She stepped onto the main deck in the deceptive light of false dawn and saw Silverwind standing by the port gunwale surveying the mist-enshrouded Horalian coast.

"Wizard," she asked, "are you performing some sort of spell?"

"No, captain," he replied pleasantly. "Was I supposed to?"

"Something seems wrong, but I can't put my finger on it."

Silverwind looked up at the brightening sky then at the water around the ship. "Looks like a nice day ahead," he commented blandly.

"Maybe," Jocey replied and went off to find Madoc.

Madoc was on the foredeck trying to decide whether it was time to hoist the stay sails. "G'morning, skipper!" he said cheerily. "You're up early this morning."

"Something seems wrong, Madoc," she told him, "but I can't figure out what it is."

"Oh oh!" Madoc replied, "Last time you said that we just barely missed a hurricane."

Jocey considered that. "No, I don't think it's the weather. Something else."

"I'll have the man in the crow's nest keep an extra sharp eye out if you like."

"It's probably nothing," Jocey replied. "A bit of nerves after yesterday's close call, maybe."

"I don't think so, skipper. I've been sailing with you too long to believe that. It won't hurt us to take precautions."

"Thank you, Madoc." She felt pleased that the big man respected her sea sense so much. She'd been working in man's world for a long time before being taken seriously and longer before she was thought of as an equal. Madoc had been at sea nearly as long as she had so his respect for her as his captain, and the fact that he bowed to her experience, was something she prized above all else.

The morning wore on and Jocey's unease increased. She was too seasoned to snap at her crew but they stepped lightly around her anyway, remaining alert to whatever problem she sensed. Those that had been with her for any amount of time had seen this before. It was always something different, but so far it had never been wrong.

It happened just after the mid-morning watch had gone on duty. Jocey heard a cry from the crow's nest that she never expected to hear on the inner seas.

"Serp off the starboard bow!"

"Battle stations!" Jocey commanded. "All hands on deck! Oceanvine, where's the Wizard?"

Oceanvine, who had been tanning on the poop deck when the cry went out, called back, "He said he was going back to sleep."

"Get him!" Oceanvine grabbed her towel and bolted down the ladder to Silverwind's cabin.

"Silverwind!" she called, urgently knocking on the door. "Silverwind!" There was no response so she opened the door and found the wizard sleeping contentedly on his bunk. "Silverwind!" she shook him awake.

"Mrffl?" he asked, still groggy.

"We're under attack! Jocey needs you on deck now!"

"Oh!" Silverwind's eyes snapped open and he was instantly alert. "What's up?" he asked as they returned topside.

"Something called a serp."

"A serp? In the Quarna Strait?"

"What's a serp?" Oceanvine asked. There was a massive roar from the sea off the starboard bow and a large triangular-shaped head loomed over the bowsprit. 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 hundreds of saber-length fangs. That the creature was venomous was of only passing interest to humans since it was fully capable of biting a man in half with a single snap.

"That," Silverwind replied calmly, "is a serp."

Oceanvine swallowed hard but came up game. "Oh goody." Her imitation of Silverwind was marred by a slight shakiness in her voice. "Can I take him home with me? Can I, can I?"

"Fine. *You* keep his litter box clean and take him for a walk every day."

The creature roared once more as it raised its head still higher out of the water. The *Skate's* armaments were mostly confined to cutlasses, axes, and boarding pikes, but several crewmen had arbalests and were already firing them at the monster. The steel-tipped bolts managed to stick into the creature's neck, but its thick rubbery skin kept them from penetrating far enough to do any major damage.

A serp is powerful but not particularly intelligent. Having, by some unfathomable working of reptilian logic, chosen to attack the brigantine, that is exactly what the serp did. The head darted at the foremast and sank its fangs into the hard wood of the top foremast. A storm of wooden splinters was produced along with the sickening sound of shattering wood. The great snake reared back and cleared the unsavory wood from its mouth, incidentally snapping several shrouds. The top section of the foremast fell into the water still attached by a single shroud.

Oceanvine immediately sank to the deck and attempted to place herself into the vulnerable trance state she found necessary for most higher magics.

"Jason," Silverwind called, "Protect Vine!" The young noble ran over and prepared to stand guard over the beautiful woman still clad only in her revealing bathing suit.

"What about you?" Jason asked quickly. Silverwind shook him off and ran toward the bow.

The serp, having cleared its mouth of splinters, renewed its attack on the *Skate* by coiling its great length around the ship twice. The crew immediately attacked the serp's coils with every weapon at hand. The monster was fully capable of crushing the ship, but would not do so as long as the crew continued to hack at its incredibly tough hide.

The serp's mouth gaped open again and was about to attack the main mast when a ball of fire materialized within. The giant snake screamed in agony and loosened its hold on the ship so that it was looped only once around the hull now. It ducked its head underwater in a vain attempt to ease the burning pain and when it resurfaced it found itself entangled in several loose shrouds from the foremast. It tried to shake itself loose but managed only to shake the ship throwing most hands roughly to the deck and several people, including Silverwind, overboard.

Then the serp suddenly released its grip on the brigantine and with a loud roar started swimming to the north at full speed. The shrouds that still gripped the monster pulled the ship along as well until Jockey gave the command to cut them loose so the *Skate* could turn about and retrieve the people who had been cast overboard.

"Fine time you picked to go for a swim," Oceanvine greeted Silverwind sharply as he was fished out of the brine. Up until a few minutes earlier she had been worried to the point of panic. It was more than she could stand; the helplessness of constantly pacing the foredeck and scanning the sea for a sign of the wizard. Now that he was obviously safe, however, old habits reasserted themselves. Her voice was perhaps a bit more tart than she had intended.

"I owe it all to the inspiration of that bathing suit of yours," Silverwind remarked. "Still parading around half naked I see. I've always meant to ask; do you ever actually swim in that thing?"

Oceanvine kept her mouth shut. The one time she had actually worn the skimpy two-piece suit, considered quite fashionable in Bellinen, on the public beach near Randona, she and her Orentan room-mate had been banned from the beach. Since then she had restricted its use to maintaining her tan.

"Well," Silverwind sighed as he surveyed the damage that the serp had done, "so much for getting into port tonight."

"What was that thing?" Jason asked.

"A serp," Silverwind replied. "A very rare monster of the deep seas. I doubt there are more than fifty or sixty in the world. For some reason they attack ships instinctively on sight. Nobody knows why and as far as I know they are almost never found on the inner seas."

"So what was this one doing here?" Silverwind had no answer to that.

"Silverwind, I put the fireball in that thing's mouth," Oceanvine inquired, "but what did you do?"

"I sort of convinced him that he should be elsewhere," the wizard replied. Both Jason and Oceanvine looked at him inquiringly. "Well they don't have much in the way of brains, which, I suppose, is why they attack ships even though ships usually give them extreme cases of indigestion. Anyway, they mate once a year under the north polar ice cap. I twiddled with his hormones until he became convinced it was the mating season and, of course, he started heading north without delay. I imagine that he'll be deep under the ice cap before he realizes that he's been had." All around them the crew was busy jury-rigging stays for the remaining masts and sails. "I suppose we should go and help get this ship under way again, don't you?" Jason and Oceanvine nodded.

"Just give me a chance to change into something a little more appropriate," Oceanvine replied.

The remainder of the voyage was quiet although slow. By the middle of the afternoon the *Skate* had been re-rigged to Jocey's satisfaction, but the wind had slacked off to a mere breeze. However Jocey finally allowed herself to relax when they were once more underway.

Interlogue

Being an account of how the gods came to be and how they created the world and the life upon it.

- adapted from the *Book of Creation* with the permission of the High Priest at Kornedd.

In the beginning there were no gods, no worlds, no Heaven, and no Hell. From the substance of chaos were born Space and her lover, Time, and in the fullness of their love Space and Time joined to become one, and that one became the universe. From this union were born the elder gods.

The elder gods were seven in number - four brothers and three sisters. As They grew older They came to know each other, and the three sisters married three of the four brothers.

The fourth brother, Aritos, became lonely, and He went to the three couples and told Them, "Our lives are empty and without meaning. Let Us create a new world and fill it with new forms of life and in this way give meaning to Our own lives." The other gods were content with their lives and to create life would mean that They would have to give up some finite amount of Their own substance. They argued against Aritos' project for a long time, but Aritos cleverly convinced each of Them, one at a time, to agree.

It was left to Emtos, the wisest of the gods, to direct the creation of the new world. Under His guidance the gods combined Their wills and from out of the void a world was formed and it was called Midbar. The gods, however, were still young and inexperienced and Midbar was without life, nor could life be sustained there.

The gods turned on Aritos, saying that this fruitless project of His was a bad idea and blamed Him for wasting Their time and life energy. Aritos became angry with His siblings but He held His anger in check and spoke to Them again. This time He appealed to Their vanity, asking if They really were incapable of creating life. They argued this back and forth and finally Emtos agreed with Aritos, convincing the others that They had not considered the problem adequately.

This time the gods spent countless millennia studying the universe of Time and Space and in these studies learned the rules that govern the universe and all within it. When Their studies were completed they began their creation.

First They created the fires of the sky and the largest fire they called the Sun and the rest were called stars. They saw these fires, but They were not yet satisfied.

Next They created land and They brought the land together and so built the world which was named Maiyim. They put fire in the heart of Maiyim so that it would itself be alive. They sculpted the land into a shape They found pleasing, and They placed Midbar, the dead world, in the sky above Maiyim as a reminder of the folly of haste. They paused to examine the land, but They were not yet satisfied.

Then They created air and They wrapped the air around Their world so the life they would create could breath. And They breathed in the air and found it sweet, but They were not yet satisfied.

They joined then in the task of creating water that there would be a way to control the fire and cause the land to be fertile. They made the water to lie in the depressions of the land, and They paused in their work, but They were not yet satisfied.

And then They brought life on to the land and in the water. Each god created plants and animals as He or She saw fit until the land and sea were full. They paused to consider Their work and found it good, but They were not yet satisfied.

Finally they began to create people. Each married couple worked together to create the male and female counterparts of a species. Gran and Querna created the Trolls, who called themselves *Granomen* . Bellinen and Merinne created the Elves who call themselves *Orenta* . Emtos and Emmine created Humans. And in the act of creating each people, They also gave birth to the younger gods; Methis, Wenni, and Nildar.

Aritos labored on a creation of His own, but without a goddess to share the burden, His people were demons - evil and without souls. The demons were stronger and more vicious than the good people of Maiyim. They killed and tortured the humans, elves, and trolls who were helpless before them. And the good people cried up to the gods for help and the gods, except for Aritos, looked down upon the demons and were angered.

Emtos, after consultation with the other gods, instructed Aritos to destroy all the demons for they were abominations on the face of the land. Aritos rebelled, accusing the other gods of favoritism and so the other gods decided to kill the demons themselves.

They instructed the good people of Maiyim to move to the highlands and cast a spell of compulsion upon the demons, causing them to stay in the lowlands. Then they caused it to rain and the rain lasted one hundred days until the oceans rose to cover all the lowlands, drowning the demons. But Aritos secretly protected five male demons and gave them immortality.

When the rain ceased, most of the land was covered leaving most of the remaining land clustered in three archipelagos. One Archipelago was the homeland of the trolls, one was home to the elves and the third was for the humans, and the five demons lived on in secret far away from the three archipelagos.

The gods looked upon Maiyim and were at last satisfied with Their accomplishment.

Part 2 Horalia

One

"Well, it's settled," Jocey told Oceanvine as she finished packing. "I'm going to have to sell to Elewys and Geraint. The repairs to the mast and rigging are going to break me."

Oceanvine said a few sympathetic things and closed up her last bag. "Maybe," she suggested after another few moments, "you can make a deal with them before they see the ship. Better terms that way."

"I like you, girl," Jocey replied with a smile. "You have a wonderfully devious mind. No, Geraint's always been honest and forthright with me. I owe him the same."

"Good point," Oceanvine conceded. "Well, this is it. Maybe we'll sail together again?"

"I hope so," Captain Jocey replied sincerely. "Next time, however, it had better be a nice quiet trip. Pirates and a serp! You know we have trouble maybe once a year and this trip it happened twice. Something strange is going on. I feel it in my bones. You take care of yourself!" They hugged and then Oceanvine picked up her bags and together they went topside.

Silverwind and Jason were at the end of the dock loading a wagon Jason bought an hour earlier. Oceanvine bid Jocey a final farewell and joined them there.

"Ready?" Silverwind asked Oceanvine. She nodded. "Good. Jason's understandably anxious to get back home so we're not staying in town tonight. We'll camp and eat on the road. Hope you don't mind."

Oceanvine sighed, "I've done it before." Silverwind chuckled. The last time his blond assistant had slept out of doors was on her way to Renton from Randona and she had been in ecstasy for over a week merely from the fact that she was able to sleep in a real bed again.

"With all that's happened," Jason commented as the wagon rolled through Tarnsa, "I forgot about the other wagon and horses. What happened to them?"

"I sold them to Geraint," Silverwind replied. "I established a running account with him."

"Even my horse?"

"I thought you had taken care of that yourself, Jason. Since you left it behind, I'm sure Geraint would think that it was included in the deal. You weren't planning to bring him back with you, were you?"

"No. I was a bit preoccupied between everything that went down in Keesport and the news of my father's illness, but you sold my horse?"

"Let's put it another way," Silverwind replied reasonably. "You abandoned your horse and I found it a nice home. Tell you what. Take the cost of the horse off my fee, okay?" Jason nodded and started studying his hands.

"What are you doing?" Oceanvine asked him.

"Nothing," he replied. "Just checking to make sure I still have all my fingers."

"How long is it from here to our destination?"

"By wagon, about three days, I'd guess. The terrain is fairly even; no mountains to climb or great rivers to cross. I made the trip in less than two days on horseback, but wagons are slow. Why?"

"Curiosity, I guess. It's very warm here, isn't it?"

"Really? I was just thinking how much more comfortable it is than when I left. It's cooler and less humid than usual. We're practically in the tropics, you know."

"We're that far north?" Oceanvine asked.

"You didn't notice the palmettos?" Jason countered.

"Living in the mountains too long," Silverwind commented.

Oceanvine ignored that. "So," she asked Jason, "what sort of land is North Horalia?"

"Agricultural, mostly," he replied. "Our biggest cash crop is tobacco, but we also grow several citrus fruits and there are a few banana plantations along the north coast. You'll find other things grown here and there as well, but they're mostly for internal use. They don't get exported."

"Most of the oranges and sour fruit used in Quarna," Silverwind added, "are grown in North Horalia."

"Pomelos as well," Jason agreed. "Too bad we can't seem to figure out how the Elves grow silk worms, though. It does get hot here in the summers and silk is very expensive, so we usually make do with light cotton and linen."

"You grow cotton here too?" Oceanvine asked.

"No, we import from Quarna. We grow the flax for our own linen, however."

"It seems strange," Oceanvine commented, "to think of deer hunting in such a warm climate. I always thought that was more popular as an activity in the cooler southern climates."

"It's a popular sport among the nobility and gentry all over the Emmine Archipelago," Silverwind told her. "No one else can afford it."

"How much money does it take to hunt with a bow and arrow?"

"The weapon is the cheapest part," Silverwind replied. "Except in a few places where poaching is allowed, you have to own the land you hunt on. Times have changed this past two centuries and commoners are allowed to buy land now, but you can't hunt on a house lot, can you?"

"Is poaching allowed in your duchy, Jason?" Oceanvine asked.

"We issue hunting licenses for a limited season and at a modest fee," Jason informed her. "Sometimes the fee is waived if the licensee is very old or truly can't afford it. We also distribute venison to the poor during the winter holiday season, although if the deer keep dying there may not be many left."

"You haven't been eating any of the venison from the afflicted animals have you?" Silverwind asked with great concern.

"No!" Jason was emphatic. "One does not eat a diseased animal. Further we've taken pains to make sure that nobody else stole them for food either. Meadow was very clear about that."

"Good." Silverwind was visibly relieved.

"Why?" Oceanvine asked. "What would happen?" Jason looked interested too.

"Nothing good," Silverwind replied. "The meat might simply be poisoned, although the Bond of Aritos is often more devious than that. I heard of one case where the sign was charmed to infect the soul of anyone who looked at it. Don't worry, Jason, I've already checked for signs of that in you. Whatever is at work here, visual infection is not included. Quite possibly, the sign is merely a symptom, not the problem itself. I'll know more after I've seen for myself. Speaking of eating, Jason, did you buy any food for the road?"

"Not yet. There's a provisioner just up around the corner that I've done business with before. I figured we could stop there and you two wouldn't have to rely on my tastes."

A minute later they saw the grimy yellowed window on which the faded words, "Fulco of Tarnsa, Provisioner" were painted from the inside. The rough, heavily stained floor was everything the peeling exterior hinted at. However Oceanvine noted that the floor, while stained, was well swept. The aromas of bread and highly seasoned meats mingled with those of dried and pickled vegetables and through it all, the sweet scents of cinnamon and other spices threaded their way uncut to the nostrils of the travelers.

"Lord Jason," Fulco, a heavy-set bald man, called out as they entered. "Welcome back! And how may I serve you today?"

"Whatever my friends here want, Fulco. Food for the trip back home. Also any news since I left?"

Fulco was fully capable of talking while waiting on customers and answered the young lord while picking out and wrapping the items that Oceanvine and Silverwind indicated. "You heard about your father's illness?" Jason nodded. "Really sorry to hear about it. I hope he gets better soon. In any case there are no details being released from Castle North."

"Who's in charge?" Jason asked.

"As eldest son, it ought to be you, my lord, but you've been away and your brothers are too young so Galiena has been filling in as best she can. She's a good woman, your sister is, but I fear the people aren't ready for a woman to rule them. There's been more than a little confusion around the duchy."

"Confusion? What do you mean?"

"Hard to say; it's an uneasiness mostly. What with all the other signs and omens people think they've been seeing lately there's a prevailing thought that perhaps it's because Galiena is trying to rule. Don't know where they get that idea, but it's out there nevertheless."

"Nonsense!" Jason scoffed. "My sister is more than fit to rule. She would too if we followed Elvish custom."

"But we don't," Fulco pointed out. "And most folks don't want to be ruled by a woman."

"Half the trick of being a good ruler," Silverwind commented, "is in having the confidence of your subjects."

"Aye. That it is, sir," Fulco agreed.

"You spoke of omens?" Silverwind asked the storekeeper.

"Indeed, sir. I haven't seen any myself, but there's stories about. Some claim they saw a dragon the other day. It didn't land but it flew around Tarnsa three times before gliding off to the west."

"Dragons don't live this close to the tropics," Silverwind pointed out. "They can't take the heat."

"So I've heard, sir, but that's the story. I did see the comet the other night and they're always signs of bad luck."

"Ridiculous!" Silverwind scoffed. "Comets are just normal astronomical phenomena. Nothing supernatural about them."

"This one was different. It flew across the sky in just under an hour and hasn't reappeared since."

"That is unusual," Silverwind admitted. "Anything else?"

"The usual. Dancing lights over the marshes, supposed sightings of weird monsters. Nothing that has been corroborated."

"Thank you," Silverwind replied.

"There have been a lot of unusual things going on lately, haven't there?" Oceanvine asked. The wizard nodded. They finished up there a few minutes later and were once more on their way.

Tarnsa was a small town and fifteen minutes later they were traveling through farm country. It was well after sunset before they found a place to stop for the night.

"Let's move off the road away into the trees here," Silverwind suggested.

"Why is camp always made among trees?" Oceanvine asked. "It was like that on my trip from Randona. Why not camp out in an open field? Certainly it would be easier to park the wagon."

"I doubt that the local farmers would appreciate our trampling their crops," Silverwind replied dryly.

"Actually that's why these small roadside groves are maintained," Jason explained as they led the horses off the road. "You'll notice that there's no undergrowth but there is a stack of firewood and a rough stone fireplace in the center. Some of them have iron grills, although this one doesn't appear to."

"Doesn't this also give a place for highwaymen to stay as well?"

"We don't have a major problem with that," Jason told her, "but it does come up from time to time. Outlaws usually choose a location well away from the roads since that makes it harder to find them. These groves, however, do make easy targets which is why most travelers prefer the safety of an inn. Perhaps we should sleep in shifts tonight."

"Not necessary," Silverwind told him. "When we're ready to sleep I'll set up some wards."

"Like you did at your house?"

"Similar, yes, but I don't like to encourage thieves, so I'll rig it to wake me up so I can catch anyone that tries to rob us."

"What if another honest traveler sets off your ward?" Jason asked.

"Then I'll apologize a lot. Vine, who's turn is it to cook?"

"Yours," she replied sharply at the hated contraction of her name.

"Oh yeah," he sighed. "Jason, if you'll light a fire I'll try to put something together. Did anyone see a stream around here for water?"

"I don't recall one," Jason replied. "Why don't you just use some of the water we brought in the wagon? We can refill the bottle in the morning."

Silverwind took stock of the supplies they had bought not too long before and selected several items.

"Meat and potatoes, Silverwind?" Oceanvine asked sharply. "That won't make much of a stew. At least you could add a few other vegetables and some seasonings."

"I was just going to grill the meat and roast the potatoes."

"That isn't a steak. It would be much too tough. Honestly, I don't know why you didn't die of malnutrition before I found you."

Silverwind rolled his eyes comically and went back to the wagon to get a stew pot and a few more ingredients. Actually he was a fairly good cook, but was also very lazy when it came to such activity. His feigned culinary ineptitude was part of a largely unsuccessful attempt to fob off his share of the household chores on Oceanvine. For her own part Oceanvine saw through his transparent attempts and found that she could usually prod him into action merely by not taking his hints that she should do whatever chore was at issue at the moment.

It was well aftermidnightwhen Silverwind was awakened by a rustling noise near the wagon. At first he thought it was a squirrel and went back to sleep since nothing had disturbed his wards, but a minute later he woke at the sound again and decided to investigate. Moving slowly and quietly, he spotted a small human figure rooting around in the back of the wagon.

Silverwind leaned over the side of the wagon and saw a young boy, maybe twelve years old helping himself to the left-over stew. "Hello. Find what you were looking for?" Silverwind said with deceptive casualness.

The boy jumped up at the sound of the wizard's voice and tried to run away. He got as far as the rear of the wagon before Silverwind cast the spell. Then the boy slowly sat down on tail gate of the wagon and waited.

"Hey!" the boy shouted. "Lemme go! I didn't do nothin'."

Silverwind walked around to the back at the wagon and looked at the boy. He was short and thin with long, tangled, dark brown or black hair, it was difficult to tell in this light, and he had stew all over his face.

"Here," the wizard said tossing the boy a towel, "wipe your face."

"I don't gotta," the boy said defiantly.

"Yes, boy," Silverwind replied, "as a matter of fact you do." He stressed the last word and the boy started wiping his face.

"Hey! How'd you make me do that?" the boy demanded. "You a magic man?"

"A magic man?" Silverwind laughed. "Yes I suppose you could say I am."

"What's going on?" Oceanvine asked, running up to the wagon with Jason close behind her, "and who's the urchin?"

"I ain't no urchin! I'm a boy."

Oceanvine let that pass. "How did he get past your wards?" she asked Silverwind.

"I was just about to find that out. What's your name, boy?" The boy was silent. "What's your name?"

"If I tell you, it'll give you power over me," he replied.

"A common superstition," Silverwind replied. "And not in the least bit true. I already have power over you but I'd rather not force you to talk. It might hurt you. What is your name?"

"Candle."

"Candle? What sort of name is that?" Oceanvine asked suspiciously.

"It's the only one I got," Candle insisted.

"It's good enough," Silverwind told him. "I just wanted something to call you. Now how did you sneak into our campsite?"

"I was here first," Candle replied.

"You saw us set up camp and waited for us to go to sleep before sneaking into our wagon?"

"Yeah. Why can't I move?"

"You can move, Candle. You just can't run away. Tomorrow, I'll turn you in to the constable in the next village. After that you're on your own."

"The constable? Why? What did I do?"

"You're a thief, boy!" Oceanvine leaned forward and told him bluntly.

"I ain't no thief!" Candle protested. "I was just, uh, hungry. Yeah, I was hungry."

"That I don't doubt," Silverwind told him. "But we'd have fed you if you asked and you'd already finished eating when I caught you. No, don't lie. I could force the truth out of you if I wanted. Right now I just want to sleep." Then his voice took on a more commanding tone, "Stay in the wagon until I wake up. Get some sleep if you can," he concluded somewhat less harshly and went back to where his bedding was laid out on the ground without bothering to look back. Oceanvine and Jason followed him

Candle tried for well over an hour to get out of the wagon, but every time he tried he found himself getting sleepy. Eventually, he gave up and went to sleep.

Two

"Candle," Oceanvine called from the fireplace, "Would you bring the water over here please?"

"Why?" came Candle's reply.

Oceanvine turned around and saw Candle sullenly sitting on a rock, drawing lines in the dirt with a stick. "Because if you don't help, you don't eat," she snapped.

Candle said nothing but he did get up slowly and trudge over to the wagon as though his feet were encased in stone shoes. He was in the process of slowly picking up the large water bottle when Oceanvine made a distinct but quiet growl in her throat.

"Stop dawdling, Candle," Silverwind told him gently.

Candle started moving faster and brought the water to Oceanvine at a speed just short of a run. "Thank you, Candle," she said with false sweetness. Jason snickered.

"Hey! That wasn't fair," Candle turned on Silverwind. "I was getting the water."

"Slowly and under protest, boy. Why don't you get a couple more pieces of wood for the fire?" Silverwind suggested. This time Candle moved quickly but of his own volition. He wasn't a stupid lad, but he never stopped pushing to see how much he could get away with. So far Silverwind hadn't let him get away with very much at all.

After breakfast Candle helped Jason clean the dishes without being prompted to do so. Jason seemed to be the friendliest of the trio and Candle hoped he might get Jason to talk Silverwind out of his plan to have him arrested. He tried broaching the subject while they washed the dishes.

"What?" Jason laughed. "But you were trying to rob us, weren't you?"

Candle said nothing. *No ally here*, he thought.

They were soon on the road again. Candle rode glumly in the back wondering how he was going to get away when every time he tried to get out of the wagon he fell asleep. He even thought of getting near the back end of the wagon and waiting for a bump in the road to knock him out, but the moment he tried to

move he found himself falling asleep again.

Silverwind, Oceanvine, and Jason were riding up front talking about any number of things, most of which, Candle realized, he didn't understand. He didn't even know their names, now that he came to think about it. Why should he? As soon as he got away he'd never see them again. The only thing he'd regret was not knowing how the older man had cast this spell on him.

Candle was fascinated by magic - most children were. The seeming ability to just wave your hands and make things happen enthralled him and he wanted to know how it was done. One of the other boys, when he worked for Daddy Fox, had told him it was all a trick - like picking pockets. The traveling magicians who produced brightly colored birds from out of their hats or coins from out of the ears of members of their audience did it by sleight of hand, Candle had been told. The other boy, Gide, showed Candle how magicians palmed coins and other objects. The trick came in handy for Candle too once he mastered it, but what this man did to him was real. There were no magic words, no mystic passes of his hands, he just did it, but how?

Between introspection and several sudden naps, Candle was unaware of the passage of time so it came as a surprise when the wagon slowed down and pulled off the road.

"Why we stopping?" he wanted to know.

"Time to eat," Silverwind told him.

"You already ate today," Candle replied. Oceanvine looked at him strangely, but Silverwind and Jason cracked smiles at Candle's remark. "What?" he demanded. Silverwind's and Jason's smiles grew even broader, but Oceanvine became concerned.

"Candle, that was breakfast," she told him gently. "This is lunch and tonight we'll eat dinner."

"Three?" Candle asked, disbelieving, "You eat three times a day?"

"Unless I'm too busy and forget."

Silverwind realized what was going on here. Candle probably was lucky when he managed to find even one meal a day. He was very thin and his dark brown hair was stringy and unkempt. His ragged clothing was several sizes too large for him but managed to hide the fact of just how emaciated he was. Would turning him over to the constable really do him any good?

"Well, Candle," Silverwind said in friendly tones, "if you don't care to join us, you don't have to."

"I didn't say that," Candle replied quickly. "You want me to carry water again?"

"That won't be necessary. Just hand me that basket." Candle did so and Silverwind took a thick loaf of black bread, and a large piece of a hard, sharp cheese out of it. While he sliced the bread and cheese, Oceanvine opened another bundle and pulled out several thick slices of highly spiced meat and Jason filled four wooden cups with iced tea.

When Silverwind handed Candle a slice of the bread topped with meat and cheese, he started wolfing the open sandwich down as though afraid it might suddenly disappear until he noticed Oceanvine staring at him. Then he forced himself to slow down, at least while anyone was watching.

The iced tea was new to him. Ice in sub-tropical North Horaliawas rare enough. To find it in the summer was unheard of.

"Where'd you get ice?" Candle asked, staring at the cup of tea.

"Made it."

"Go on!"

Silverwind noted Candle's disbelief and glanced sharply at the boy's cup. A quiet crackling noise came from within the wooden vessel as the liquid inside froze solidly.

Candle looked down at the brown ice in his cup and demanded, "How'd you do that?"

"Magic," Silverwind replied with a normally disarming smile.

"Show me!" Candle insisted.

Oceanvine giggled, "Go ahead, O mighty wizard, show him how to make ice."

"I think we can all live happily without anymore of that," Silverwind told her sourly. "Candle, before you can learn to make ice you need to learn a lot of basics, both magical and physical."

"Huh?"

"You not only need to know how to cast the spell, but you also need to know why water freezes."

"It freezes 'cause it gets cold," Candle asserted.

"No, it does not get cold," Silverwind corrected the young thief. "It loses heat."

"Same thing." Candle responded. Silverwind sighed and looked toward Oceanvine who sat chuckling a few feet away.

"You think this is funny?" Silverwind asked her. She nodded, still laughing. "Then you try explaining it to him."

"Uh uh! You're the one who started teaching him about ice. You finish it," she replied.

"He'll never understand," Silverwind muttered

"Try me!" Candle challenged him.

"All right. Let me know if I lose you. First you have to understand that matter comes in three different forms; solid, liquid and gas. Understand?"

Candle nodded, but asked, "What's matter?" Oceanvine's laughter was renewed.

"Matter is what objects are made of. Everything in the world is made of matter."

"Even people?"

"Yes, even people."

"And rocks?" Silverwind nodded. "Then why aren't rocks alive like people?"

Oceanvine started laughing again but Silverwind looked at Candle closely. "That's a very good question," he complemented the boy. "There are many different kinds of matter."

"You said there were three," Candle accused.

"I said there were three forms of matter, you may call them states if you like."

"States?" Candle asked, trying out the unfamiliar word.

"Yes. Take water for example. In the solid state it is called ice and in the gaseous state it is steam."

"Steam is hot and ice is cold," Candle said, trying to figure out what the man was trying to tell him.

"That's true, but the part you have to understand is that heat is a form of energy. The hotter matter becomes, the more energy it has. Now all matter is made up of very very small particles..."

"Particles?"

"Pieces, extremely small pieces. They're called atoms."

"Atoms." Candle repeated.

"Right. There are less than ninety different types of atoms, last I heard. They're called elements."

"Elements."

"Silverwind!" Oceanvine admonished him. "How do you expect him to understand all that?"

"All matter," Candle said, stumbling only slightly over the unfamiliar words, "is made of very small pieces called atoms and there are less than ninety types of atoms called elements." Oceanvine raised her eyebrows in mild surprise. "But what has that got to do with solids, liquids, and gasses?"

"Very good!" Silverwind applauded. "All right, now these atoms can be combined into larger particles called molecules." Candle repeated that word. "Molecules tend to stick together, which is why objects like this piece of ice here," Silverwind picked a chunk out of his iced tea by way of demonstration, "don't just fall apart. Now when this ice melts," he let the ice form a small puddle in the palm of his hand, "the molecules have more energy and become more active, they start to move freely. And when it turns to steam..." he tossed the water into the air and instantly turned it to steam.

"It has even more energy and the molecules move even faster!" Candle finished for him.

"There. You see, Oceanvine, he does understand," Silverwind said smugly. But privately he thought to himself, *This is a very intelligent boy.*

"But," Candle continued, truly interested in the subject, "some things don't melt, they burn. Why?"

"Ah, combustion. That's much more complicated. We'll have to leave that for another time. Right now it's time to get on the road again."

"Silverwind?" Candle asked, hoping he wouldn't be slapped for calling the man by name.

"Yes?"

"But how do you make ice by magic?"

Oceanvine laughed, "This should be good. Go ahead, teach him the magic."

"I know some magic," Candle told them. Silverwind and Oceanvine looked skeptical. "I'll show you." He had a single copper penny in his pocket. With the skill gained from hours of practice he deftly palmed it and made it seem to appear from within Oceanvine's long blond hair, "Magic!" he proudly proclaimed.

"Illusion," Silverwind corrected him. Then the wizard pushed back the loose-fitting sleeve of his tunic and held his right arm out with the hand open and fingers spread wide. He slowly turned his arm to show that he was concealing nothing and then as he held it motionless, palm upward, Candle's penny slowly materialized in his hand. Candle had felt his penny dematerialize so he knew that the wizard had used magic, but before he could ask how Silverwind did it, the coin changed color, becoming a silver crown instead of a copper penny. "Now that's magic," Silverwind said flipping the silver coin back to Candle.

"Show me how you did that."

"That will take a long time," Silverwind told Candle, "and there are other spells you'll have to learn first."

"Teach me," Candle insisted. Although he didn't know it, that was the traditional phrase spoken by a person applying for apprenticeship.

Silverwind looked at him seriously. "That would involve my taking you on as an apprentice. Are you sure you would want that? Magic is not easy. It takes many years of hard work." Candle nodded. Anything was better than the workhouse, which is where Candle would end up if arrested. "Well, you think about it for the rest of the afternoon and we'll talk about it tonight. In the meantime, it's time to get back in the wagon."

"Silverwind," Oceanvine said softly once they were underway, "I was only kidding about teaching him magic."

"I wasn't," the wizard whispered back after checking to see what Candle was doing. The boy was sitting near the back end of the wagon just watching the road go by. He didn't apparently hear what they were saying. "It would be such a waste to just turn him over to the authorities. Did you see how quickly he picked up what I told him?"

"Are you really sure he understood? You told him things that university students usually have trouble with."

"He understood all right. He might not know energy from a flatfish, but he was able to follow what I told him."

"He'll be trouble," Oceanvine warned.

"Apprentices always are," Silverwind shrugged.

"When was the last time you took an apprentice?"

"While I was back at the University."

"This will be different. Very different. He isn't some well brought-up son of a local clerk. He's a thief. The gods only know what sort of life he's led."

"Then I suppose it's good that I'll have you here to help me," Silverwind replied. Oceanvine only closed her eyes and shook her head. All the while Jason continued to chuckle softly to himself.

Three

It was late that afternoon when they saw the dragon. Candle had not even thought of trying to escape since Silverwind mentioned the possibility of learning magic. Instead his mind was filled with images of himself producing sprays of flowers from thin air and making things disappear. He took the silver coin from his pocket and practiced palming and then making it seem to appear from nowhere. The penny had been the one coin he would never spend. It was his lucky piece. Now it was worth even more. Did that make it even luckier? Candle thought so. And now this magician said he might teach Candle real magic. Candle smiled. This was, he thought, the best thing that had happened to him since he left the orphanage.

The draconian shriek in the skies above interrupted his thoughts and he looked up to see the winged serpentine shape seemingly slither through the air.

"Your merchant friend was right," Silverwind remarked to Jason. "He did see a dragon. Nice specimen." The vivid red serpent was about twenty-feet long and heading generally southeast back toward Tamsa.

"Is it dangerous?" Jason asked.

"Not particularly. At that size it might attack young livestock and children, but only if it were desperately hungry. They're very intelligent and know that they're no match for an experienced dragon hunter. One hundred years ago there were hundreds of thousands of dragons in the Emmine Archipelago. Now there are less than one thousand."

"Is that bad?" Jason asked.

"Jason, the gods created this world in balance. That was the first and most important rule they learned when they failed with Midbar. Without balance there is no life. Those dragons were mostly eating vermin in the southern farm and ranch lands, but occasionally one would attack a calf or a young lamb. Very rarely one would be foolish or desperate enough to attack a young child left unattended, but for the most part they went after rabbits, mice, weasels, and other small mammals. The farmers and ranchers, of course, were not about to tolerate the loss of young animals and it was only natural to want to protect their children so they started an extensive campaign of extermination.

"They culled out all the stupid and slow dragons. Now the ones who are left are clever enough to be wary of Man and very good at hiding so they are rarely seen. Of course with that many dragons gone the

farmers and ranchers are now having even more trouble with the rabbits, weasels, and wildcats that the dragons used to keep down."

"But they did have the right to protect their children," Jason asserted.

"True," Silverwind agreed, "but the habits and territories of dragons are usually well known and predictable. They would never attack if an adult was present, for example, and they would also never try to eat anything blue. All they had to do was put their children in blue clothing and they would have been perfectly safe."

"Sounds like more of the 'One Maiyim' philosophy Oceanvine was telling me about."

"'One Maiyim' is also concerned with ecological balance," she told him, "but our primary concern is understanding and tolerance between the intelligent species."

"But if the dragons are so predictable," Jason asked, returning to the matter of the flying lizard, "what's that one doing here?"

"Good question," Silverwind replied.

"Do you have a good answer to go along with it?"

"No, but I'm sure there is one. Something drove that dragon out of its southern range."

"Silverwind, there's been a lot of unusual things going on lately," Oceanvine pointed out.

"I've noticed that," he replied.

"Do you think it might all be connected together?"

"Everything in the world connects if you look at it the right way. Isn't that what you keep telling me and everyone else who'll sit still long enough?"

"No fair!" Oceanvine protested. "You know what I meant."

"Okay. Yes, I think there is a connection. There is a lot of unusual activity going on. The Ducal deer, pirates, the serp, all the omens seen in Tarnsa, and now this dragon, maybe even the financial trouble Captain Jocey is having - any one of those might have been an isolated event, but all of them together? I just can't accept coincidence, not this much coincidence anyway."

"So what is causing it, do you think?" Oceanvine asked.

"Now that is exactly what I don't know. So far we have only seen the symptoms but not the ultimate cause. Magic does, as you well know, leave traces that can be detected, but up until now I haven't had the opportunity to study them. I didn't become suspicious until after we fought the serp off and that dragon is just too far away. It will have to wait until we get to North Horalia. Will that be tomorrow, Jason?"

"Late tomorrow I think, unless we're delayed again," he replied.

"That's a thought," Oceanvine remarked. "Do you think that whoever or whatever is behind this is trying

to delay us?"

"Getting paranoid on me, Vine?" Silverwind laughed. "No. If that were the case, that dragon would have done a lot more than just fly overhead."

Jason wanted to keep moving and hopefully make the next day's traveling a bit easier, so they continued to ride an extra hour after sunset until they arrived at another of the widely spaced camping groves. After they had their camp set up, Jason and Oceanvine started preparing the evening meal while Silverwind took Candle off to one side of the grove to talk.

"Well," Silverwind began, "I assume you're still interested in an apprenticeship since you stopped trying to escape."

"How you know that?" Candle asked suspiciously.

"There was nothing keeping you in the wagon this afternoon. You could have jumped out at anytime."

"You tricked me?"

"No, I tested you. An apprentice is constantly tested. Learning magic is hard work and not just anyone can do it. You have to be willingly dedicated to the craft. Being a magician isn't like being a blacksmith. You have to want to practice magic, because if at any time you don't want to do it, it just won't happen. A blacksmith or a cobbler or a fishmonger can go to work in the morning and even if he hates his job, he can force himself to go through the motions. A magician can't. He has to like his work or at least do it willingly. That's the first law of magic; you can't force it. You can not ever force it. Do you understand?" Candle nodded. "All right. Now let me tell you something about being an apprentice magician. It takes many hours of work and every hour has to be done willingly. On top of your magical studies I will also expect you to perform certain services for me as payment for the tutelage and in this case room and board as well."

"Tutelage?"

"The magic lessons."

"What sort of services?" Candle asked cannily.

"I'll expect you to help with the household chores when we get back to Renton."

"Chores?"

"Cleaning, cooking, mowing the lawn. That sort of thing."

"I don't know how to cook."

"You'll learn that too. Also you'll run errands for me."

"Errands?"

"Things like going into town and buying groceries or delivering messages."

"You would trust me with money?" Candle asked incredulously.

"The relationship between an apprentice mage and his teacher is one of absolute trust. It is part of the apprenticeship binding spell. Once cast neither you nor I will ever be able to betray one another until such time as I release you. Now do you still want to go through with it?"

"What if I say no?"

"Then you may go your way either now or in the morning. To coerce you would only invalidate the relationship."

"You'll teach me magic?"

"As fast as you're capable of learning."

"Deal!" Candle stuck his hand out to seal the bargain. As Silverwind solemnly accepted it Candle felt an uncomfortable buzz all throughout his body. His eyes bugged out and he shook all over. "Gods!" he exclaimed when Silverwind finally let his hand go. "What'd you do to me?"

"That was the spell that binds us together as apprentice and teacher."

"I thought I was gonna die!"

"It does get the blood flowing, doesn't it?" Silverwind laughed.

"Does all magic feel like that?"

"No. Each spell is different. Most produce no tactile sensations at all."

"What?"

"You won't feel them."

"Why didn't you say so?"

Silverwind just shook his head and replied, "Lad, I foresee interesting times for both of us. Let's get some dinner."

Four

Castle North, the ducal seat of North Horalia, was built for size rather than defensibility. An impressive edifice, it was actually a collection of loosely attached buildings and gardens that sprawled across several acres at the top of a wide, low hill with a fair-sized city situated around its southern and eastern flanks. While still a half-day's journey away the party got their first glimpse of the structure as a dark gray smudge on the western horizon, barely discernable through the undulating waves of sun-heated air.

"Think we'll make it there by nightfall, Jason?" Oceanvine asked. Jason's initial estimate of how long they would be on the road had been seriously optimistic. Instead it had taken them a full day longer in travel

time just to get within sight of the castle. After several nights of sleeping under the stars, which Oceanvine would never admit to having enjoyed, she was ready to adapt once more to the rigors of a feather mattress.

"By nightfall? Maybe not," Jason replied, "but I think we can get there before the staff goes to sleep." There was an abrupt cracking sound from underneath that directly preceded the sudden tilt of the wagon toward the back and the right. Silverwind, Oceanvine, and Jason managed to keep their seats, but Candle was thrown out and on to the right shoulder of the road.. "Of course, I could be mistaken," Jason concluded a moment later.

"Candle?" Silverwind called. "Are you all right?"

"I'll live," he replied.

"I'll check him," Oceanvine told Silverwind, "while you and Jason go check the damage."

"The axle is still sound," Silverwind reported a few minutes later, "but I doubt this wheel will ever play the bagpipes again." The wheel, iron-shod and wooden-spoked, was a total loss. Half the spokes had snapped and the iron tire had been twisted to the boundary of recognition. "How's the boy?"

"A bruise or two," Oceanvine replied. "Nothing to worry about. Now what could have caused that wheel to go like that?"

"Dry rot," Jason informed her.

"What? Didn't you check for that when you bought the wagon?"

"Of course I did," Jason returned heatedly. "I'd have sworn these wheels were new."

"They were," Silverwind confirmed. "See these spokes, they rotted from the inside. There wasn't a trace of rot showing until they broke."

"But that would mean that they were intentionally built with rotting wood. Why would a wheelwright do that? The word would get around quickly enough. He'd soon lose all his business."

"Silverwind," Oceanvine asked, "do you think it was done by magic?"

"Good question," the wizard replied. "You know what to do?" Oceanvine nodded, sat down cross-legged in front of the broken wheel, and closed her eyes.

"What's she doing?" Candle asked.

"Sh!" Silverwind whispered. "She's casting a spell that will tell us whether or not that wheel was cursed in some way." Silverwind led the young apprentice away and explained. "The use of magic leaves a trace that can be detected and often analyzed. Now the mere detection is a fairly easy spell, one that I expect you to be able to cast within the year, but it is rarely very useful since magic is so much a part of our daily lives. Almost everyone is capable of using magic to some extent. Now if the wheelwright uttered a blessing while working on the wheel, it would probably be magic. If he hit his thumb with a hammer and started cursing, that would be magic too. Very low power, ineffective magic, to be sure, since very little thought and concentration went into it, but enough to be detectable to a simple detection spell."

"Now what she's doing," Silverwind continued, "is not only seeing if someone cast a spell on that wheel but whether it was benevolent or malicious and whether it was incidental, like an accidental curse after hitting your thumb, or an intentional act of magic. That sort of analysis is much harder. If we needed to, we could probably go on to ascertain the actual spell that was used, but I don't think that's needed here."

"You know, wizard," Oceanvine called him as she came out of her trance, "you talk too much. It's very hard to concentrate while you're lecturing on basic magic theory."

Silverwind and Candle returned. "I thought you might like the practice in concentration, Vine. You ought to be going for your Master's exam soon. They won't take any pity on you."

"Oceanvine," she corrected him automatically, "and I still don't feel ready for that yet."

"No one ever is," Silverwind told her. It was an old argument. "But you're capable of passing them now."

"I'll take them when I'm ready," Oceanvine snapped. "Now do you want to know what I've learned or do you want to see for yourself?" Silverwind smiled his response and Oceanvine took that as her cue to report. "The rest of the wheels are sound by the way, as is the rest of the wagon itself. However it was definitely an intentional curse, but I couldn't find out anything else about it like when or where it was cast or the level of competency of the caster."

"Which argues by itself that he or she must be pretty good. I would think you'd be able to pry that much out of most masters' and a few wizards' spells." Oceanvine blushed at the complement. "Want me to take a look?" Oceanvine shrugged and Silverwind glanced almost negligently at the broken wheel. Then he frowned and stared at it more intently. Finally, he too sat down and put himself into a trance. He remained that way for five full minutes while the rest of the party stayed very still and quiet. Even Candle realized that something very serious was going on.

"I didn't honestly expect to find anything either," Silverwind said after coming out of his trance, "but I was surprised just how clean of magical clues it was. This was a masterful job. The strongest magic trace was from the spell that was used to damp the traces from the original curse and it was self-damping. Whoever did this must have had it in for us in particular."

"Why us?" Jason asked. "Why not for the wheelwright or the merchant I bought this from?"

"Because this isn't the spell of some country witch. It's too neat and clean. That isn't a very accurate way of putting it, I know, but that's the way it felt to me. The person who cursed this wheel had a very well organized mind and a lot of magical experience. That much I could tell. All mages leave a signature, a sort of magical fingerprint, when they cast a spell. For example, I would know one of Oceanvine's spells in a moment, mostly because we have worked together for so long but also because she has a very distinctive mind. This spell here, however," he waved at the wheel, "could have been cast by a machine for all the character I can pick up in the few meager traces that are left here. Well, we're not going to get to the castle by sitting here and staring at a broken wagon. I guess we'll have to find a replacement because fixing this one would take too long."

"Wait a minute," Oceanvine disagreed. "I've seen you produce living creatures out of thin air and spilled beer. True transformations. Why can't you just whip up a new wheel?"

"Because I'm not drunk."

"Huh?"

"I don't know how I do it, but I usually only can do that when I've had a dozen or so too many."

"Usually?" Oceanvine seized on the word. "Then you have done it sober."

"Small items, yes, but it's very hard and would probably take me three or four hours. In that time we could buy a new one from a nearby farmer."

"There's no need in any case," Jason told both of them. "We have a spare under the floor."

"We do?" Oceanvine and Silverwind asked as one.

"Oh yes," Jason replied. "Standard Horalian feature. We'll have to unload the wagon the rest of the way, but you can see where the hatch is."

"I'll be damned," the wizard muttered. "So much for the uselessness of a fifth wheel." They soon had the floor of the wagon cleared and pulled the spare out of its compartment.

"Well?" Oceanvine demanded of Silverwind, as she helped Jason and Candle muscled the old wheel off the axle. "Are you just going to stand there and direct?"

"What do you mean?" Silverwind replied placidly. "I'm holding the wagon up." He appeared to be drinking lemonade. "You wouldn't want me to lose concentration would you?"

Oceanvine gave him a sour look. "You're not fooling anyone, you know. Holding up the wagon might be all I could do at once, but I've seen you do a lot more than that just to win a bar bet."

"Want to trade?" Silverwind grinned at her.

"No," she replied, "I want you to work. Candle, be a dear and put that log under the back corner of the wagon. No, put it on end. All right, wizard, you may let it down now."

"You're no fun," Silverwind grumbled. Candle chuckled. "And that will be enough of that, boy!"

Candle stuck his tongue out at his master and quickly ducked out of the way of Silverwind's glare. When it came to wizards, maybe looks could kill. It was for that reason Candle saw the approaching coach first. "Fancy wagon comin'," he said, pointing.

Jason paused to look. "Hm, a white and gold coach with a team of six. I wonder which of my relatives is coming to visit. Well, we can keep working until they get here."

They were just sliding the old wheel off the axle when the approaching coach got to within earshot.

"Move that heap of junk off the road," roared a voice from on top of the coach, "and make way for your betters!"

Candle responded first. "Road's wide enough," he told the driver of the coach. "Go 'round."

"Out of the way, boy," the coachman repeated, "or you'll be beaten!"

"Up yours!" Candle spat. The Coachman snapped his whip, catching Candle on his left arm. The tongue

of the lash opened a painful, although shallow wound. "Ow!"

"Candle!" Silverwind shouted, rushing to the boy's aide.

"You too!" The coachman shouted. Snapping his whip toward the wizard.

However, as the whip snaked out, it burst into flame and all that actually struck Silverwind was a light shower of rapidly cooling ashes. In the next instant the haughty coachman was yanked out of his seat as if by an invisible hand and thrown roughly on to the road in front of his horses. The sight startled the horses and the two in front started to rear, neighing loudly. On the ground, the coachman whimpered in terror as he looked up at the raised hooves.

Silverwind looked gently at the horses before they could bolt and they quickly calmed down.

"Really, Oceanvine," he admonished the blond mage. "I had the situation in hand. You didn't have to toss him around."

"Sorry," Oceanvine apologized insincerely. "Just reflexes is all."

"Damned show-offish reflexes, Vine. I keep telling you. You've got to be subtle."

"I've never been a very subtle type of person," she replied with half a smile.

"Well, work on it."

"What's going on out there?" A deep voice demanded from within the coach. "Why aren't we moving? You, man," a ruddy-faced fat man leaned out the door of the shiny white coach and called to Silverwind, "are you responsible for this delay?"

"Stupid question," the wizard muttered. He turned to Jason who was out of the nobleman's line of sight and asked quietly, "What do you think?"

"Have fun," came the reply.

"Well, man? Speak up!" the noble demanded. "Is this your fault."

"Yes, my lord. It is," the wizard replied with a grin. "Your money or your life."

"What? That's not a joke, man! You aren't even armed."

Silverwind pushed back the sleeves of his tunic and replied, "Yes I am." Oceanvine smiled as she dressed Candle's wound. Even Candle was able to laugh, having a general idea of where this was all heading.

"See here now!" The noble was interrupted by a bright flash of light and a loud noise. By the time the light faded, he was back in the coach, terrified. Strangely, the horses didn't so much as snort in reaction. In fact they stood unnaturally motionless.

It was then that Jason finally stood up and walked over to the coach. "Oh come on out of there, Denzell. If you're really in such a hurry, you can help us fix the wagon," Jason told him.

"Me?" Denzell asked incredulously. "How dare you suggest that I... Lord Jason? Is that you? Why are you dressed in those, those... clothes." He said that last word with some distaste.

"These? Do you like them? It's the latest fashion on Rallena. You always were too provincial."

"Really. That's the fashion? I'll put my tailor to work right away."

Jason rolled his eyes at Denzell's gullibility and then became very stern. "Well, while you're at it you can try explaining why you and your man there still think you can bully the people of North Horalia?"

"Well, er..." was as far as Denzell got. His servant was still lying in the middle of the road. "What did you do to Hiram? Is he dead?"

"Stunned," Silverwind said.

"You should have killed him, Silverwind," Jason told him harshly. "It would have served him right."

"I'll have you know that Hiram has served me faithfully for years," Denzell protested.

"Carrying out your dirty work, you mean. Denzell, my father has been very lenient with you because you're kin, but that won't last much longer. The duty of the nobility is to protect the people, not beat them up." Denzell knew enough to keep his mouth shut. "Now, if you don't care to get your hands dirty I recommend that you have your man drive around us. Wizard, you may wake him up now." Silverwind shrugged and gave the coachman a mild kick with the side of his foot. A few minutes later, the white coach had driven out of sight.

"You have many like him?" Silverwind asked as they put the spare wheel on the axle.

"He's unique," Jason replied, "thank the gods. I don't know how many times my father has warned him. It may be acceptable for noblemen to beat commoners elsewhere, but we've never approved of that here."

"There's one in every crowd," Oceanvine commented.

"Oh, that's right, you know his nephew, Kormac."

"I see the resemblance. Wish I'd known that before. Maybe I would have given him a gift as well."

"You still aren't authorized to do that sort of thing," Silverwind warned her.

"True, but I've learned a lot since I left Medda. One of those things is how not to get caught."

"You'd be authorized if you passed your master's exam," Silverwind reminded her.

"When I'm ready."

"If you two are finished," Jason cut in, "I believe we can be moving on now."

The main gate of Castle North, flanked on either side by thick-trunked palmettos, was illuminated by the flickering blaze of a dozen torches. Lights had also been posted on the towers and along the granitic parapets of the enclosing wall of the castle compound. Additionally, every window in the main keep

appeared to be illuminated as well.

"Would you look at that?" Candle marveled at the sight.

"Quite impressive," Oceanvine agreed. "The King's palace isn't as large."

"It's a bit gaudy," Jason replied deprecatingly, "but we call it home. It may be larger than the palace at Randona, but the king has several large manors across Emmine, while this is the only residence of the Dukes of North Horalia. My family goes back to the founding of the kingdom. After some thirty-odd generations, originally as the Dukes of Horalia and now of North Horalia, we need all this room just to store all the junk that's accumulated."

"What's with all the lights?" Silverwind asked. "This isn't normal is it?"

"Not hardly," Jason replied. "I suspect Denzell arrived a few hours ago and had all this set up in an attempt to make up for the episode on the road. I'm surprised he didn't have them illuminate the palmettos as silly as it would have looked."

"Hail, Lord Jason, heir to the Duchy of North Horalia!" a voice shouted from on top of the gate. Then in a slightly quieter and less formal tone, "Welcome home, my lord."

"Thank you, Malcolm. It's good to be back," Jason returned, "What's with all the ceremony?"

"Orders, my lord. You know?"

"I know," Jason sighed.

"You're a lord?" Candles asked, astonished.

"Looks that way," Jason told him.

"How?"

"Just lucky, I guess. Had the right parents."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Would it have made a difference?"

"Yes. Yes it would have."

"Really, Candle? I'm just a man. Nothing more. Besides, weren't you a bit suspicious by the way I faced down Denzell earlier?"

"I wasn't paying it much mind. I was a bit busy myself getting patched up by the..." he stopped himself in mid-sentence, then started again, "by Oceanvine. I thought you was just brave cause you had the wizard at your back."

"No. I didn't need Silverwind there, although I will admit it was comforting. I could have Denzell banished for his actions and he knew it."

"Why don't you?"

"Something my father taught me. Hand out neither rewards nor punishments without taking the time to consider the matter. Besides, for all his nastiness, Denzell is family and he has been useful on occasion. Still somebody, either my father or me probably, will need to deal with him soon. He certainly isn't getting any better with age."

Candle watched wide-eyed as they proceeded through the compound toward the main keep. Just inside the gate was a large neatly cropped field surrounded by various buildings that were set up against the castle wall.

"Whoa! You could hold off an army in this place," Candle muttered.

"That is pretty much the point," Silverwind told him. "There was a time when such fortifications were necessary."

"It's all a bit antiquated now, though," Jason pointed out. "There are weapons and magics that would open this place up in a day or less."

"There are magical protections that are more powerful too," Oceanvine mentioned.

"True, but we haven't been building for fortification in the last few generations. There used to be two outer boundary walls around the entire estate. But they were demolished by my grandfather to allow the lands they enclosed to be used by all the people. Some of it is farmed but most is the game preserve."

A short man with curly, light-brown hair, dressed in a bright green, heavily embroidered, short-sleeved tunic, met them at the entrance to the keep. He wore several chains and medallions that jingled together as he walked.

"Lord Jason, welcome back!" he greeted Jason with a warm hug. "And these are?"

"Master Steuen," Jason replied, "it's good to see you again. My companions are the Wizard Silverwind, Oceanvine, a journeyman..."

"Journeywoman," she corrected him quickly.

"A journeywoman mage," Jason continued with a slight bow to the blond woman, "and Candle, recently apprenticed to Silverwind. Gentle people..."

"Gentle?" Candle laughed, interrupting Jason.

Silverwind whispered something to him and he stopped laughing out loud, but his eyes still sparkled with delight. He hadn't realized that by merely apprenticing to the wizard, he had come up in the world.

"I present," Jason continued as though Candle's interruption had gone unnoticed, "Master Steuen of North, the seneschal of this castle."

Master Steuen eyed Candle's rags suspiciously, wondering just how recent he had apprenticed. Very few masters of any guild kept their students in rags. It made them look as bad as their students. However he merely nodded to each in turn and exchanged polite and meaningless greetings.

They started to enter the keep but Jason paused to give the customary blessing at the right doorpost. Oceanvine followed suit but Silverwind had to instruct Candle in the proper observance.

"Put your right hand on the doorpost," he told the young apprentice, "and repeat after me. Emtos and Emmine bless this house and those within it."

"Why?" Candle asked.

"It is customary all over the Emmine Archipelago to make that blessing before entering another's house or your own house if you've been away."

"Why?"

"Because it shows the proper respect for the gods and for your host. It also shows that you've been brought up properly. Now are you going to continue to embarrass me, or will you make the blessing?" When Silverwind put it that way, Candle found that he genuinely wanted to bless the keep. To do otherwise would betray his master - it was his first real experience with the power of the binding spell between Silverwind and himself. He quickly repeated the blessing and they went inside.

"Your sister," Steuen told Jason as they walked, "is very anxious to meet you in the small audience chamber." Jason raised an eyebrow. Was he about to have trouble here too? "It seems that she is eager to discharge her responsibilities as acting mistress of the keep, and wants to hand it over to you as soon as possible." Steuen smiled. "Ruling, evidently, has not been all she dreamed it would be."

"I hope you haven't been going out of your way to point that out to her."

"I'll admit," Steuen replied, "that the thought did cross my mind at first, but there were enough problems that came up on their own without any of my own able assistance."

"How did she handle them?"

"Well enough, I'd say, but she doesn't have the confidence of the people. That old prejudice, don't you know. She'd have had an easier time if she'd been born a man."

"Too bad. Still I suppose it is just as well she didn't like the taste of command. The last thing we need right now is a power struggle. Would be damned inappropriate too considering our father's illness."

"Are you so sure that you will like command where your sister didn't?" Master Steuen asked pointedly.

"I suspect," Jason replied, smiling, "that I'll absolutely abhor it. Still, it's a matter of duty. I'll do what I must. Maybe one of my brothers will turn out to be better suited to the job."

"I doubt it. Michael has been praying his thanks to Emtos every night that he wasn't old enough to act in your place and Cerdic would rather be a musician."

"Cerdic is young yet. I wanted to be a gardener; still do."

"I know but many noblemen keep personal gardens like yours and manage to rule well."

"And many play guitar as well," Jason countered. "I suspect that if it were thrust upon him, Cerdic would do as well as any and better than most."

"Perhaps, but he'll be just as happy if he never has to find out. Meanwhile, here we are. Wait a moment and I'll have the herald announce you."

"Is all that really necessary? All we really want to do is get some sleep."

"I'm afraid so, my lord. This is a formal occasion. Don't worry, I'll have your things brought to your rooms. Also I doubt Galiena will want to drag this out anymore than you do." Master Steuen slipped quickly through a pair of double doors that swung shut again behind him.

A moment later they swung open again as a loud voice announced, "Lord Jason, heir to the Duchy of North Horalia, Silverwind of Quarna the Wizard and the mages Oceanvine and Candle."

Jason led the way into what was supposed to be the small audience chamber. Candle estimated that the room was some five fathoms wide and almost twice as long and wondered just how big the large one must be. As they walked the length of the hall, he kept looking from side to side, trying to take in all the richness and opulence at once.

"Stop that!" Silverwind whispered.

"What?"

"You look like you're trying to case the joint."

"Oceanvine's doing the same thing," Candle pointed out.

"She isn't dressed like a thief. Remind me tomorrow to buy you some new clothes."

"Really?"

"Well we can't keep you dressed like that, now can we. We have appearances to maintain you know. Rule number two: a mage must always dress for success."

"Dress for success?"

"I'll explain later."

"Silverwind?"

"Yes?"

"What's rule number one?"

"Figure that out for yourself." Candle was certain that was not an answer, but he shut up nevertheless.

A slim young woman about Oceanvine's age sat at the head of the chamber on an ornate chair, large enough to hold two of her comfortably. She was flanked on one side by Master Steuen and the herald, garbed in the green livery of North Horalia, on the other. The only other people in the room were the two maids who opened the doors for the party when they were announced.

"Dear brother!" Galiena cried, getting off the ducal throne and running toward Jason. Master Steuen

gave them a few moments to embrace before clearing his throat. Then when they didn't pay attention he did it again twice. "Oh," she said, disentangling herself at last, "Let's get this over with." she cleared her throat and asked, "Do you, Lord Jason of North Horalia, heir to the ducal throne, accept the authority and responsibilities of the office of Warden, acting in the name of Duke Astel for the good of the Duchy, and all that?"

"And all that?" Jason asked, laughing as he caught Steuen's scowl at Galiena's wording. Galiena winked, so Jason replied, "In the name of our father, Astel, the twentieth Duke of North Horalia, I accept all that."

"Good!" Galiena replied. "It's all yours." Steuen scowled again; he preferred that ceremonies be accomplished with formality and decorum. Neither Jason nor Galiena agreed. "We'll handle the real transfer in the morning. Wizard," she said, turning to Silverwind, "thank you for coming so quickly. The Wizard Meadow was informed of your approach but says that because of the late hour he will meet you in the morning."

"A polite lie, I think," Silverwind confided with a smile. "I don't think Meadow approves of my behavior these days."

"Oh?"

"I laugh."

"Ah, yes," Galiena nodded. "He doesn't smile much does he?"

"Most mages don't. It's a very serious profession. It's just that over the years I came to miss having fun and decided that there was nothing to keep me from having it both ways. Most of my colleagues, however, mistake that for a lack of seriousness in professional matters."

"It didn't stop Meadow from recommending you," Jason pointed out.

"He knows I'm among the best. He just doesn't condone my behavior. Now if I might be so bold, how about we all have a night cap before we go off to bed."

Galiena looked at Silverwind as though that was the last thing she expected him to say. Then she smiled and replied, "No wonder Wizard Meadow doesn't approve. When I suggested the same to him, he looked at me as though I'd spoken heresy."

"Orenta are not supposed to drink alcoholic beverages of any kind except during religious celebrations," Silverwind informed her. "Meadow is perhaps more religious than most. Combined with the fact that most mages view intoxicants as counterproductive to their performance..." Silverwind shrugged.

They repaired to a less formal room up one flight of stairs and down a long corridor. This one had been decorated in warm colors and had large windows that were open to catch the evening breezes. Oceanvine restricted herself to lemonade and Silverwind would only allow Candle the same in spite of his protestations. After the drinks had been served, the two maids who had followed them to this room quietly left Jason and Galiena alone with their guests.

Galiena noticed Candle and studied him closely before asking, "Have we met before?"

"I don't see how," Candle replied.

"You look very familiar. Oh well, if you're Silverwind's apprentice, then it's not likely is it?"

"Uh, no, yer ladyship," Candle replied uncomfortably.

"Candle. That's an interesting mage name. How did you happen to choose it?" Silverwind had been about to correct Galiena's faulty impression that Candle had accompanied him from Renton, but stopped himself. He was interested in the answer to that question as well.

"It's the only name I got," Candle replied. "When I was young in the home..."

"Home?"

"An orphanage, I believe," Silverwind interjected.

Galiena nodded and Candle continued, "Anyway, when I was young, I'm told, I tried to touch a candle flame and burnt my hand a bit. See, I still have a scar on this finger. So after that they started calling me Candle."

"Do you have another name?" Galiena asked him.

"Don't know."

A sudden flash of recognition crossed Galiena's face. "Tell me, Candle. How long have you been studying with Silverwind?"

"Not long," he replied evasively.

"A few days," Jason interpreted for his sister.

"I thought so! I have seen you before. A year ago, in Tarnsa. Wasn't it?"

"It was?"

"Candle," Silverwind asked sternly, "did you pick this lady's pocket?"

"I did not!" he exclaimed indignantly.

"No," Galiena told the wizard, "he distracted me while one of his friends did. Where did you find this one?"

"On the road, first night out of Tarnsa," Silverwind replied, still looking solemnly at his young apprentice.

"He was going through our wagon," Jason amplified.

"Lady Galiena," Silverwind turned to her, "if you wish I will gladly reimburse you for whatever amount this rascal took."

"That won't be necessary," Galiena told him. "I wasn't carrying much at the time, just a few coins. Just keep him out of trouble while he's here in Castle North."

"Thank you," Silverwind replied. "Don't worry about Candle. He won't do anything here that might

embarrass me, would you, Candle?"

Actually Candle had been looking around to see what he might carry off. Now, however, he found the thought repugnant. He even found himself embarrassed by the fact he was a thief and that had never happened before. "No, sir," he told his master quietly but firmly.

"Good lad. Well, my lady, it's getting quite late and I, for one, need my sleep. See you on the morrow."

Five

Silverwind was used to sleeping late. Living in the semi-isolation of his retreat just outside of Renton, he had the luxury of setting his own hours and he preferred to work late into the night and avoid those first deadly rays of dawn. Oceanvine, on the other hand, was definitely a morning person. The arrangement had worked out well between them. Silverwind would leave notes for her so that she wouldn't have to wait for him to wake up and in the long run they were able to accomplish more working that way.

However the first morning at Castle North found Silverwind up and moving at first light. He obstinately attempted to go back to sleep, but he was as awake as if his eyelids had been pinned open; not only was there an uninterrupted view of the world around him, but the nagging pain of the pins as well. So after a token attempt, he got dressed and wandered off in search of a breakfast with his name on it.

He wasn't really sure which way the kitchen was, but as large as the keep was, it wasn't all that big. He'd find it eventually and, if all else failed, he could always ask for directions. Every so often his instincts would tug at him to turn one way or another. He steadfastly ignored these little hints and even turned the other way on several occasions. His instincts had never been very reliable in the past and he had no reason to believe that anything had changed overnight. It took better than twenty minutes, but he eventually made his way into a small dining room.

"It is about time you got here, Silverwind," a resonant baritone voice greeted him harshly. Sitting alone in the room at a long wooden table was a tall, deeply tanned, slightly built Orente - an elf. His medium-length salt-and-pepper hair did nothing to hide his slightly pointed ears and his golden, almond-shaped eyes glared at Silverwind from beneath great, upswept eyebrows. He was wearing the characteristically loose-fitting Orentan silk tunic with short sleeves and pants in a boldly colorful print, considered conservative in the tropical Bellinen Archipelago.

"Meadow, how are you, old man?" Silverwind replied cheerfully, knowing just how much this would bother his elvish colleague.

"Still acting like a troll, are you?" the Wizard Meadow replied caustically. "Silverwind, I Called you almost an hour ago. Did you deliberately ignore it?"

"Why, yes," Silverwind replied with an annoying grin, "I believe that is exactly what I did. Didn't know it at the time, of course, but now that I come to think about it, I was going out of my way to avoid getting here."

"Do you mean you didn't hear the Call?"

"I suppose I was asleep at the time."

"With the power I put into the spell it should have shown up in your dreams. You can not fail to hear a Call."

"When I sleep," Silverwind told the Orente, "I really sleep!"

"Nobody sleeps that soundly," Meadow scoffed.

"Evidently not," Silverwind agreed. "I'm here. Now, what's so damned important that you had to wake me up at this ungodly hour?"

"Ungodly?" Meadow stiffened. "How can you say that? The gods began their creation of Maiyim at dawn."

"Says who?"

"It is obvious," Meadow insisted. "A major project should always be started after a good night's sleep."

"The gods sleep?"

"Of course They sleep."

"Then what was there to stop Them from sleeping until noon and creating Maiyim in the afternoon?"

"That's ridiculous!" Meadow scoffed.

"We could ask Them if you like. If you're right They should be up by now."

"Do not even joke about that!" Meadow shuddered.

"Of course if They're sleeping late today, They might be just a tad annoyed if we wake Them up," Silverwind continued.

"Silverwind, your questionable sense of humor has only gotten worse for the aging. Do you have any idea of what has been going on here?"

"Silly question. You sent the message, didn't you? So you know exactly what I do and do not know. So try filling me in the easy way or would you rather reduce this conversation to incoherent shouting like last time?"

Meadow gripped the arms of his chair until his knuckles lightened by several shades. He closed his eyes and went into a meditative trance. Silverwind watched him closely. He didn't think he had pushed Meadow too far; a wizard ought to have better control than that. *On the other hand*, Silverwind thought to himself, *I ought to know better by now as well.*

Finally, Meadow spoke without opening his eyes. "Silverwind, let us call a truce. The issue at hand is too serious for this nonsense."

"All right," Silverwind agreed. "After our last argument, I'm surprised that you even recommended me."

"Fishing for compliments?" Meadow's eyes opened again. "Well, I had hoped you might have grown up over the last few years. You may be the most powerful mage in the world. The problem is that you know it."

"Not at all," Silverwind disagreed, "At least that's not the problem."

"Oh? What is the problem then?"

"My attitude, of course. After the Isle of Fire disaster I did a lot of soul searching and what I finally found was that it doesn't pay to take anything too seriously."

"Someone using the Bond of Aritos is not serious enough for you?" Meadow demanded.

"It's possibly the most serious thing to come along in centuries, Meadow, but that doesn't mean that you can't take the time to laugh at a joke when one comes along. You didn't know me back at the University, but I was just like you - serious, conscientious, and boring as Hell. But you can only keep that up for so long; the pressure builds up. Most of us no longer do problem work in the field. They get a nice routine job in town. That's one way of dealing with it, I suppose, but those of us who do research and investigations, like you and me, need some sort of release. I found that humor was an ideal release."

"It can also distract you at a crucial moment, Silverwind. Persist in this madness if you wish, but stop trying to send me down that same road."

"Silverwind recommended you too, you know," Oceanvine said from the doorway.

"Oceanvine," Meadow asked, "are you still working with Silverwind? I'd have thought you'd have had enough of him by now."

"Not yet. Silverwind, would you really have attempted to ask the gods such a trivial question?"

"Only if Meadow had insisted," Silverwind replied. "Actually I don't recall ever speaking with a god. It might have been an interesting experience."

"Well," Oceanvine imitated Silverwind's casual tone, "you will let me know if you change your mind? I've always wondered what a god sounds like."

"Oceanvine!" Meadow admonished her. "You used to be such a serious young lady, but I see now that this scoundrel has totally corrupted you." Oceanvine fluttered her eyelashes at the elvish wizard. "Gah! And to think I saw such promise in you. What a waste." Oceanvine looked down at the table, abashed. It was one thing for Silverwind to poke fun at a fellow wizard, but it was an honor she had not yet earned. "Well, at least you still have enough sense to be embarrassed," Wizard Meadow observed.

That was the penultimate straw. Oceanvine looked up and locked eyes with the aging elf in a contest of wills. Normally a wizard would win such a contest easily. Experience, age, and mastery of magic would be ultimately in his favor, but Oceanvine was angry. Angry in a way that only an accomplished mage might be. While still a young apprentice she might have lost control now and again, but as a graduate of the university she held her emotions firmly in hand. Rather than suppressing them as most wizards did, however, Silverwind had shown her how to make them work for her. At that moment she was more than a match for almost anyone.

Such contests were common among students, both as recreation and as a learning exercise and they

went far beyond merely seeing who would be the first to blink. It put the power of one's mind directly up against that of another. Teachers often competed with their students to give them a tougher challenge, but it was the rare student who ever won out against his teacher. Oceanvine was the only one in her class who could give even the wizards on the faculty a run for their money.

Meadow quickly realized that against this journeyman and her anger he was utterly out-matched. He broke eye-contact first, admitted defeat and apologized, "Maybe I went a little too far, Oceanvine. I am sorry." She nodded her acceptance. "Have you taken your master's exams yet?"

"Not yet."

"Do not wait much longer. You are ready now."

"Told you so," Silverwind needled her. She quickly discarded the notion of a contest of wills with Silverwind. He was the one immovable object and irresistible force she had ever encountered. Instead she merely stuck her tongue out at him.

"Wizard Meadow," Oceanvine prompted, "you were about to explain the situation here."

"Thank you. Yes, I was," Meadow replied. "I did not send you much information because I didn't want you to show up with any preconceived notions the way I did. Please understand that this is not a case of someone poisoning a deer and painting an arcane symbol on its flank. Somewhere there is a rogue mage who is casting subtly powerful spells of incredible evil. The Bond of Aritos in this case is not the cause of death, merely the symptom."

"Ah ha! That's why there hasn't been a whole rash of possession and corruption," Silverwind concluded.

"Correct," Meadow acknowledged. "The symbols are magically neutral; they are not set to do anything when looked at or touched, although I have determined that the meat of the deer so afflicted is deadly poisonous."

"Could the caster have hoped that someone might eat the venison from the afflicted deer?" Oceanvine sounded doubtful.

"It strikes me," Meadow replied, shaking his head, "that the person behind this is neither stupid nor foolish. Nobody would eat the meat of a possibly diseased animal."

"Depends on how desperate and hungry they are," Silverwind pointed out. "Meadow, you are a very intelligent and educated man, but you haven't had much experience with commoners, especially the very poor. Poor people can't afford education, even in the few lands where there are public schools. Education takes both time and money and the poor need all they can get just to survive. As a consequence most of what they learn comes either from experience or the weekly sermons of their local priest. Now in most cases superstition combined with their hard-earned knowledge would, as you say, keep someone from ever touching a diseased animal, but if someone were hungry enough, they might think it was worth the risk."

"I do not think that there are many that desperate in North Horalia," Meadow countered. "The duke has always been exceedingly generous. He has an open hunting season in his game preserve, for example."

"And he often grants free licenses to hunt to those who can't afford to pay," Oceanvine added.

"Just so," Meadow agreed.

"All right," Silverwind allowed. "We can discuss possible motives later. Tell me more about the deer."

Meadow cleared his throat and launched into what was obviously a fairly direct quotation from a set of notes he had been making since his arrival some weeks earlier. "When I first came to this duchy, I plunged directly into my study of the situation. The fallen deer had been preserved in one of the duke's stables by the town master magician and so I started my investigation by examining the bodies of the fallen animals.

"My first surprise," Meadow told them, "was that the markings neither appear to be painted nor dyed on to the animals, but instead seem to be an actual change of color of the hair and skin. If it is dyed, then it is something that no known test can detect."

"Yes," Silverwind nodded, "Lord Jason told us about that."

"He did? I thought I told him to tell you as little as possible."

"It was a necessary fact for me to know."

"Very well. What else did he tell you?"

"That's about all. The deer are dying with the markings and now Duke Astel seems to have picked up the same disease. Tell us about the duke."

"I don't know for a certainty that it is the same disease, as you call it. The deer were marked on their flanks, but the duke is marked on his forehead. Also, the deer appear to have died immediately but Duke Astel is stricken with the symptoms of a wasting disease; one that advances quite rapidly, to be sure, but hardly immediate."

"How rapidly?"

"It is a matter of two or three hours. Swift, but hardly instantaneous."

"What proof do we have that the deaths of the deer were actually instantaneous? Has anyone actually seen them die?" Oceanvine asked.

"Yes," Meadow replied. "The duke himself witnessed the first such case. If it was not instantaneous, it was nearly so. Each time, once a week for the next twenty-six weeks, the deer were found already dead. I know your next question and yes it is possible that they died over the course of several hours just like the condition affecting the duke."

"What is keeping him alive right now?" Silverwind asked.

"I cast a protective spell of sorts on him."

"Of sorts?"

"I put him in stasis. He neither lives nor dies until the spell is removed, but we cannot remove the spell until we have a cure for him. Otherwise he will die within minutes."

"Then I guess I won't be able to talk to him," Silverwind concluded.

"Not unless you want his dying words, no. You can not even examine him through my stasis spell."

"It's that impermeable?"

"It is necessary," Meadow replied. "Nothing less would preserve his life."

"Did you have time to question him about symptoms?"

"Not really. He was - I suppose he still is really or will be when the spell is removed - in great pain and not particularly coherent. The pain seemed to be non-centralized - he hurt all over, and was running a high fever."

"Any swelling of the joints?" Oceanvine asked, "Abnormal discharges? Skin color? Anything else?"

"His skin was very pale and he was sweating profusely, but that was about it. You must realize that I had to work quickly or I would have lost him. It was as though his life was like a candle made of different types of wax with increasingly lower flashpoints. He was burning himself out."

"Poetry, Meadow?" Silverwind asked, startled. "I didn't know you had it in you."

"I have taken to reading poetry, but how did you... Oh I see, the candle metaphor."

"A simile, actually, but why quibble," Silverwind smiled. "So we know very little of what struck Duke Astel down and almost nothing about the deer. Any other unusual signs or reported omens around here lately?"

"Omens? Come now, Silverwind," Meadow scoffed. "Do not tell me you believe in that sort of superstitious rubbish! If the gods really wanted to warn us of future troubles They would tell us directly."

"How?" Silverwind asked. "Would They just pop in for tea some afternoon and say, 'Oh by the way, the world is coming to an end. Sorry about that but you know how it is.'?" Oceanvine giggled, trying to hide a smile with her hand, but Meadow was glaring at both of them. Silverwind realize that maybe he had gone too far again. "Sorry, Meadow, I couldn't help myself."

"Must you persist in your casual sacrilege?"

"I don't think the gods mind, Meadow. People have been doing far worse over the ages. I rather think the gods have a fine sense of humor."

"How do you reason that?"

"They created three forms of intelligent life on Maiyim, didn't they? Even if most of us still don't get the joke." Meadow rolled his eyes to the ceiling in exasperation. "Calm down, Meadow. You're starting to match that gaudy outfit of yours."

"Hey!" Candle called unceremoniously from the doorway. "Where's the food?"

"One of yours, Silverwind?" Meadow asked looking down at the young apprentice's ragged appearance.

"Yeah, what's it to ya?" Candle challenged the Orentan mage.

"Candle," Silverwind said sternly, "Be courteous to the Wizard Meadow."

"Yes, sir," Candle replied, chastened. "I'm sorry, sir," he told Meadow. He had not wanted to apologize until Silverwind had corrected his behavior. *Something's going on here*, he thought to himself as Meadow continued to look at him disdainfully. Candle was used to that sort of treatment; he'd been putting up with it all his life.

"Meadow," Silverwind continued, "Candle is my newest apprentice."

"You ought to dress him better. He looks like a thief."

"He is a thief," Silverwind replied.

"Am not," Candle protested. Silverwind glance at him and he immediately regretted speaking up then.

"All right," Silverwind relented, "he was a thief, but isn't any more. Is that better?" He asked Candle who nodded.

"You apprenticed a thief?" Meadow asked. "A mage should only accept apprentices who have demonstrated the highest moral standards. We have enough problems with mages corrupted by power without teaching the craft to those who start out with no respect for the law."

"Candle was a thief by necessity, not desire," Silverwind defending his apprentice. "I'm sure that now he has a choice, we'll find him as law-abiding as any."

"We shall see," Meadow replied, unconvinced. "Why do you not dress him better then? You have obviously agreed to house and feed him or he would not be on the road with you."

"Well, actually I just took him on a few days ago and haven't had the occasion to rectify the matter of his wardrobe. I'll see to it in a day or two after I've managed to catch up to you. In the meantime, however, perhaps Lord Jason will have something suitable for a wizard's apprentice to wear."

"You would bother the warden of this castle over so trivial a matter?" Meadow asked.

"Good point," Silverwind conceded. "Lady Galiena, on the other hand has just passed that office over to her brother, she ought to have a little time to help out and I do believe she likes this scamp. Oceanvine, would you take care of it after breakfast?" Oceanvine nodded. "Good, then it's all settled. Candle, in answer to your question, this is where the food is supposed to be. However, I doubt the kitchen staff knows we're here yet. Would you be so kind as to go to the kitchen and bring us all back some breakfast?"

Candle almost asked, "Why me?" but decided to keep quiet. He was obviously low man in this group, another situation he had dealt with before. "Yes, sir," he replied instead. "Where's the kitchen?"

"Go out the door," Meadow informed him, "and turn left," he pointed in the correct direction as though he didn't expect Candle to know his left from his right, "and then go through the third door on the right." To illustrate this point, the elf held up three long tapering fingers. "The kitchen will be at the end of a short corridor." Candle didn't miss the Orente's slights, but he said nothing as he left the room. His mind was

too busy trying to figure out what had been happening to him lately.

Six

"Oceanvine?"

"Yes, Candle?" she replied. They threaded their way through the corridors of Castle North, looking for Lady Galiena now that breakfast was over.

"When you were an apprentice, did your master put any spells on you?"

"Several, depending on the occasion. What sort of spells do you have in mind?"

"Well, when he took my hand everything seemed to buzz and when it was over, he said I was his apprentice."

"I know that one," Oceanvine smiled, remembering her own apprenticeship. "It's a standard binding spell. It gives the student and the teacher a common purpose powered by a temporary sharing of part of your souls. In this case he is bound to teach you and protect you from harm and you are bound to learn and to obey him."

"What if I can't learn magic?"

"Oh, I think you won't have any more trouble than the average student, but don't worry. The spell only binds you to try to learn. Nothing can force you to do something you aren't capable of. In most cases, the spell is unnecessary. It cannot be cast unless the apprentice truly wants to learn magic so that aspect of it rarely comes into play. Why?"

"Ever since he cast it I keep changing my mind."

"Changing your mind?" Oceanvine asked.

"Yeah, like with that Meadow guy. He didn't like me so I didn't bother being nice to him. Then Silverwind told me to be nice and I wanted to. Same thing's been going on for days." Candle seemed genuinely worried. "Am I going nuts?"

Oceanvine laughed, "Oh dear, no. That's the binding spell at work. Meadow might have been right about choosing apprentices at that. Most of us would never even think of embarrassing or disobeying our masters, especially in the first few weeks. After all if you want to be a magician, the last thing you'd want would be release?"

"He'll release me if I'm bad?" Candle asked worriedly.

"He might, but Silverwind knew, sort of, what you were when he agreed to teach you. I doubt he'll let you go unless you ask him to. Were you worried?"

"Yeah."

"Good. It shows the proper attitude." Oceanvine did not tell Candle just how lucky she thought he was. In her own day as an apprentice she would have given anything to have studied under as eminent a mage as Silverwind. It would only go to his head.

They walked on for another few paces before Candle asked her another question. "Oceanvine?"

"Yes. What now?"

"What's a mage name? Last night the lady said 'Candle' was a mage name."

"Lady Galiena only assumed it was a mage name," Oceanvine corrected him. "All right, it's a bit of a story, but I think we have the time. There used to be a time when magicians thought that you could control something if you knew its true name. I'm not sure why they believed that, but one of the ancient philosophers said it and everyone just believed him."

"How long ago?"

"The ancient philosopher, Theostophanes by name, lived almost four thousand years ago, but his theory of true names was only an interesting subject of debate until the fall of the ancient civilizations, about fifteen hundred years ago, which led to what some scholars call the Dark Age, but most these days are calling the Age of Faith."

"Why?" Candle asked.

"Why what?"

"Why do some call it one thing and others another?"

"Oh. Well, there was a time when the ancient world was idealized, never mind why, it just was. People tend to look back and decide that things used to be better than they are now. You've heard people talk about the 'good old days'?" Candle nodded. "Usually they mean either when they or their parents were children, but sometimes they also talk about the 'Golden Age.' Then they mean the ancient world and they call it 'golden' because they think it was that much better. It's rather silly actually. I wouldn't want to live in the past, with the institutional slavery, diseases, and all the other things that ignorance brings.

"More recently, however," Oceanvine continued, "scholars have referred to that period as the Age of Faith because it was considered wrong to question the wisdom of the ancients and the Church."

"When did that end?" Candle asked, suspecting that it never had.

"About three hundred years ago, depending on whose historical theories you belong to. Anyway, during the Age of Faith magicians believed that their magic could be nullified, canceled out, by another mage who knew their true names, so they started adopting other names to be known by; mage names. Nowadays, of course we know this was just superstitious rubbish - a name is just a convenient label by which to call someone or something and has no inherent magic of its own - but the tradition of mage names has stayed with us anyway. So some time during our apprenticeships we each choose a new name for ourselves. It's part of the image, the mystique of magic - that mysterious, unknowable quality that sets us apart from the rest of the world. The name is usually something that has a special meaning for us or is something we either do or wish to emulate."

"What's an oceanvine?"

Oceanvine smiled briefly. "It is a form of marine plant life that grows in the outer seas."

"Seaweed? You named yourself after seaweed?" Candle started laughing so hard that he had to stop walking and lean against the wall to support himself. "Seaweed!"

Oceanvine's smile vanished quickly. She wasn't about to let this young, rag-dressed urchin make fun of her name! "Oceanvine," she told him, taking a firm grip on his shoulders and giving him a mild shake, "is a carnivorous plant that entwines and devours anything it catches. It is most definitely not just seaweed!" Candle didn't know Oceanvine well enough to be intimidated and just kept laughing instead. Oceanvine tried to lock eyes with him, but he was laughing too hard to even notice the challenge even if he had known what it meant. Frustrated, Oceanvine finally let him go and waited for him to calm down.

"My, my," Lady Galiena said as she entered the corridor, investigating the cause of the laughter, "what's going on here?"

"Just an apprentice who doesn't know any better," Oceanvine replied sourly. Candle took another look at her and started laughing again.

"Whatever," Galiena replied. "It's good to hear laughter in these halls again. It seems like a lifetime since we last had anything to laugh at. Tell me," she said softly, leaning conspiratorially toward Oceanvine, "what's the joke?"

"Nothing," Oceanvine replied flatly. Candle's laughter redoubled. "Absolutely nothing."

Oh, one of those jokes, Galiena thought to herself. *Pity* .

"However," Oceanvine continued, "we were looking for you."

"Me? How can I help you, magician?" Galiena asked.

"It's finally dawned on Silverwind that it's about time he started dressing his apprentice in something a little more suitable to his station. Unfortunately, we won't have the time to do any shopping for a while and we were wondering if there might be a few modest hand-me-downs around the castle that we might be allowed to put him in until we can rectify the matter."

"Of course," Galiena replied. "There are any number of outfits we can put him into. Follow me." They walked down another long series of hallways until they came to a room that smelled of cedar and was filled with clothes racks, chests of drawers, and cabinets, all of which were filled with clothing.

"Here you go," Galiena waved at the clothes. "Take your pick. A lot of this is out-dated, but you can take, and keep, I won't hear of you just borrowing, whatever you like. Something fancy, perhaps?" Candle's eyes glowed as he looked at the slightly used finery around him and was crushed when he heard Oceanvine's response.

"No. Something serviceable, I think. Mages don't normally go for the high styles of the nobility, but we do appreciate quality. Let's see what we can find that's well-made, fairly simple, and fits. He's at an age where he'll be growing fast unless I miss my guess, so we won't take more than a change of clothing."

Galiena nodded and led them to one of the far corners of the room. "You'll take two sets," she said after

they got there. "He'll need to wear one while the other is being cleaned and who knows how long you'll be too busy to shop."

Oceanvine acknowledged the wisdom of that and they started searching. Candle was fascinated by bright and garish colors, gold and silver trim and lace, but Oceanvine kept steering him back to the simpler styles.

"How about this tunic?" Galiena suggested, holding up a bold green silk shirt that was lined with a lighter green with wide-open lapels.

"Silk?" Oceanvine questioned. "That's much too good."

"Nonsense!" Galiena told her. "He deserves quality, you said so yourself. Besides, it will only sit here collecting dust, most likely, if you don't take it." Oceanvine hesitated. "And it will go marvelously with his eyes, don't you think?"

Oceanvine studied Candle's eyes. They were a deep brown in color, but had fascinating gold flecks. "You're right," she admitted. "It would go with his eyes. Very well. Candle, what do you think?"

Candle looked at the finely made tunic. Galiena had chosen it as a compromise between what Oceanvine was looking for and what Candle obviously wanted. Candle didn't trust himself to speak, afraid that if he voiced too much enthusiasm, Oceanvine might change her mind, so he just nodded his approval of the garment. Galiena immediately had him try it on and was pleased that she had properly estimated his size. She looked around and found a similar tunic in blue with some simple knot-work embroidery around the cuffs and hem that Candle also liked over Oceanvine's protests.

"But I actually had something more in mind of work clothes," she told Galiena.

"Why? Are you planning to have him scrub the castle floors? I assure you we have enough servants to handle that sort of detail around here."

"But he can't go traipsing about the countryside in something this good."

"Emtos' teeth! Why not? I and my brothers do so all the time. Those two tunics, in fact, used to be Jason's. Why do you think they're so simple in the first place?"

"But they're Bellinen silk."

"Which is not only the finest cloth in the world but the longest wearing as well. The fabric was chosen as much for its durability as its quality. Now what about his legs? Will he be wearing tights?" Candle wrinkled his nose at the concept.

"Can you really imagine Candle in tights, even on a formal occasion?" Oceanvine asked, catching his grimace.

"Trousers then." Galiena found some heavy-duty pants in shades of brown and grey that Candle could wear interchangeably with the two shirts. She also tossed him several sets of underwear, a light straw hat, two leather belts, and a new pair of shoes. It was all he owned in the world, and represented greater wealth than he previously had. Just before they left the room, Galiena whispered to him, "Meet me here after dinner and we'll find you something for fancy occasions too. Okay?" Candle nodded quickly.

"Ah, there you are," They heard Silverwind say as they entered the corridor. "You have some new clothes. Good. Candle, take a bath before you change into them."

"What about his old clothes?" Oceanvine asked. "Burn them?"

"No, just have them cleaned up, or deodorized or something." He turned to Candle, "I might need you to play scruffy boy-thief again soon and an entirely new set of clothing might be out of place. Give them to Oceanvine and she'll take care of having them washed. Oh, and when you're done in the bath, meet us down in the courtyard. Got all that? Good lad!" Then Silverwind walked back in the direction he had come from, leaving Candle and the two ladies stunned by his passage.

"Is he always like that?" Galiena asked, echoing Candle's thoughts.

"Depends," Oceanvine replied. "Most of the time he's fairly relaxed, but when there's something important to do or if a major project is near completion he turns into the human whirlwind you just met."

Castle North had no dungeon. Such a feature had been removed several centuries earlier and replaced with luxurious hot and cold baths. A clever engineer had installed a large tank of water on one of the keep's roofs which was heated by the sun for the hot and one of the town aqueduct's openings led directly into the baths for the cold. Candle had never seen such a place before but Galiena quickly explained how to work the controlling faucets before leaving Candle to his bath. Oceanvine too only stayed long enough to collect Candle's old clothes.

Candle was taken aback by the velocity of the water's flow and accidentally over-filled the tub that was set into the raised wooden floor. He panicked before discovering that the floors had been wisely built with drainage in mind. Having relieved himself of the thought that he was in trouble he jumped into the tub, joyously splashing still more water out of the over-filled tub.

After the bath he discovered that Oceanvine had taken most of his new clothes as well leaving him the green silk tunic and the brown trousers along with a brown belt, the new shoes, and some unfamiliar garments that Galiena had called underwear. Candle had never worn underwear before, but correctly figured that if 'under' was part of its name it must be worn under his clothing. Oceanvine was waiting for him when he emerged.

"Galiena was right," she observed. "You do look good in those clothes, but your hair is a mess. Good thing I thought to get you a comb." She handed him the comb, but this too was something that he had never encountered directly before and had only a limited understanding of how it was used. Oceanvine patiently explained and then combed his hair for him anyway and showed him what she had done in a wall mirror.

Candle thanked her, thinking all the while that he looked just like a nobleman. *Who'd a thought!*

Seven

"Fascinating," Silverwind whispered as he examined one of the afflicted deer. "Even magically, it appears to be a natural marking in the fur. How long ago was this one found?"

"Four days. This's the latest," Aistan the Gamekeeper replied.

"You doubted my abilities?" Meadow asked stiffly.

"Not at all," Silverwind replied easily, "but I had to see for myself. So this phenomenon continues uninterrupted."

"Except for the week that Duke Astel was struck down," meadow told him.

"Really? It skipped that week?" Meadow nodded. "And was each victim found on the same day of the week?"

Meadow nodded again. "Yes, on Arsdays"

"Now that's an interesting bit of news."

"Why? What does it tell you?" Meadow asked.

"Nothing definite, but it leaves me wondering why only once a week and on Arsdays at that."

"Arsdays is a contraction of Aritos' Day," Meadow pointed out. "I had assumed that day was chosen simply for its significance to the worshippers of Aritos."

"You're probably right, but what if the spell can only be cast once each week?"

"Do you know of such a spell? I have never encountered any."

"Old Hammer in Granom had a theory about divinely powered spells, or some of them anyway. He claimed that it was at least possible that certain high-order spells might work more efficiently at certain times. Agricultural spells seem to work better in the summer, for example."

"Those are hardly high-order, Silverwind, and I doubt that the season has any effect at all. Crops always grow better during the growing season even without magic."

"A bad example then. It isn't my theory anyway. I could, however, devise a spell that would be timed to have an effect at whatever interval I wanted or, for that matter, work only under certain circumstances."

"Yes, but that is a matter of using a secondary trigger spell, not a property of the primary."

"What's the difference?" Silverwind countered.

Meadow thought about that, trying to come up with an answer and finally gave up. "All right, there is no difference. What does that have to do with Hammer's theory?"

"Good question," Silverwind admitted. "Maybe nothing. The use of the spell on Arsdays may be just a part of some ritual, but I don't want to leave any possibility unconsidered. It could, after all, be a combination of factors. The timing, however, could be invaluable in this investigation."

"How so?"

"If the spell is only used once a week and always on the same day, we only have to set detection wards

up on that day. That will save a lot of effort right there and we can spend the rest of the week following the leads we gain on that day."

"I have tried that," Meadow commented, "but wards are not my specialty."

"Nor mine," Silverwind admitted, "but Oceanvine's done a lot of work with wards and I've learned quite a bit from her."

"Ah ha!" Oceanvine exclaimed from the stable doorway. "You admit it at last." Candle stood just behind her carefully watching both her and Silverwind.

"I may never hear the end of this," Silverwind said in an aside to Meadow. "Of course, Oceanvine. No one person can know everything. Of course there are things you would know that I don't." *Is she buying it?* he wondered hopefully. Oceanvine's skeptical look softened briefly, before reasserting itself. *No* .

"Thank you. Remind me to quote you on that later," she replied tartly.

"Better yet, how about putting your mind to the actual spell we'll be needing," Silverwind suggested.

"Spells, more likely" she corrected him. "All right, I'll need to know where the deer were found and, for that matter, where the duke was when he was cursed."

"Cursed?" Meadow questioned the term.

"Do you have a better term for it?" Oceanvine countered. "I know we don't use the term very much these days because it sounds like primitive superstition, but a spell that causes harm is a curse. It's much more to the point than 'negative magical effect'."

"Girl," Meadow berated her, "you would bring us back to the Dark Age with thinking like that."

"You mean the Age of Faith," Candle corrected the elvish mage with his new found knowledge.

Meadow glared at the apprentice. *How dare this guttersnipe try to correct me?* he thought. "Bah!" he cried out loud, flinging his arms upward in angered frustration as he left the stable.

Silverwind waited a minute before asking, "Is it safe?"

Oceanvine peaked out the door and replied, "Yes. He's out of hearing."

"Good," the wizard said shortly before his will dissolved in a fit of laughter. Oceanvine and Candle joined in, but not as unrestrainedly.

"That isn't very nice," Oceanvine said when they had regained control. "I suppose I ought to apologize. He is a great wizard, after all."

"Oceanvine, in all the world there are very few wizards, a double handful or so. With all due modesty, we're all great."

"Modesty?"

"I think so. You've met Meadow twice now. How would you characterize him?"

"A bit of a pompous ass. Sort of like that relative of Jason's, Denzell, only with magic."

"Well, he's not that bad, he comes off even stuffier than he really is because he almost never uses contractions when he speaks. Now how does he compare to the wizards you met at the University?"

"About average, I suppose," Oceanvine responded. "If you're trying to point out how unusual you are, I noticed that long ago."

"Why thank you, but that wasn't my point. The real difference is that most wizards, Meadow included, have never found their limits. Windchime and I did. We found out just how much we could do and it wasn't enough. That changes a man." He was silent for a moment. Oceanvine wanted to ask him more, but sensed this wasn't the time. "We do have to work with him, however. An apology might be in order." Oceanvine nodded. "And you, young man. Where did you learn about the Age of Faith?" Candle pointed his thumb in Oceanvine's general direction.

"He was asking about mage names," Oceanvine explained with a shrug, "so I included a brief history lesson."

"Well, I don't disapprove of that. So what have you decided about mage names? Have you chosen one for yourself?"

"I like my name the way it is," Candle replied. "Do I have to change it?"

"No, you don't. 'Candle' is a good mage name in any case."

"And it's not my real name anyway," Candle informed them.

"I'd guessed that," Silverwind said seriously. "What is your real name?"

"Don't know," he replied. "No one ever told me."

"Well maybe someday we'll have a chance to find out. Would you like that?" Candle nodded. "I'll put it on the agenda." Silverwind glanced around at the preserved carcasses of the deer. The gameskeeper was still standing quietly a few yards away. "Oceanvine, why don't you get the information you need from Aistan here."

"I'll need your help in examining the deer for magic traces," she pointed out.

"Later. Right now I want to talk to Jason about the general area. I'll meet with you about mid-afternoon and we'll compare notes." Oceanvine nodded. "Candle you come with me."

"See you later, Seaweed!" Candle called over his shoulder as they left the stable. If he had seen her reaction to his name for her he would have run for cover, but instead he just walked nonchalantly next to the wizard.

"You ought to watch that, Candle," Silverwind told him as they walked back toward the keep. "She's very sensitive about her name."

"That an order?" Candle asked.

"No, just a friendly warning. You don't want to get on her bad side. Now, I suppose it's time for your first magic lesson." Candle looked at the wizard eagerly as Silverwind looked around the courtyard. "Yes. Let's use that bench over there."

From the stone bench by the main entrance to the keep they could watch the entire courtyard. The courtyard, in fact, was far from empty. To one side a small group of men in bright green uniforms were engaged in close order drill and the rest of the courtyard bustled with various others going about their daily routine. It was as unlikely a locale as one might find for a first lesson in magic and Silverwind felt fortunate that it was there for him.

"Now," Silverwind said getting Candle's attention away from the guardsmen, "the first thing to know is that no matter how experienced you become as a magician, no matter what rank you ultimately achieve, the power for the majority of the spells that you will employ comes from within you. As you get more experienced, you will learn how to tap into the power of other people and things, but even then the crucial power still will be coming from you. You are your own most powerful source of magic and until you have mastered control over yourself you won't be able to cast more than the most basic spells. Therefore, today I am going to start you off with one of the most basic exercises there is. It won't be easy, you probably won't master it today or even in the next week, but I want you to promise me that you'll keep working at it until you do." Candle nodded.

"All right," Silverwind continued. "You should know that it is not always necessary to know why a spell works, however you will have a better control with such understanding, so I'm going to start you off with something you will readily understand." He reached down and picked up a piece of milky quartz about the size of a robin's egg and put it down on the bench between them. "Move this stone," he said simply.

Candle reached out and picked the stone up. He was briefly tempted to toss it out into the courtyard, but decided that he had been told to move it, not to throw it so he put it back down again a few inches away from its previous location. He smiled impudently at the wizard.

"Wise-ass," Silverwind muttered, "but that is more or less what I wanted you to do. Why did the stone move?"

"Because I picked it up."

"Close, but not the answer I wanted. It moved because an outside force acted upon it. Try it this way." Silverwind reached out and pushed the stone back across the bench without actually picking it up. "That time the outside force was simpler. In essence it acted on a single vector."

"Vector?" Candle asked.

"It was pushed in only one direction," Silverwind explained. "Now watch." Silverwind didn't need to close his eyes to do what happened next, but he didn't want to make it look too easy. As Candle watched, the stone slid across the bench again, apparently of its own volition. "That's what I want you to do."

"How?"

"That's the trick. I won't tell you yet, I want to see if you can figure it out for yourself. However, the first thing you must do is clear your mind of all other thoughts and then concentrate on moving the stone. You must have no other thought than to move the stone. Some mages like to sit with their legs intertwined to help them concentrate." He demonstrated the lotus position for Candle. "As a beginner you may find that

it helps. Oceanvine still uses it. Others find it more of a hindrance. Try it before rejecting it." Candle nodded. "Also you'll notice that many mages close their eyes when they cast a spell. It too isn't necessary, but it does help you to concentrate." Silverwind stood up. "I'll just leave you to this and go talk to Jason. Don't forget to break for lunch." Candle closed his eyes tightly and tried to concentrate on the stone. "Oh, one more thing," Silverwind added. "Relax! This is supposed to be fun." Candle looked at him perplexedly. "One: clear your mind," Silverwind reminded him. "Two: concentrate on moving the stone."

"Ah!" a gratingly familiar voice said entering the courtyard from the keep. "The teacher and his student. Charming."

"Denzell," Silverwind nodded coldly to the man who was closely followed by the servant who had acted as his coachman the previous day.

"Ah," Denzell said, taken aback by the wizard's coldness, "You must allow me to apologize for my behavior yesterday."

"All right."

"Then you accept?"

"No, but you may apologize," Silverwind replied. It was an old joke, but the opportunity to use it came up so seldom that Silverwind was unable to resist.

"Really. If I had known who you were," Denzell tried again.

"You would have kept your thoughts to yourself?"

"Right. I mean..."

"Denzell, I really don't care what you mean. Why don't you just try being a little nicer to people. Good day, sir. I have business within." Silverwind turned on his heels and entered the keep as Denzell snarled and stalked off toward one of the stables that didn't contain dead deer.

Candle, left to his own devices, stared at the rock for a moment and then closed his eyes. *Clear the mind. Sounds easy enough*, he thought. However, as he tried to clear his mind, the sound of the guardsmen's drill kept distracting him. He opened his eyes for a while and watched them and they marched back and forth with impressive precision.

Fifteen minutes later he berated himself for doing nothing but staring at them. He closed his eyes and tried again. After a while the sounds of marching feet and the orders that directed them became part of the background noise - not really noticed anymore. That was when he started hearing the other voices in the courtyard; people greeting each other, talking about the weather, wishing the duke a speedy recovery, orders given to the kitchen boy who couldn't seem to keep his mind on taking out the garbage long enough to complete the job, and the sounds of the duke's horses in the stables, wagons and carriages coming in with deliveries or taking things and people away. The moment he managed to overcome one distraction another two or three presented themselves.

Candle thought sourly of something Silverwind had told him before leaving him to this exercise. *This is supposed to be fun?* Then he buckled down and went to work.

Silverwind and Oceanvine didn't actually get a chance to compare notes until after dinner. A long and protracted apology to Meadow finally mollified him at about the same time that Oceanvine thought she was about to draw blood by surreptitiously digging her nails into her palms. The stuffy old elf would probably never know how close he came to living out his golden years as a pumpkin. All in all, however, Oceanvine was justifiably proud of herself. She wasn't sure if she could pull off a major transformation spell especially on the spur of the moment, but the fact that she had actually managed to keep her temper she considered a major victory.

"Well," Silverwind started his report, "Jason wasn't as much help as I'd hoped he be. He's better than the average nobleman, I'll admit, but he doesn't really know much about the commoners of this duchy. The word, my friends, is sheltered. I did get a fair idea of the local politics, but that hasn't led anywhere yet."

"Why not?" Oceanvine asked.

"As far as I can tell, nobody who stands a reasonable chance of inheriting the coronet, wants it. Everyone wants to be the duke's favorite, but nobody wants to be the duke."

"Nobody?" Meadow asked. "I have the distinct impression that wart, Denzell, thinks he ought to be the duke."

"He probably also wants to be Emtos, Bellinen, and Gran combined, but that's almost as unlikely. He's fifty-sixth in line. And in the unlikely event that many members of the family up and died, the king would probably install a new family rather than let him sit on Astel's throne."

"You are probably right," Meadow agreed, "but do you think he is smart enough to realize that?"

"I hope so," Oceanvine laughed. "He couldn't be that stupid or he wouldn't have enough brain power to keep his heart beating."

"Don't count on it," Silverwind told her. "I'm not sure he's all there, but what is there is a petty-minded, mean little spirit with delusions. Fortunately he doesn't appear to have much of a power base unless you count that henchman of his. Frankly, I don't know how he can afford to keep him on. From what Jason tells me Denzell was the second son of a second son and inherited almost nothing. He's been living off the duke's charity for years and Jason is seriously thinking of cutting him off."

"So he doesn't stand to benefit from the duke's illness either," Oceanvine concluded.

"You got it. Tomorrow I'll start finding out how the townsfolk feel about their duke. I was thinking of sending Candle in to look around and ask questions. He speaks with the local accent and should have an easier time getting the answers we'll need."

"You suspect a commoner?" Meadow asked. "Where would a commoner learn magic of this caliber?"

"Why couldn't a renegade mage masquerade as a commoner?" Silverwind asked pointedly. "There are a few mages who eventually left the craft. They'd live just like commoners. For that matter, what's with all this class distinction? There are more rich merchants in this world than there are rich nobles, and money is what buys an education, especially at the University. Where's Candle, by the way?"

"Last time I saw him," Oceanvine replied, "he was sitting on a bench outside swearing at a pebble. Your

doing, I presume."

"When was that?"

"Just before dinner."

Just then Candle entered the room. "Am I too late to eat again?" he asked plaintively.

"Good gods!" Silverwind swore. "I specifically told you not to skip lunch."

"Didn't do it on purpose. I was so busy I forgot and when I finally remembered, the cook said I was too late and would have to wait for dinner. Then I forgot about dinner too."

"Well, get yourself down to the kitchen. If they won't feed you, remind them what happens to people that cross a wizard."

"What happens?" Candle asked hopefully.

"Haven't the foggiest," Silverwind replied, "but I'm confident you can make something up that will be sufficiently impressive. Off with you now." Candle grinned and ran out the door.

"You may have just turned a young thief into a bully," Meadow pointed out.

"I doubt it," Silverwind disagreed. "Candle is basically a good lad in spite of his background. I haven't asked him about his life story yet, but I don't think he was a thief for very long. He obviously ran away from an orphanage and got very hungry. He isn't volunteering information and talks around some part of his short life. I think he was picked up for a while by someone who taught him some of the essentials of thievery, but he was alone and hungry when we found him, so I doubt he was happy there either. Now that he has an honest alternative, I'm noticing a rapid change in him."

"He is fooling you. Just giving you the line you want to hear."

"I don't think so, Meadow. I admit I've had to invoke the restraints of the binding spell more than usual, but I think he genuinely wants to learn magic. Look how he went at the old 'move the pebble' exercise. If he'd been trying to fool me he wouldn't have missed two meals."

"All right. Just remember that he is your responsibility."

"Right. Oceanvine, what did you find out today?"

"I made a map of where all the deer were found, but you're not going to like this," she replied, unrolling a large piece of paper on the floor in front of them. "I doubt you'll have trouble seeing the pattern."

The map was of the area around the castle including the town, farms, and the game preserve. Most of the deer had been discovered in the preserve but a fair number of the finds were in the farmers' fields. Three, surprisingly, had been found in various locations in the town itself, and in the center of it all was Castle North, where Duke Astel had been found.

"Meadow," Silverwind asked, "did you know about this?"

"It never occurred to me to make a map," the Orente replied, staring at the map in horror.

"But the deer that were found in town, didn't that make you suspicious? Look one of them was actually inside a building."

"I assumed someone was trying to hide it."

"Now what was that you were saying about the nonexistence of curses?" Oceanvine asked Meadow innocently.

"The pattern isn't finished yet, but I doubt it is missing more than two or three bodies," Silverwind said as he too gazed at the map. The combined locations were very near to forming the completed form of the oddly shaped, asymmetrical sign known as the Bond of Aritos. "The big question, however, is - what will happen when it's complete?"

"No," Oceanvine disagreed. "The big question is - how are we going to stop it from being completed?"

Eight

"Hey, kid!" A raspy voice called Candle as he passed the opening of an alley late the next afternoon. "C'mere!"

Candle wasn't stupid nor was he naïve when it came to the streets. This guy reminded him far too much of Daddy Fox in Tarnsa and Candle had spent far too long trying to get out of Fox's clutches to want to go through that again. He kept walking, but when he heard a shrill whistle behind him, two large thugs, one of whom smelled as though he was in terminal need of a bath and that it was too late for the other, materialized in front of him, hideous grins on their faces exposing what few teeth they had left. Candle turned and ran only to find another two blocking his path in such a way that only the alley offered itself as a possible means of escape if only it were not a dead end and he could avoid the man there. He was wrong on both counts.

"Hey, kid," the raspy-voiced man told him, "relax. We ain't gonna hurt ya." Candle stopped struggling. It wasn't doing him any good, he'd better save his energy until an escape offered itself. "There. That's better. There's a man wants ta see ya. Maybe he'll answer some of those questions ya been askin' all over town."

Oh shit! Candle thought. Silverwind wanted him to ask questions without rousing any undo interest. Now he had not only failed to follow that instruction, but he might wind up dead if he wasn't careful as well.

The men kept their grips firmly on him as they professionally muscled him halfway down the alley and through a rotting wooden door. Once inside he was blindfolded and guided up and down a series of staircases and hallways. Finally the blindfold was removed and he found himself in an amazingly clean apartment without windows but well-lit by oil lamps. Most of the room was empty, but there were several sculptures set along three walls of the room and a large, highly polished desk near the fourth. A lean, gray-haired man, dressed in charcoal grey tunic and trousers with a white under-tunic, sat behind the desk. "Come here, boy," he said firmly, but not unkindly as though he had no doubts that Candle would obey. "Have a seat."

Candle didn't need to know the man's name; he knew who he was, or rather what he was. Every town had at least one. This capital city of the duchy had several. This was a boss, a man to whom lesser criminals looked to, but which one was he? This one evidently liked to call himself a businessman; this office was evidence of that. The one in Tarnsa fancied himself a king and had a throne room. At least that was what Daddy Fox had said once in barely repressed tones of fear and respect.

"Do you have a name, boy?" the boss asked in polite and gentle tones. Candle said nothing and instead kept looking out of the corners of his eyes for a way to escape. "Oh come on," the boss continued conversationally, "I can't keep calling you boy, can I."

"Candle," he replied reluctantly. The man seemed nice enough, but so did Daddy Fox at first.

"Candle. A good, strong name. Are you as bright as a candle? Yes, I think you might be. My name is Adelulf." Candle had heard that name several times that day.

"Would you like something to eat or drink, Candle?" He hadn't eaten since breakfast, but right now he was too scared to be hungry. Candle mutely shook his head. Adelulf merely smiled and gestured toward one of his men. A few moments later a tray of pastries and a pot of tea was deposited on the desk between Candle and Adelulf. Candle eyed them suspiciously, but Adelulf ignored that and poured the tea and helped himself to a piece of pastry. "Now, Candle. Who are you working for?"

"I ain't workin' for nobody."

Adelulf raised his eyebrows. "No?" he asked. "Candle, I don't think you're stupid. Please give me the same courtesy. It is highly unlikely that a boy your age would be running around town asking about the cursed deer on his own and those clothes you're wearing - a very authentic costume, but much too clean for me to believe you're a local boy, besides which I know all the boys this side of town. You're not one of them.

"All of which leads me to conclude that you must be asking these questions for another. Are you working for one of my competitors or do our purposes match? Well, Candle?"

Candle kept his mouth shut. He hadn't the slightest idea of what the right answer was or if there even was a right answer. Instead he tried to stall by picking up the cup of tea and a pastry.

Adelulf saw through the ploy immediately but smiled indulgently and told Candle, "You know I'm not going to let you go until you answer my question." Candle nearly choked on the pastry he was eating and after he recovered he carefully put the rest back on the tray. "Oh go ahead and eat the thing," Adelulf told him disgustedly.

Candle reached out and finished the snack. *Maybe I should try the truth*, he thought uncertainly to himself.

"I expected him back by now," Silverwind fretted, looking out a window that faced the courtyard. This was his base of operations for as long as he was here at Castle North - a long, narrow, corner room on

the third floor of the keep. At the moment his only complaint was that he couldn't see the road to town from the window, not that it would have done him any good. The sun had set two hours earlier and midnight was rapidly approaching.

"Think he might be in trouble?" Oceanvine asked. From where she sat, studying her map.

"I'm not worried about whether he is in trouble but how much," Silverwind replied tightly. "We don't even know where he is."

"You've come to really care for the boy in just a few days haven't you?" It wasn't really a question, but Silverwind nodded an answer. "Have you considered tracing him via the apprentice contract spell? I didn't think so. It's late but we've both done all-nighters before. Let's go."

"Right now?" the wizard asked.

"Is he going to be in less trouble if we wait until morning?" she countered.

"You're right. Onwards and outwards! We're going to town."

Oceanvine was already on her feet and heading for the door. "Shall I pick up a can of red paint on our way out?"

Silverwind laughed. "That reminds me. Did I ever tell you about the time Windchime and I were shipwrecked on Mir?"

"No," Oceanvine replied interestedly as they walked along. "Where's Mir?"

"A medium-sized but very rustic island on the equator in the Bellinen Archipelago. Well, being so rustic the natives had little use and a big distrust of magic and, of course we had absolutely no money on us after the wreck..." Silverwind continued to tell the tale as they crossed the courtyard and strode through the open portcullis. "... and we were stuck on that miserable island over a month, before the next ship came in and we could leave." He finished as they approached the town.

"How many of the buildings did you get painted during that month?"

"All of them," Silverwind replied. "Two coats."

"That's a lot of painting. Didn't someone get suspicious that you were using magic to work that fast?"

"Well, to tell the truth, most of them got done our last night in port. I dare say there was a fine large reception to see us off that morning in the harbor."

"I can imagine."

"No, I don't think you can. We're talking about nearly two thousand angry country elves."

"Orenta," Oceanvine corrected him.

"No, these were most definitely elves. There is a difference. Orenta are suave, intellectual sophisticates. These were a superstitious, ignorant lot of elves. Trust me." He paused a moment at the first in-town intersection and said, "Hmm, this way."

"Not the better part of town, is it?" Oceanvine commented a few minutes later.

"The sort that only a fool would venture in after dark," Silverwind replied.

"Thank you ever so much," Oceanvine replied dryly.

"Present company excepted, of course."

They continued on for several more blocks before turning again. After that turns came far more rapidly.

"I think you're taking us in circles," Oceanvine complained.

"Can't help that; Candle went in circles. I'm just following his path."

"What? Are we going to have to go everywhere he did in order to find him? I thought you could center right in on where he is now."

"I can, yes, but it's like reeling in a very strong fish with a very light-weight line. There's a high risk of breaking the line. I'd rather not take the risk unless I have to."

"I didn't know that," Oceanvine replied.

"It's not the sort of thing that comes up often. Apprentice mages are not the rambunctious lot that most children are, usually. You know, I think Candle might really shake things up at the old University in a few years."

"He'll give half the professors heart attacks," laughed Oceanvine.

"Uh oh!" Silverwind muttered at the next intersection.

"What's wrong?"

"He went through this intersection a dozen times or more."

"It was bound to happen," Oceanvine pointed out.

"I guess. I'll have to try reeling him in after all. I'll need to really concentrate to do this properly. Make sure I'm not interrupted."

"Sounds easy enough."

"Don't be too sure of that, we've been watched for the last half an hour or so. If we stop now they might decide to make a move."

"Terrific. Maybe we should take care of our watchers first."

"They might be only curious. Just be ready. If they decide to move in it will take me a minute or so to get clear of this spell. Ready?"

"I have a choice?"

"Not really."

"I'm ready then."

"Right." Silverwind closed his eyes and let his head drop to his chest.

Oceanvine looked around, wondering what sort of defensive spells she should prepare. Very few of her experiences had been directly against people. They were usually against things like swords or, in the case of the pirates, the ship itself. It bothered her to kill someone when she could hold them off by merely frightening them. The real problem was that in spite of Silverwind's claims, she still couldn't see anyone watching them. If only she could see them. Then she smiled as an idea flashed behind her eyes and she went to work.

Five minutes later, she was getting bored and wished that either Silverwind would finish what he was doing or the hidden watchers would make their move. There are those who believe that all wishes do come true. Oceanvine was one of them, but curbed her optimistic side by often reminding herself that it helped if the wisher took an active part in the process. Certainly it was the presence of two apparently helpless people standing in the middle of a wide intersection in the seedier part of town that was the catalyst that brought about the reaction of the local denizens.

Wog, born to the name William, was not the most intelligent member of his gang, but he certainly was the strongest. That made him the leader. Like many poor commoners on the island of Horaliahe had never seen any true magic, only the clever sleight-of-hand tricks performed by wandering illusionists. Consequently, even if he had known that Silverwind and Oceanvine were mages, it probably would not have stopped him from attempting to attack and rob the couple who walked so boldly through the streets of his city. In fact the only thing that had held him back so far was the fact that nobody just walked down the street like that around here. In the daytime the streets were too busy except around the edges and nobody, not even fools, ventured out here alone at night.

Wog took one more look at the pair. The man was just standing there motionlessly, but the woman kept looking around nervously. That put him at ease. At least she was acting almost normally. He had almost let them go, fearing that the guardsmen were trying another of their tricks to catch him and his gang, but the woman was nervous; she must realize the sort of danger she was in and that meant it was safe for Wog to attack. He silently signaled the seven others in his gang and they started running toward the couple.

Oceanvine heard the sound of running footsteps and turned to face them. She had set a defensive ward up that might prove sufficient, but she concentrated on a set of impressively bright and loud although low-level and almost harmless spells, just in case.

In an army, Wog might have been an adequate sergeant, but his regrettable tendency to lead his men from in front rather than behind, would have established him as a dead lieutenant with record dispatch. So as was inevitable, he was the one who passed through Oceanvine's defensive ward well before any of the others. As he did so he began to glow a sickly shade of orangey yellow much like a candle flame that never quite understood what its purpose in life was. Intent on his target, he never noticed the change, but his underlings did and they stopped in frightened amazement as he started to glow and then noticed that they too were glowing. In confusion they just stood there and watched Wog continue on toward the woman with the long blond hair.

Oceanvine raised her arms theatrically. That wasn't necessary, but she knew that the shock effect would

be greater that way. A bright flash of light accompanied by a loud noise might be taken for lightning and thunder, but if she matched her movements to the spell it would be obvious that it was her doing. The flash of light was tinted a delicate blue-green with red spots and the noise was the sound of a crashing waterfall.

Wog screamed in panic and fled from the strange woman as fast as his stumbling feet could carry him. His gang had actually started fleeing before he did, but he was soon leading the pack and a minute later there was no sign that they had ever been anywhere in the vicinity.

Oceanvine's self-satisfied chuckle was cut abruptly short by Silverwind's next comment. "That's an interesting way you have of keeping me uninterrupted, Vine. Fireworks spells?" She nodded. "Damn good thing I'd already finished or I might have snapped the string when the first one went off."

"You were finished? Why didn't you help out?"

"You didn't seem to need any help, Vine."

"Silverwind, how many times do I have to tell you not to call me 'Vine'?"

"More often than you have so far, I believe. I liked the way you made them glow, but what's with the loud noises?"

"I didn't want to kill them if I didn't have to, just frighten them away."

"A commendable attitude," Silverwind told her, "but next time try something a little quieter. Phantom pains or uncontrollable itching would probably have done the trick and wouldn't have put Candle and me at risk."

"Risk? Why? What would have happened if the string was snapped? I understood that would merely dissolve the binding spell."

"Yes, it would do that. Physically we'd have both suffered headaches for the next few days."

"You would? I never had headaches when I was released from my apprenticeship."

"You wouldn't. Normally the bond is dissolved gradually, it's only the suddenness of the break that would have caused the pain, but the headache would have been a mere inconvenience. I've had headaches before and worse, but more to the point is that we would have lost our ability to find Candle."

"I'm sorry. I didn't consider that," Oceanvine said contritely.

"That's all right, Oceanvine. No harm done this time, but do try to think things through a little more from now on." She nodded. "Now," Silverwind continued, "we turn right here."

It turned out that they were only a block away from where Candle was still being held.

"Well, that probably saved us a few hours," Silverwind smiled. "Now should we just walk on in or do you think subtlety is needed?"

"Jus' walk on in," a rough voice said behind them, "tha boss is expectin' ya."

"Good enough for me," Silverwind shrugged without bothering to turn around to face the man behind them. "By the way, you won't be needing that knife, so be a nice guy and put it away."

Oceanvine took a chance and glanced over her shoulder at the big man behind them. He was better dressed than the thugs who had tried to assault them earlier, but was badly in need of a bath and a haircut. His knife was a thick, slightly curved, single-edged affair with a strip of brass or bronze welded or cast on to the back of the blade. Under other circumstances, she might have taken the time to admire the workmanship. This man might not believe in investing in personal hygiene, but he knew his weapons. There were several large nicks visible in the brass back edge where the man had obviously caught the blade of opponents in the past. That would have told her something about his preferred style of knife fighting if she were at all experienced, but at the moment, she was only wondering what the fastest and safest means of disarming him might be. She need not have bothered.

"I'll jus' keep it," came the reply, "if ya don' mind."

"Ah," Silverwind sighed with mock sadness, "but I insist." A yelp of pain behind them was accompanied by a soft thud and clatter as the knife hit the hard slate sidewalk. The noise sounded wrong to Oceanvine - a knife shouldn't thud. She turned to see what was wrong and saw that the knife's blade had become red hot and forgeably soft and was hissing softly on the damp pavement. Smoke was curling from around the rough wooden handle. The thug was clasping his burnt hand. "You'd better see to that," Silverwind told him. "Now."

"Ya had no call ta do that," the man accused. Silverwind stared deeply into the man's eyes. "All right! I'll take ya in. Gods! I was gonna do that anyway."

"Perhaps, but it would have been on your terms. Now you may lead the way." The man carefully slid ahead of the two magicians and walked in front of them in a carefully measured pace up the short stairway to the door. There were two armed men inside who backed out of the way to let them in. They had seen what happened to the knife outside and didn't care to see what else Silverwind could do. One of them looked appreciatively at Oceanvine, who met his look with a steely one of her own. He quickly backed off with a feeling that he had just viewed his own mortality. Their guide quickly led the way to his boss's office.

"I told you to invite them in, Claude," Adelulf showed his anger, "not rob them at knife point! Oh, go take care of that hand. Damned fool. My apologies, gentles, I'll see to the fool's punishment personally." Oceanvine shuddered, doubting Claude's ability to survive the experience. Who was this person? He spoke pleasantly enough on the surface level, but she found his existence deeply disturbing for reasons she could not quite fathom. "I assume you are here looking for Candle? I knew someone would be."

"Where is he?" Silverwind asked quietly.

"Sleeping," Adelulf replied. "He should be with us in a few minutes. In the meantime, permit me to introduce myself. I am known in this city as Adelulf."

Silverwind resisted asking by what names Adelulf was known in other cities. He suspected it was a ploy

to make Adelulf sound more powerful than he really was. Instead Silverwind introduced himself and Oceanvine.

"The Silverwind?" Adelulf was visibly impressed in spite of himself.

Silverwind smiled tightly and nodded. This was not a time for his usual modesty or humor. "Why did you expect someone to come looking for the boy?"

"It was obvious, my dear sir. The common people aren't talking about the recent disease among the ducal deer. They certainly are not walking around asking each other about the phenomenon. The moment your boy started asking questions little alarms started going off and eventually either I or one of my competitors were going to pick him up for questioning."

"Questioning?" Silverwind asked with the coldness of an arctic winter. The sound of the word bothered him deeply.

"Talking only, I assure you," Adelulf replied quickly. "That might not have been the case had one of my competitors found him, mind you, but I like to think that I am more far-sighted than they are."

"Competitors?" Oceanvine asked.

"I am a businessman, my dear, with many diversified interests," Adelulf informed her.

"He's a crook!" Candle said as he entered the room. He quickly walked over to Silverwind and Oceanvine and sat between them to reassure himself that he was rescued.

"Are you all right, lad?" Silverwind asked.

Candle nodded, but warned, "Don't trust him."

"Candle," Adelulf replied patiently, "I'll admit that some of my dealings may be less than legitimate under the watchful eyes of some of the authorities of this district, but I am most definitely not a crook."

"Right," Candle commented, not buying any of it.

"That is beside the point," Silverwind broke in. "Why were you holding my apprentice?"

"I prefer to think of him and your gentle selves as my guests," Adelulf corrected him.

"Right," Silverwind mimicked Candle's earlier comment.

Adelulf sighed with exaggerated patience. "Wizard, I know of you. Do you really think for even a moment I would dare to dream that I could live after crossing you or any wizard for that matter?"

"That depends on what you think you have on me, Adelulf. You see, I know you too, or rather I have met some of your colleagues elsewhere. So let's start talking plainly."

"Very well. Your apprentice was actually doing a fine job of blending in. I could almost believe he was one of the local young men. His clothes were a little too clean, but what really gave him away was the subject of conversation."

"I'd already gotten that far," Silverwind replied. "Move on. Why were you holding him?"

"So that you would come here, of course. You see, I wanted to speak with you. " Silverwind shot him a cold questioning look. "All right. I didn't know who his superior was. That's a very bright lad you have there. Beyond telling me his own name, he wouldn't say a thing. But I knew that someone would come looking for him. Only someone in authority would be investigating the cursed deer and I believe that anyone doing that would have need of some of the information that I alone can offer."

"A fine sales pitch, Adelulf," Silverwind told him emotionlessly, "but get to the point. What information?"

"Concerning the people cursing the deer, of course. Information I'm willing to give you freely as a gesture of good faith."

Silverwind looked skeptically at the well dressed, grey-haired man. "Adelulf, I have already commented on your native-born ability to sell, however, I am not your typical ivory tower scholar and I know a been more about organized crime than most of my colleagues. What do you expect for your so-called free information? What's in it for you?"

Adelulf smiled, "We understand each other then."

"Not necessarily. Speak plainly."

The crime boss's smile slipped slightly, "Very well. My interests here do not quite represent a monopoly in this town, but I do hold a growing area and am making certain encroachments against my competition. However, recently, we have found it increasingly more difficult to collect our," Adelulf pause to clear his throat, "bills. A new religious cult has been terrorizing the locals here in town."

"Religious cult?" Oceanvine asked. "What sort of religious cult would do that?"

"An Aritos cult," Silverwind answered.

"Exactly," Adelulf agreed. "We sell a sort of business insurance."

"A protection racket," Candle interpreted.

"Whatever," Adelulf waved him off. "The point of such an insurance plan is that our customers are assured that as long as they pay their premiums they will not be victimized in any way by us or anyone else as long as we can control our territory. When someone muscles one of our clients, we look bad, and when we look bad we look weak. Our reputation for strength is perhaps the most important part of staying in business. You see, when I first went into business I had to establish how tough I was and there were some regrettable incidents."

"He killed people," Candle interpreted again.

"Hardly ever," Adelulf protested. "You can not extract premium money from a dead client. A very poor business practice. Also you should never take too much. If the client can't afford to stay in business, you lose it all too. It is a very challenging task to gauge exactly how much I can extract without putting a business under. However when someone refuses to pay, it becomes necessary to convince them how important insurance is. Until recently, it has been a long time since anyone in the area needed to be convinced."

"So you've been bleeding every merchant you could get your hands on?" Oceanvine asked with quiet anger. "That's disgusting!"

"Not every merchant by any means," Adelulf replied. "This is a business and we only deal with those who can afford our services and those with whom we stand to make a profit. We rarely exact a premium from someone who is losing money. He will soon be out of business and we will spend more collecting than we can make. We also stay away from businesses that are under the direct protection of the guards. We cannot afford to engage in an armed confrontation, but the guards don't come into this part of town, not without provocation, so there is room for everyone. However that is hardly my only means of income."

"You're still avoiding the issue, Adelulf. What is in this for you?" Silverwind asked harshly.

"I was just getting to that. This new cult has been cutting into my business. I want them out and I want them out now."

"So why do you need us? Sounds as though you own the town."

"Perhaps I have implied more than is so. My area of control is of a limited nature, but very firm where it does extend. People, however, are very superstitious. You're all well-educated people, I'm sure you have noticed that. Given a choice between a curse or a beating they'll choose the beating every time. The whole affair is damaging my reputation and once I lose that, I lose everything. My people find themselves unable to combat this cult on anything but the most basic level because it has ducal protection."

"What?" Silverwind and Oceanvine asked loudly as one.

"You didn't know? I would have gone directly to the castle if that hadn't been the case."

"Why would the duke support a cult that has cursed him as well?" Oceanvine asked acidly.

"Now that's something I didn't know. The duke is dead?"

"Not yet," Silverwind replied wishing Oceanvine hadn't let that slip. No one at the castle, however, had mentioned anything about that being a secret. "He is being kept alive by a very special spell. Why do you think the cult has ducal protection?"

"It is very simple. The first time we tried to convince them that it would be in their best interests to choose an alternative mode of operations..." Candle looked like he was about to translate again so Adelulf continued on quickly, "that is, the first time we had an encounter with their people, we were raided by the guardsmen that same day."

"That could be coincidence," Silverwind pointed out. "I don't imagine you're too popular in those quarters in any case."

"The guards don't generally bother with us," Adelulf countered. "We're careful about whom we deal with and have learned our limits as far as they are concerned. We even do each other favors from time to time."

"Favors?" Oceanvine asked. "What sort of favors?"

"For one thing, we keep crime on the streets to a minimum. The one sort we deal with quite harshly is the free-lance criminal. That's another reason why shopkeepers pay us for protection. Very few are foolish enough to try to rob one of our clients and when they do, we are quick to teach them the error of their ways."

"He don't mean a talkin' to," Candle commented.

Adelulf ignored that and continued, "We also do not approve of random assaults within our sphere of influence."

"Really?" Oceanvine asked skeptically. "How do you account for the little scuffle we had just before we found you."

"What sort of scuffle?" Adelulf asked, deeply concerned. Oceanvine described the incident. "Sounds like Wog and his bunch. They don't usually prowl my district and they have been warned before. My apologies for your inconvenience. I'll make sure they don't do it again to anyone. Now what about this cult of Aritos worshippers? Will you see that they do not inconvenience me and my associates any longer?"

"We aren't here to keep you in business, Adelulf," Silverwind told him bluntly, "but it appears that we have a common goal for now. But if you want me to abolish this cult, you will have to tell me everything you know about it."

Ten

"I just don't like it," Jason said for the fifth time running while Silverwind and Oceanvine briefed him on the previous evening's activities.

"All right," Silverwind sighed, trying a different tack toward convincing the young noble. "What don't you like about it?"

"Dealing with criminals. They prey on the people I am sworn to protect. How the hell am I supposed to live with myself if I ally with such a person?"

"Jason, I don't condone his activities, but in this one case our purposes coincide. For now we must work together. If you really want to know, he doesn't trust you either. He figures that you'll have him arrested as soon as the current crisis is over."

"That's exactly what I would do. It would be a matter of honor."

"Adelulf knows that, but he believes that if you'll agree to leave him alone as long as we are working together, he can manage to stay out of your reach afterward."

"I suppose he wants a free reign for the duration, however," Jason said cynically.

"Of course he wants that," Silverwind agreed.

"Forget it! I'll give him truce status only as regards the matter of the Aritos cult. If the guards catch him with his fingers in some other racket however, he's going down."

"Will you agree not to go out of your way looking for an excuse to arrest him?"

"No. In fact I'll have the guards start cracking down today."

"Not smart, Jason," Oceanvine pointed out. "You want his cooperation. He isn't likely to feel well disposed toward you in your dungeon."

"I don't have a dungeon."

"You know what I mean."

"Listen," Silverwind took over once more. "Adelulf will not seek to expand any of his operations for the duration, if you will agree not to order his arrest. He understands that the guards could choose to arrest him for his routine business as he calls it, but he wants you to agree not to change the standing orders regarding such investigations until after the current situation."

"I still don't like it. The man is totally immoral - his word is worthless."

"Actually," Silverwind pointed out, "he understands honor better than you might think and does have his own code of honor. He won't violate any agreement you make with him, but he will look for and use any loophole he can find. The big difference between you is that you will honor the spirit of any such covenant while he will honor only the letter of the understanding."

"All right. If I change my mind, when can I meet with him?" Jason conceded.

"Fly two flags of the duchy together on the main flagpole and he will come to us."

"He really doesn't trust me?" Jason had trouble understanding that.

"No he doesn't. I've already explained why he believes that the Aritos cult has ducal protection."

"Impossible!" Jason cried. "My father would never..."

"Not your father. Even Adelulf found that hard to believe, but perhaps someone in a position of authority here. Maybe the Captain of the Guard secretly worships Aritos; he could order the guards that conducted the raid of reprisal against Adelulf's people." Jason mutely shook his head but could not bring himself to speak. "Or maybe Master Steuen - as seneschal he would have access to the ducal seal, as would the herald, or your siblings."

"No!" Jason exclaimed heatedly. "My sister and brothers would never do such a thing. You'll never convince me of that!"

"I'm only listing a group of possible suspects. Those people all had the means. We may eliminate them from consideration when we have adequately proved that they had no motive or no opportunity. Your cousin Denzell, for that matter, should be considered for that matter."

"No," Jason disagreed coolly. "As much as I would like to find a reason to get rid of him, he does not have the means to have Adelulf arrested. He has no authority in the duchy and certainly no access to the

seal."

"All right, we can start by eliminating Denzell from consideration," Silverwind replied. "Who else might be able to command the guards?"

"It depends on how many were dispatched on that raid," Jason replied. "It could have just been a routine patrol, in which case the sergeant in command might have guided them into the right place at the right time. It could also be coincidence - suppressing crime is part of their job after all."

"That is a possibility," Silverwind agreed, "but the timing was too coincidental to ignore. We'll continue to consider it until we know more. Your next step is still to talk to Adelulf."

"Damn!" Jason swore. "Every time I think we've moved on to another topic, you bring it right back again."

"All part of the service, my lord," Silverwind grinned. "Look at it this way. One day you'll be the duke. Hopefully that day is a long way away, but the truth of the matter is that we may not be able to save your father. In either case there will be times when you are forced to declare a truce and discuss terms with an enemy. Think of this as your first such truce."

"You make it sound like I'm at war with Adelulf," Jason told the wizard.

"No," Silverwind replied. "Actually you're the one who is making it sound like war."

It took another hour but eventually Jason gave in and ordered that two banners be flown from the flag pole. Adelulf appeared at the main gate soon after in a fine black-lacquered cabriolet with soft leather seats. As a gesture of faith that he didn't quite feel in Jason's truce, he brought only one man with him and that one to drive the small carriage.

Jason decided, against Silverwind's suggestion, that Adelulf should come to him rather than be met at the door, so he waited for Adelulf in the small audience chamber. Adelulf did not appear to take offense at Jason's all too obvious reminder of their comparative ranks.

"Why should he have minded, Silverwind?" Oceanvine asked afterward. "This is the same way he treated us when we went to him. This is Jason's territory and Adelulf knows it."

"I just sort of hoped they could have met as equals."

"They aren't equals and never will be. If Jason had met Adelulf at the door as you suggested, Adelulf would have seen that as a sign of weakness and uncertainty on Jason's part, but instead they parted on terms of mutual if temporary respect."

"You're probably right," Silverwind grudgingly admitted. "Have you figured out what sort of wards you'll have to cast and where?"

"Still working on it. It's going to be a complicated amalgamation of spells."

"Better hurry, we need it tomorrow night."

"I'll be ready. Most of the trouble was figuring out where the next incident would take place."

"Oh, where will that be?"

"The attack on the duke broke the pattern, but I'm fairly certain that the next one will be at the projected site to the northeast."

"Out in the farm land again?"

"Uh huh. There aren't a lot of choices left out there. The other two will be one in town and one at the game preserve."

"You said the duke broke the pattern. How?"

"Just look at the map. See, the symbol I used for him doesn't fit into the emerging Bond of Aritos that the other deaths are forming."

"Actually it is. I didn't tell you everything about the Bond. It is such a complex and powerful sign that I didn't remember that aspect of it. The sign can be used to focus power. The place where the duke was struck down - the keep - would be the focal point. Sort of an optional part of the sign."

"Wouldn't it have made more sense magically to delineate the focal point last?" Oceanvine asked.

"I would have thought so," Silverwind replied, "but then I'm not the one setting up this curse. Well, I ought to see what Candle is up to."

"Last I checked," Oceanvine chuckled, "he was still swearing at that rock. Oh, while you're here could you check my work on this map? I want to make sure I'm using the neutralization spell on the Bond properly."

"You're doing fine," Silverwind assured her. "I checked that out the first time you showed me the map." He left Oceanvine open-mouthed in their office and went out to find Candle, expecting him to be on the bench in the courtyard. When Silverwind arrived there, however, a light rain had been falling intermittently but had managed to dampen everything in sight so there was very little outdoor activity.

Silverwind walked briskly over to the stable where the deer were being kept. Candle wasn't there, but Meadow was, sitting cross legged on the floor studying the latest deer carcass.. The old elf had chosen to wear long, flowing silk robes, but even they were emblazoned with the same bold floral prints favored among the Orenta. Silverwind thought his colleague clashed with the world in general. Even with Silverwind's cosmopolitan outlook he was constantly surprised to hear such stuffy speech coming out from within the gaudy clothing that Orentan adults considered respectable. He wondered if Meadow ever worked on his tan the same way that Oceanvine did.

Meadow turned as the stable door was opened. "Silverwind," he grunted in acknowledgement.

"G'morning, Meadow. Have you seen Candle?"

"Candle? No, I am happy to say the little knave has managed to stay out of my way since he arrived with you."

"I don't think he likes you either," Silverwind informed Meadow.

"That suits me fine," Meadow replied and turned back to his study..

"Find anything new?" Silverwind asked conversationally.

Meadow sighed theatrically and rose to speak to Silverwind. Meadow was several inches taller and the effect was that he was looking down at his colleague. "No, I have not. Aside from the inevitable traces, there is absolutely nothing new to learn here."

"Then why persist on the same track?"

"It is hardly the same track, Silverwind. I have tried any number of approaches since I arrived here and each one I have repeated every time another dead animal was found. My strength is with animals and their diseases, as you know, so I continue to look for new ways to study the animals while leaving you to investigate the other phenomena." Meadow started turning back to the carcass.

"Sounds fair," Silverwind agreed. "Here's an idea I just thought up." Meadow stopped and turned back toward Silverwind. "You know that Oceanvine has drawn a map locating where each of these deer were found?"

"Of course," Meadow replied coldly. "She showed it to both of us at the same time."

"Oh yeah. Sorry about that. Anyway it occurs to me that maybe the deer aren't the key aspect of the curse."

"I do wish you would stop calling it a curse."

"As my beautiful young assistant might say, 'If the word fits, use it.' It does fit too. What we have is a long and involved spell that will probably have a great and lasting harm when completed."

"All right, call it whatever you like. What about the deer?"

"Well, if they were the key to the spell, then moving them would probably break it."

"That does sound reasonable," Meadow allowed reluctantly.

"Thanks. So assuming the magician casting the spell has slightly more intelligence than the average palmetto, he is bound to realize that we've been moving the deer."

"True. For that matter he should have realized that would happen before he even started. If Oceanvine is correct it will have taken thirty weeks to cast this spell. In that much time it is unreasonable to assume that any of the victims would have stayed in the same place."

"Good point," Silverwind agreed, "So if the final placement of the deer is not the key to the spell, what is?"

Meadow thought about that for a moment. "The places they were killed?" he hazarded at last.

"Not killed, sacrificed."

"Sacrificed? Yes, I believe you may be right. I had not thought of it, but I believe that each of these deer have been consecrated to Aritos, and each such consecration is part of the greater spell doing the same for the whole of the duchy, assuming that your hypothesis is correct. Have you considered that all of this

might be some twisted plan to terrorize the locals?"

"I thought of that, but I could think of any motive that would change the vector of my investigation, so I'll just go along with my first hypothesis until something better comes along. Well it's just a passing thought but perhaps we should try a little more investigating magic at the actual sites these deer were sacrificed."

"Tomorrow," Meadow replied. "You have just given me an idea of something else to look for."

"Really? What?"

"A link between each carcass and the locations we found them. Probably nothing will come of it, but any new approach is worth a try, especially when nothing else seems to be working."

"Well," Silverwind replied backing up toward the door, "I'll leave you to that, I still want to find Candle." Halfway back to the keep, however, the weather had finally made up its mind as to exactly what its mission in life was and the sporadic light rain was transformed into a decided tropical downpour. Even at a full run, the wizard was soaked before he once more saw the inside of the keep.

Water trailing behind him, he dragged himself upstairs for a change of clothes. On the way to his room he found Candle in a small alcove resolutely staring at the rounded piece of milky quartz Silverwind had given him a few days earlier. Silverwind watched his young student quietly. He was a bit surprised that Candle had kept the same pebble to concentrate on. Any small object would have done, but perhaps Candle was right. He would probably become more comfortable with his first spell if he kept practicing it on the same object for a while.

Candle, still not aware of Silverwind's presence, took a deep breath and closed his eyes once more. He silently ran through everything that Silverwind had told him and a few hints that Oceanvine had given him as well. Then he screwed up his face and concentrated on moving the stone.

"You're going at it all wrong, you know," Silverwind said at last.

"Huh?" Candle jumped, startled by the unexpected voice.

"Sorry," Silverwind apologized. "Didn't mean to surprise you. It's just that you're trying too hard."

"Why're you all wet?" Candle asked.

"Guess I didn't know enough to come in out of the rain," Silverwind replied.

"Oh," Candle nodded. "If I'm tryin' too hard, how am I supposed to do it? By not trying at all?"

"It's been known to happen," Silverwind replied, "but that causes even worse problems. No, it's best to be able to use magic only under your direct control. Trust me."

"Then what?"

"You have to relax, Candle. The power can't flow if you're all tensed up."

"But then how can I concentrate on moving the rock?"

"By clearing your mind of every thought besides moving it," Silverwind replied, "but you have to be

emotionally relaxed. That's why most magicians use the trance state from which to cast their spells. It keeps them relaxed while they settle down to work."

"How do you go into a trance?" Candle asked.

"Self hypnosis. I'll show you. Relax and just breathe deeply for a bit. Feel all the tension drain out of you..." Silverwind spoke in a quietly comforting voice. Slowly, as Silverwind spoke to him, Candle began to relax. After several minutes Silverwind felt that his apprentice was sufficiently relaxed and he began to put the boy into a deeper trance. "Now, Candle, I want you to take your right fore-finger and touch the spot directly between your eyebrows.

It's all just a game, Candle thought to himself. *I can stop this anytime I want, but I'll play along and maybe I can learn something.* So he lifted his hand and put the tip of his finger in the center of his lower forehead.

"Each time you touch yourself there," Silverwind told him, "you will feel yourself becoming more relaxed, more at peace. Do it again..." He had Candle do that five times in all. "Now, you are going to open your eyes, but you will remain relaxed and at peace. Good. Now look at the pebble. Do you see it?" Candle said that he did. "Are you ready to move the pebble?"

Candle said, "Uh huh."

"Right. Now just reach out with your mind and move the pebble."

It'll never work, a small voice said within him, but another inner voice told him to go for it, so he did.

For a moment nothing happened, and then the pebble slowly rolled over. It didn't move very far - only an inch - but it did move.

"I did it!" Candle shouted, suddenly coming out of the induced trance.

"Looked that way to me," Silverwind confirmed. "The question is - can you do it again?"

"That trance," Candle asked, "can I do that myself?"

"With a little practice. Let me put you under once more to help reinforce that." Candle nodded and a few minutes later Silverwind planted a post-hypnotic suggestion that the finger touch between his eyebrows would relax him into the trance state. The suggestion by itself would only last two or three days if Candle didn't reinforce it by using the technique, but it was a start.

As Silverwind got up to leave Candle to his practice and to find himself a dry set of clothing he noticed the puddle of water that had collected at his feet as he had worked with Candle. He looked around and saw the now drying trail he had left down the corridor. There was a clue there that tickled at the corners of his mind. Something to look into if he could just figure out what his subconscious was trying to imprint on his brain. He was submerged within an ocean of thought by the time he reached his room and instead of changing right away he sat down to contemplate the image in his mind. His clothes were mostly dry before he became aware of Oceanvine at his door informing him it was dinnertime.

Lord Jason of North Horalia did not sit comfortably on the ducal throne. He had long ago come to the conclusion that it must be genetic since neither he nor his siblings really wanted the job. Galiena had, at one time, fancied herself more than suitable to rule. That fantasy had crumbled during her recent brief tenure as Warden. Now she seemed quite content to remain in charge of the household staff, much to Jason's surprise. He made a note to try again to coax her into sharing some of the responsibility he found himself buried under.

Master Steuen assured him that he would find it easier to cope as he became used to the ducal responsibilities. Jason was still mortified by his childish response that he didn't want to become used to it for a long time. He was certain that he might have at least phrased that in a more mature manner than he had, but he had been on edge since his return to Castle North. Part of that was due to his concern for his father, but Jason's edginess had become more pronounced since Silverwind had explained how almost everyone in the castle might be implicated in the on-going curse. The latest thorn in his foot stood before him in the form of his cousin Denzell.

"Your grace," Denzell began.

"That title is not yet my own, nor will I permit its use at this time, Denzell. Stop trying to flatter me - you're not very good at it - and just say what you want."

"Just taking my leave of you, my lord," Denzell replied smoothly.

"You're leaving so soon? You usually stay for weeks at a time."

"Ha ha," Denzell replied flatly. "Actually I will just be attending to a little business in Carna and should be back in a few days."

"Very well, Denzell," Jason replied formally, privately sorry that his cousin wasn't leaving for a more extended period. Jason would have dearly liked to tell Denzell not to come back, but he did not feel comfortable reversing decisions made by his father especially when the duke was still alive. "You have my leave to depart. No doubt I'll see you on your return." Jason waved a dismissal to his hated cousin.

Denzell muttered something under his breath that Jason assumed was a formal reply for Denzell's next move was to take a few steps backwards, turn, and leave.

"Better you than me," Jason heard Galiena say behind him. Looking back, he saw his sister step out from behind a curtain.

"Still hiding behind curtains, Gali?"

"Just wondering how you do it, Jase."

"Do what?"

"Run the duchy, sit on the throne, rule. You make it seem so easy."

"I do? Never noticed. I have this permanent pit in my stomach that just keeps getting deeper and deeper. Lately, I think someone's been installing a set of pointed stakes at the bottom."

"I know the feeling," Galiena empathized. "Every time I spoke I was afraid I would say something wrong and the entire duchy would collapse around me."

"I've never been very religious," Jason confided, "but lately I find myself praying to the gods for Father's health every spare moment I can find. I'd pray that they make him immortal if I thought it would do any good, but my deepest wish is that he recover so that I can ask him how he does it. He always seems so at ease under the coronet."

"So do you, brother," Galiena reminded him.

"I'm just doing my best to imitate Father. It's just an act."

"What if he's just been acting all this time, too?" Galiena asked.

"That's a frightening thought," Jason shuddered, laughing nervously.

"Isn't it though?" she nodded. "What you need is a chance to relax. How about we do a little hunting, just you and I?"

"I haven't the time. From sunup to sundown there are a hundred little details that seem to need my personal attention."

"I know," Galiena replied. "I've been there, but haven't you noticed that you're usually left alone at night?"

"I'm usually too tired to notice."

"Well, pace yourself today and I'll arrange to have coffee served with the after-dinner drinks. That should keep you up long enough to enjoy a little hunt."

"Hmm," Jason said thoughtfully, "venison for dinner tomorrow would be nice."

"Out of here, scamp!" Candle heard the head cook's voice ring out behind him. Jason's youngest brother, Cerdic, had finally explained to him that he was allowed to eat any time he pleased, in spite of what the cook might say. Candle had been wary of Cerdic at first, never having had any friends his own age.

The other boys who worked for Daddy Fox were mostly not friends. Rather they were fierce competitors all vying to not be the one beaten for bringing in the least that day. Candle was beaten more often than he felt was strictly fair - often twice in the same day; once by Daddy Fox and once before that by whichever larger boy got to him first to steal his take. Fox not only condoned such behavior, he encouraged it. "Only the strong survive," he would chortle to himself whenever Candle or one of the other smaller boys would complain. Candle, himself, had tried picking on a boy smaller than himself, but relented when the lad collapsed in absolute misery. Candle escaped Daddy Fox that same day.

After a brief introductory period, Candle and Cerdic became fast friends. Each felt the other had the better, more exciting life. Candle was shocked that Cerdic hardly noticed all the wealth and luxury around him while Cerdic couldn't understand why anyone wouldn't prefer the adventurous life of a magician over the boring routine of the court. When Cerdic learned that Candle had been an orphan he was at first very careful to try not to say anything about that which might disturb his new friend, but very soon his curiosity got the better of him when he learned that Candle was willing to entertain him with tales of his short life. Cerdic absolutely insisted that Candle show him how to pick pockets and locks and to teach him the silent walk Candle had learned while he had been a thief. Candle for his own part couldn't understand why the young noble would want to know such things, but he couldn't refuse anyone who seemed to hold him in such esteem. In return, Candle had Cerdic teach him how to speak and act like a noble. Cerdic was as puzzled by this as Candle had been when first asked to teach about picking locks until Candle explained that he didn't like the looks of disapproval he got from Master Steuen, Denzell, and even Meadow, and he thought it might have had something to do with his speech. So Cerdic corrected his pronunciation and showed him which utensil should be used with each course at dinner.

Another secret of the nobility Cerdic introduced Candle to was the complex of secret passages within Castle North. They weren't really secret anymore, Cerdic explained, and their greatest use these days was by children who used them to play hide and seek, although some of the passages were used by the Castle servants for shortcuts across the sprawling complex, especially when it rained which was an almost daily occurrence during the wet season.

Candle and Cerdic were in one of the secret passages overlooking the small audience chamber when Denzell took his leave and when Jason and Galiena decided to go hunting.

"Hey, that's a great idea!" Cerdic said enthusiastically. "Let's go hunting."

"Will they let us go alone?" Candle asked.

"Probably not," Cerdic admitted with a gleam of mischief flashing back and forth between his eyes, "but if we don't tell them, they won't forbid it."

"I don't know," Candle said uncertainly, feeling a mild tug from his apprenticeship spell. The action wasn't strictly forbidden him, but his guilty feelings activated the spell.

"Why not?" Cerdic pressed.

Candle didn't want to tell his friend that he was under an enchantment so he found another excuse. "I don't know how," Candle admitted truthfully enough. "I was getting pretty hungry before Silverwind found me."

"I'll show you how to use a bow," Cerdic told him. "Archery practice is almost as good as hunting and it's even encouraged. Maybe we can go hunting after you've learned." Candle agreed and they went off to find a bow Candle could use in the armory.

An hour later Candle's arms hurt too much from pulling the bow to shoot any longer and he had only managed to hit the target at short range. Cerdic told him that was pretty good for the first time, but Candle thought otherwise, so they agreed to meet at the practice field every day until Candle got better. After lunch Cerdic had lessons to study which left Candle to his own lessons. So far he hadn't managed to move the rock without Silverwind's assistance, but he thought he was getting closer.

"Are you sure?" Silverwind asked.

"Not absolutely, no," Oceanvine replied, almost snapping at the wizard. "If you like you may set the wards. You may even go over all my calculations yet again if you want. Oh yes, I know you've been triple-checking every thing I've done, since I arrived in Renton."

"I just like to be sure."

"Well, I would think you would have learned to trust me, on my strong points at least, by now," Oceanvine told him.

"All right, I'll try not to be so obvious from now on."

"I suppose that will have to be good enough," Oceanvine sighed.

"How certain are you?" Silverwind persisted.

Oceanvine closed her eyes for a moment and breathed deeply. "I'm as sure as I can be. The dead animals have been appearing in a predictable pattern so far, so it is only natural to assume that the spell our enemy mage is casting requires that he follow that pattern."

"And what if it doesn't? Maybe he's just been following that pattern because it pleased him?"

"Then he'll probably continue to follow the pattern," Oceanvine replied.

"Not necessarily. Now that we're here, he might decide to play it safe and break the pattern."

"Does he know we're here?" Oceanvine countered. "We haven't made any overt moves against him yet."

"He knows," Silverwind told her. "Have you forgotten that rotten wagon wheel?"

"That did take a deliberate use of magic, didn't it?" Oceanvine admitted.

"He will follow the pattern," Meadow said authoritatively. "If he was both able and willing to change it he would have done so when I arrived."

"Good point," Silverwind conceded. "So we'll follow Oceanvine's plan. Go to it, Vine."

"Oceanvine," she corrected him, "and if you think I'm going out to cast a spell or two while you lounge around the castle and fill yourself and yet another evening with the dregs from Jason's ale barrel, you have another thing coming. I'm going to need both of you to help cast and maintain all the spells we'll need."

"Just how many spells did you have in mind?" Silverwind asked. Oceanvine recited a long list to him. "I've never heard of half of those."

"Of course not," she replied. "They're my own inventions. Okay, boys! Let's get moving."

"Where are we going?" Meadow asked cautiously.

"The forest. We have a lot of prep work to do and I want to have all these wards up by nightfall."

"Young lady," Meadow protested. "Your skills may be well in advance of your rank, but have you not yet learned how to cast a spell by sympathy?"

"Sympathy," Oceanvine recited, "the property of magic that allows a mage to affect a person, place, or thing by causing a similar effect on a symbolic representation of the intended subject. That sort of sympathy?"

"So you know what the word means," Meadow replied, "but can you apply the theory? Why can we not use your map to set your wards up over the intended area from the comfort of this room?"

"We could, of course, but I don't want to use any paralyzing wards without being there in case some innocent fool stumbles into them."

"That does sound responsible," Meadow conceded. "Are you sure you'll need both of us?"

"You sound like Silverwind now," Oceanvine said nastily.

"You do not have to insult me," Meadow replied. He said that with a straight face, but Oceanvine could swear his eyes were smiling.

Now that's a change, she thought, *I didn't even know he had a sense of humor*. Aloud she told both wizards, "I arranged for a basket dinner to be prepared for us. Let's move out."

Both men grumbled and made a big show of how hard it would be for them to get up, but Oceanvine wasn't fooled nor did she allow them enough slack to strangle a mosquito.

Twelve

Jason and Galiena slipped out of the keep just at sunset under rapidly darkening blood-red skies. What had been an uncomfortably hot and humid day was turning into a delightful evening as cool, dry air flowed across the island from out of the south.

"Mm!" Galiena murmured as they saddled their horses, "A change in the weather at last. You missed most of the heat wave, brother. I'm not afraid to tell you that there were many times I wished that Dad had sent me off to look for the wizard if only to escape this infernal climate."

"Renton isn't that much farther south, Gali," Jason told her.

"Far enough, I'll bet, or are you trying to tell me the weather was as hot as it was here?"

Jason considered doing just that, but found he could not lie to his only sister, not about something so

inconsequential at any rate. "Well actually, yes it was considerably cooler. I had to wear a light cloak or a jacket at night, although none of the locals seemed to."

"They were used to the weather, I suppose," Galiena replied. "What's it like to be cold in the middle of the summer, Jase?"

"Highly over-rated. It's just like being cold in the winter except that in the winter you expect it."

"But..."

"Gali, cold is cold. What difference does it make what time of the year it is? You're still uncomfortable." As he said that, Jason mounted his steed, a tall black animal more fitting to a person of his station than anything he had ridden in weeks. "Well, Gali? Shall we?"

Galiena smiled and mounted and together they rode out of the main gate of Castle North toward the game preserve.

"There!" Oceanvine sounded satisfied. "All finished. Now we can eat."

"It is about time," Meadow complained. "We have been at this for hours. I really do not know how you continue to function with such little sustenance."

Oceanvine looked surprised. "A difference in your Orentan metabolism?" she asked. "Funny I never noticed any differences when I was rooming with Airblossom."

"The difference," Silverwind informed her, "is between you and us. Maybe you've been too busy to eat but older and wiser heads have other priorities."

"You could stand to lose a few pounds, old man," she teased.

"Terrific," Silverwind said sourly. "I think all that lying under the sun is starting to bleach all the respect out of your brains."

Oceanvine impudently stuck her tongue out at Silverwind and started opening the picnic basket they had brought from the castle. "Beautiful sunset!" she commented. From where they were she could see through the trees that the sun had just set behind Castle North, framing the impressive structure and the hill it stood so proudly upon within a brilliant scarlet halo. She watched for a long moment as the red halo deepened to a more sanguine color before remembering that for all her taunts she was as hungry as the two wizards. Silverwind and Meadow had already laid a blanket down on the ground so she quickly placed the basket between them and started pulling out various sliced meats, cheese, and bread. In spite of the men's complaints of hunger, they ate lightly under the darkening sky.

"We're probably going to be here all night," Silverwind commented. "We might as well leave some for later." The others nodded although all three knew that they were just too nervous to eat much at this time. Later, when boredom set in, they would probably eat more if only to have something to do while they

waited.

"Amazingly clear sky tonight," Silverwind commented when they had finished eating. Stars had started to become visible although Midbar, Maiyim's one moon, had just vaulted up off the eastern horizon and threatened to blot out the fainter stars with its own cold light.

"It'll be a bright night," Oceanvine added, nodding toward the rising moon. As they watched, Midbar's light began to dominate the blackening sky.

"Indeed. We seem to have all the uncontrollable factors going in our favor."

Leave it to Silverwind, Oceanvine thought, *to take all the romance out of such a beautiful sight as a full Midbar as seen through the trees of a sub-tropical forest*. She sighed. Would he ever see her as something other than a junior colleague. *Yeah, when I become a wizard he'll see me as an equal colleague*. It had always been her goal to be treated as a person first and a woman second, but now that she had found a man who was capable of just that, he seemed unable to see her as woman. *I have all the luck*, she thought bitterly.

Silverwind had a few thoughts about Oceanvine running around through his head as well at that moment that she might have been interested to learn. Contrary to what the beautiful blond thought, Silverwind did see her as a woman, but whenever his thoughts strayed in that general direction, a clear and vivid memory of her arrival in Renton invaded his thoughts. The proud young woman had arrived like the storm after the calm and sometime between "Hello," and "So where's my room?" she had managed to deliver a long-winded oration that, when boiled down, announced that she was there to work only and if he had anything else in mind, he could get another assistant. Silverwind, who had been just beginning to take an interest in the rest of the world after the long depression he felt following his encounter with the demon on the Isle of Fire, was concerned only with having her there as an intelligent and talented research assistant and agreed to her terms easily. He was a man of his word and a year or so later, when he started finding himself attracted to the young mage, he honorably ignored any such feelings. Instead he continued to enjoy their bantering relationship. It was refreshing to find someone who wasn't afraid of what he could do if angered. Oceanvine, by now, knew him all too well in any case.

Once the three mages had finished their meal, they separated so that they were evenly spaced out over the moderate area their wards enveloped.

The greatest part of any investigative research is waiting for results. With no one to talk to, each of them passed the time in his own way. Silverwind had brought a small sketch pad with him and under the more than adequate full-Midbar light worked on several sketches ranging from mere doodles to serious attempts at artwork. Meadow leaned up against a tree and went to sleep. If any of the wards were tripped the alarms would wake him up from a coma, never mind a mere catnap.

It was Oceanvine, who had planned this foray, who found herself with nothing to do. She was too nervous to sleep like Meadow had and took little pleasure in drawing for its own sake. She wished now that she had let her mother teach her how to knit. It would have given her something mindless to do with her hands, or would have if she kept the pattern simple, but she had always been much more interested in magic. She might have run through a few basic magical exercises, which were her second most common refuge from boredom, but using magic now might disrupt the wards she had so carefully constructed. Her preferred activity would have been to read, but in her urgent desire to get this job done, she had neglected to bring a book with her. Had she remembered, it was likely that she wouldn't have anticipated how bright the moon would be in any case. So she propped herself up against a tree and stared at the stars, reciting the constellations and counting meteorites.

Jason had to order Aistan the Gamekeeper not to accompany him and Galiena when they stopped by the gamekeeper's cottage just outside the preserve.

"No, Aistan," Jason repeated. "We just came here to leave our horses behind."

"But, m'lord," Aistan protested, "tis dangerous, hunting at night without a guide."

"Aistan, Gali and I have been playing in these woods all our lives, and look - Midbar is rising full tonight. There'll be plenty of light for us to see by."

"Ah," the gamekeeper fretted, "and what would I be tellin' ya father if his two eldest should come to harm. Tis Quernday and Arsdays start at midnight. You know what that means, don't you. Do you want to catch the curse of Aritos?"

"Nonsense, old friend," Jason replied, warmly placing a hand on the older man's shoulder. "We'll be just fine. It's not the first time either of us have hunted at night. Just take care of our horses, please."

"Aye, sir. All right, sir, but you two be careful now."

"Okay, Aistan, we'll be careful." Jason slung a tooled leather quiver full of arrows across his back, unshipped his longbow from its carrying case and joined Galiena where she was waiting for him a dozen yards away.

"Better string that bow," she commented dryly. "The deer won't stand around waiting for you to do it later."

Jason looked at his unstrung bow and shrugged off his embarrassment as he bent the smooth, green sourfruit wood. "Silverwind told me that a friend of his in Granom has been experimenting with a new hunting weapon," he told his sister as they entered the game preserve on one of the main paths.

"What sort of weapon?" Galiena asked interestedly.

"Very exotic. It's sort of a hand-held cannon."

"A hand-held cannon?" Galiena laughed. "It sounds terribly difficult to use. It must be very heavy and impossible to aim."

"Silverwind said it is very small. It shoots a ball the size of a pea and is mounted on a crossbow stock."

"A cannonball the size of a pea? What good is that?"

"Silverwind seems quite sure that it would kill more efficiently and humanely than a hunting arrow." Galiena looked at the broad-bladed tip of one of her arrows and shook her head disbelievingly. "Also," Jason continued, "the device is supposedly capable of throwing the ball over half a league away."

"That settles it then," Galiena said practically. "I have no need for a weapon that shoots farther than I can see. It's too dangerous - who knows what you might hit if you missed your target. At least with an arrow you can see right away if you miss and if an accident happens and someone gets hit. Get hit by one of those little cannonballs and you could bleed to death before anyone even knows you were hit."

"That's what I told Silverwind," Jason agreed.

"What did he say to that?"

"He went on about efficiency and fire power for a bit and I countered that a small gun was likely to be nearly as noisy as a big one so a bow was quieter and was more aesthetically pleasing to hunt with. We are supposed to be relaxing. Don't see how anyone could relax with cannons going off all around him, do you?"

"No. It doesn't sound very sporting either," Galiena opined.

"You know, that's why Silverwind says hand-held cannons have never quite caught on in the past. They also scare the game away for miles around when you shoot them, he said. Evidently, his friend didn't invent these tiny guns, just found the idea in the papers of his master's master. They were first invented about three hundred years ago as a weapon for warfare, but nobody liked them then either."

"They sound like they'd be a pretty intimidating weapon in war. Why didn't they catch on?"

"A good master mage can deflect thousands of balls without thinking hard and the noise unnerved friendly and enemy troops alike. Swords and bows were and still are considered preferable to those noise-makers."

"But now a troll in Granom is trying to make them for hunting?"

"Right. Silverwind says he tried to talk his friend out of it, but you know how stubborn trolls can be."

"Oh well, just promise me you'll never get one of those things," Galiena requested.

"So be it," Jason laughed.

They were quiet after that for a while as they walked almost silently down the woodland path. The warm night air bathed them with the light scent of the forest. It was one of the simple pleasures of hunting to both of them. Finding a likely target and stalking it was mostly an excuse to get out of the castle and relax. If they shot no deer this night they would find the activity just as satisfying and laugh that at least they didn't have to clean the carcass and haul it on back.

They moved haltingly through the forest for the next hour and a half, stopping frequently to rest. It wouldn't pay to come out for relaxation if they only managed to exhaust themselves. Both had responsibilities to see to the next day. During one such break, Jason brought up the topic he had been wrestling with all day.

"Gali," he started, "you did an excellent job as Warden during my absence."

"Thank you," she replied, honestly flattered, "but I'll be just as happy to not have to prove it wasn't an accident."

"That's not what you used to say," Jason reminded her.

"True. I always used to think I would be the best suited to rule here as duchess. That was before I actually got the chance to see what it was like."

"But there must have been some parts that you found enjoyable," he pressed.

"What are you getting at, brother?" Galiena asked suspiciously.

"It just seems to me that you're being wasted as head of household staff, and there is really far too much for me to do alone. Michael and Cerdic are still too young and I could really use the help of an experienced head."

Galiena thought about that. "What jobs do you have in mind?" she asked hesitantly.

"I hadn't gotten that far," he admitted, "but even if father pulls through, there will come a day when I'll have to serve as duke and I'm going to want as much help as you and our brothers are willing to give."

"Ruling by committee? That doesn't sound too sensible."

"Well, I suppose as duke I would have to make the final decisions, but I don't see why I can't delegate some of my authority once those decisions are made."

"You're also not taking marriage into account. I'm supposed to get married next spring."

"Is there a problem, Gali? I thought you liked Lord Joram of Amden."

"I do. I'm so glad you didn't have to marry that cow, Maidie of Tolla, last year. But my point is that even though Joram's a second son, he might prefer to live with his family and I really should go by his choice on that. Then what?"

"Maybe we can make him a better offer. I don't think Amden is a very close family. They seem to have more than the usual internal squabbles for a noble family."

"All right. Do you mind if I think about it? I still haven't gotten bored with my new-found freedom."

"No problem. Think about it as long as you like. Hopefully it will be years before we're able to implement the idea."

"May the gods permit," Galiena replied fervently. "Of course father might like the idea and start spreading his responsibilities out before then." Jason grinned and nodded, and Galiena changed the subject. "Jase? You'll have to get married sometime, you know. Now that you're free and clear you really ought to find someone before politics force your hand."

"Have someone in mind?"

"No, not really, but I've noticed the way you look at Oceanvine. She's very pretty. I like her and the two of you would make a nice couple."

"Never happen," Jason sighed heavily. "She's too devoted to magic and even if she weren't, she's utterly

in love with Silverwind."

"I didn't know that," Galiena admitted. "They bicker at each other so much."

"It's the way they hide their true feelings toward each other. If you'd traveled with them like I did you'd have seen that they also have a whole library full of private jokes and even when bickering, there's an almost visible line they never cross. For their own sakes I hope they realize someday just how much they love each other."

"Jase!" Galiena laughed. "I never thought of you as a matchmaker."

"I'm not, but I've become quite fond of them both. I like Candle too, even if he did pick your pocket a few months ago. I wish them all the best." Galiena nodded, absently wondering how accurate Jason's perceptions in this matter were and whether there was some way she might get her brother together with Oceanvine. Jason might not fancy himself a matchmaker, but Galiena couldn't resist.

They were each lost in their own thoughts when the buck, spooked by their approach, bolted across their path and then disappeared into the night-blackened foliage.

"Did you see that?" Jason whispered.

"Uh huh," Galiena replied. "Eight points at least."

"Ten," Jason said firmly, "or I'm a beggar. Come on, he's ours!"

They left the path and started following the trail left by the departing buck. The trees were thick in this part of the forest and the moonlight penetrated only tentatively. They lost the trail several times only to regain it more by luck than skill. It was another two hours before they sighted the buck again.

"You were right, Jase," Galiena confirmed quietly. "Ten points. Let's split up. I'll circle around and try to drive him toward you." Jason nodded. "Wait a few minutes before you start moving," Galiena told him, and then she disappeared into the brush.

Jason patiently stayed put and watched his intended target. The buck was plainly visible in a natural clearing where the light of Midbar dripped down through the trees. It was, he decided, not one of the indigenous deer but one of the Granomish species his great grandfather had imported fifty-six years earlier for his jubilee. The local deer were a bit smaller and their racks rarely achieved eight points. This one, a naturalized citizen of these woods, had a dark brown coat with a jet-black tail and a white diamond-shaped mark on its chest. Jason had often wondered what the foliage was like in a place where those markings could be considered camouflage. He remembered that this species of deer was largely a nocturnal feeder, which might account for the coloration, but wondered how it managed to hide during the day.

Every now and then Jason caught a glimpse of his sister as she moved through the woods to the far side of the clearing. Before she got there however, the buck decided to move on away from both of them. Jason briefly considered shooting his bow. He had shot at and hit more difficult targets, but he was just as likely to miss or worse, to hit the animal in a non-vital area, frightening it away and causing undue pain. No, the buck didn't seem to be in any hurry, it just decided that it didn't like the forage here and was going to try over there. Jason stretched and got up to continue his stalk of the proud creature.

He moved stealthily through the woods nearly paralleling the buck's direction, carefully moving nearer to

the creature. Finally the deer stopped and settled down again to nibble on a nearby bush. Jason used the opportunity to edge closer. Jason was only fifty feet away from the buck when it suddenly raised its head, alert to the fact that something was wrong. Jason surmised that either he or his sister had gotten too close to the skittish animal, although he was certain that neither was directly upwind.

It was getting late, nearly three hours pastmidnight. Jason knew that this was probably going to be his best and last chance to bag the buck. It was already later than they had planned to be out. He selected an arrow and nocked it on the silken bowstring. The buck stiffened as though it were about to bolt and Jason knew he would have only one shot, and that only if he was lucky. Expertly sighting the deer as he drew the arrow, he zeroed in on his target, and prepared to release.

He held himself at the ready as a vivid glowing yellow-green mark began to form on the flank of the ten-point buck. The illuminated mark started out as a vague glowing blur but quickly resolved into a sign he knew all too well - the Bond of Aritos.

"Not this time," Jason muttered as he released the arrow, hoping that he could somehow break the curse if he killed the animal before the Bond could. The arrow flew, straight and true, toward the center of the arcane symbol, but as the steel point touched its target, the arrow was instantly consumed in an intense flash of light that temporarily blinded Jason.

As his eyes cleared, he saw the buck stagger and fall, its flank still emblazoned with the glowing Bond of Aritos. Jason stumbled forward to inspect the fallen creature. As he approached he saw that the Bond was rapidly becoming darker and soon became the pitch black mark he was more acquainted with. The buck was crying a high-pitched squeal of pain as it died under the exquisite torture of the spell that had been cast on it and there was no sign of the arrow Jason had shot.

The future Duke of North Horalia was no sadist and he quickly drew his knife, intending to put the poor creature out of its misery, when a shower of sparks flashed across his eyes and he fell to the earth only vaguely aware that something hard and heavy had hit him on the back of his head. However, that was the last thing he was aware of for the next several hours.

Thirteen

The next rays of light admitted into Jason's eyes made their way to him through his bedroom window and, after bouncing around for a bit, fell from the ceiling and slipped between his opening eyelids. There was a brief moment when he thought that perhaps he had only dreamed the events of the previous evening and then he moved his head and activated the formidable headache that had been lying in wait for just such a moment to begin its assault.

"Careful, brother," he heard Galiena tell him softly. "You've taken quite a beating."

Jason immediately wished she hadn't said that for as she did he became aware of the various aches and bruises over the rest of his body.

"What happened?" he asked, trying to sit up. Gentle hands pushed him back down. Galiena's effort was unnecessary for a soon as Jason tried to sit up he became nauseated, dizzy, and filled with pain. He collapsed back onto his bed in a tortured sweat.

"For starts," Galiena told him, "you were hit from behind by a tree branch."

"I think I remember that," Jason gasped, feeling the stabbing pain receding in favor of the longer-lasting variety. "Did it fall on me?"

"Sort of," Galiena smiled. "If you think that being used as a club is falling, then that's what happened."

"That's about all I can remember," Jason admitted.

"I'm not surprised. When I came along, the bastard with the club was still doing his best to kill you with it."

"He doesn't seem to have been very competent," Jason commented.

"Thank the gods!" Galiena swore piously. "He also had a slight distraction at the time." Jason looked inquiringly. "He was dodging arrows."

"I hope he wasn't any better at that than he was at killing me."

"Unfortunately he was," Galiena replied. "I tagged him once on his upper right arm, but it was only a glancing shot, more's the pity. He was very good at running too. He lost me in no time, besides I was more concerned in getting help for you. Good thing the mages weren't too far away. You might owe your life to Oceanvine, she was the first one to arrive and held you magically while waiting for Meadow to get there. You definitely owe him your life. He said you were bleeding internally and had a bad concussion, but you'll be okay now. How are you feeling?"

"Terrible. If this is okay, I'm glad I wasn't awake during the worst of it." Jason laughed, then instantly regretted it. "Oh. Are you sure they saved my life?"

"Magic can only do so much, Jase," Galiena reminded him, "The rest is up to you."

"I don't think I'll be feeling up to much for a bit yet."

"Don't worry. I'll cover for you."

Jason looked at his sister. "That's not the way you were talking last night."

"It isn't, is it?" She nodded. "What can I say? Father brought us all up right, I guess. We do what we must when we must. It's not so bad this time. I'm getting more support from Master Steuen."

"Maybe that old arch-conservative is finally coming around," suggested Jason, "or maybe he really doesn't like my way of doing things."

"Oh no," Galiena disagreed, "Not at all. He praises you constantly."

"Then you must have finally gained his approval as well," Jason concluded. "How long have I been out?"

"It's almostnoon. Hungry?"

"Yes, but is it safe to eat?"

"Meadow says you should try something light. Some tea, maybe some toast?"

"Why not?" Jason shrugged. "Oh, that hurts. I don't suppose Meadow prescribed some sort of pain killer."

"I'll ask. Maybe some sort of tea. Oh, before I go, are you feeling up to talking to Silverwind and Oceanvine? They wanted to be in the room when you woke up, were most emphatic about it, but I told them that I wouldn't have them pushing you before I was sure you were ready. They're waiting in your sitting room right now. Jason, why are you looking at me like that? What's wrong?"

"Funny," Jason chuckled, stoically ignoring the mild pain, "you don't appear to have turned green or sprouted horns."

"Jason, are you all right?" Galiena sounded worried.

"That's debatable. But you mean you actually stood up to Oceanvine and made it stick? You're a better man than I, Gali."

"Oh that. I just made sure that she knew she didn't have a choice. It helped that Silverwind backed me up, of course. I'll send them in." Galiena got up and went to the door. "All right," she said on opening the door, "you may see him now."

"Candle," Jason heard Oceanvine say. "Go get Silverwind." Then she entered his room. She wore a bright yellow low-cut, short-sleeved tunic and dark green shorts. By Horalian standards she was dressed most immodestly, but a mage could get away with almost anything. Her hair, on the other hand would be the envy of every woman on the island. She wore her usually straight, blond hair up in a complex braid. "G'morning, Jason," she said brightly, "or should I say afternoon?"

"Morning," Jason decided. "Regardless of the time, it is still morning until you eat breakfast. You're looking very nice this morning."

"After what you've been through," Oceanvine replied, trying unsuccessfully to cover her pleasure at his reaction, "I'm sure you'd think Meadow looked good."

"Meadow is an Orente. I expect to see him in Orentan clothing, but I haven't seen you in those togs since we arrived in Tarnsa."

"Didn't want to shock the locals. But it's just too hot to keep wearing the long dresses your women seem to favor. You don't mind, do you?"

"Not at all," Jason agreed, enjoying the view. Oceanvine had excellent legs. "It does seem more sensible. Maybe you'll start a fashion for Elvish clothing." Jason privately wondered if such a trend would extend to the Orentan beach clothing, which, he had heard, was often topless.

"Good. Jason, Silverwind and I want to ask you about what you saw last night."

"Not a lot. I seem to have missed most of the action."

"Anything might be of help. Galiena says you were closest to the deer when it died. Do you remember that?"

"I think so." He told her about how the Bond of Aritos formed and what happened when he tried to shoot the deer before the spell had been completed. Silverwind entered with Meadow about halfway through and Jason had to repeat the story for them. Between the two tellings, Meadow gave Jason a bitter, vile-tasting potion, which he said would be good for the pain. By the time his finished the story again, he was beginning to feel better.

"Interesting," Silverwind commented when Jason had finished, "and totally unique. I've never heard of anything like it. Meadow?"

"Nothing in my experience is comparable," Meadow replied. Oceanvine shrugged as well.

"The Bond glowed as it formed."

"As though it was alive," Jason amplified.

"Alive. Yes, I think you're right. That could account for the magic neutrality of the markings on the deer. Meadow, Oceanvine, tell me what you think. What if the markings are neutral because they are only residual effects of the actual spell?"

"You mean once the curse had done its work it deactivated?" Oceanvine asked. Silverwind nodded. "Yes, that could account for that part of it, but the spell might also only be dormant. The over-all pattern of the killings suggests that there is a greater purpose at work here besides the slow and predictable extermination of His Grace's deer."

"I agree," Meadow nodded. "The spell is at least dormant, although we knew that already. As you say, that would account for some of the troubles we have been having, but this is really just confirmation of what we already knew. Does this actually further our study of the problem?"

Candle entered the room then with Jason's breakfast of tea and toast. His tray also held a large silver pitcher, fogged over with condensation and several glasses. "Lady Galiena," he explained to the mages, "thought you might like some lemonade." He placed the tray beside Jason where he could reach his breakfast. "Would you like me to pour?" He asked Silverwind.

"Yes, please. Looks as though you've been learning more than magic here, Candle," Silverwind commented lightly. "Lady Galiena been coaching you?"

"No, sir," Candle replied, keeping an eye on Meadow's reaction. "Just hanging around with Cerdic."

"Your manners do you credit, boy," Meadow said approvingly.

"Indeed," Silverwind replied. "And what have you been teaching him in return?"

Candle shrugged and said, "Just stuff."

"Oh, oh!" Jason laughed, "We'd better all keep an eye out. If Cerdic is as apt a student as young Candle is, we're likely to be missing pocket change in the days to come."

"No," Candle protested. "He was more interested in locks. We practiced on the treasury vault." Silverwind and Oceanvine laughed uproariously, but Jason and Meadow showed alarm.

"You'd better get one of those new combination-lock vault doors, my lord," Silverwind said between laughs, "or the two boys might rob you blind!"

"No," Candle persisted, "We just chose that one because it was one of the easiest to practice on. The keyhole is so big, that it is easy to manipulate the tumblers."

"Well," Jason said ruefully, "my father always said that locks will only protect you against the honest, and that lock was an antique when my great-grandfather was born. Perhaps it is time to modernize. Candle, I shall rely on you to help me pick the safest system."

Candle nodded and started pouring lemonade for the mages. He filled Oceanvine's glass first and then Silverwind's, but when he got to Meadow he slipped and spilled some of the liquid into the Orente's lap. While he was stuttering out apologies, Silverwind saw the sweet puddle on the floor and remembered the trail of water he had left the other day when he got caught in the rain.

"That's it!" he shouted.

"What?" Oceanvine and Meadow asked.

"I don't know why none of us thought about it before. If the individual deer are all part of a greater curse spell, there has to be a connection, a string."

"Like the apprenticeship spell," Oceanvine added.

"Exactly. Any time magic connects two or more objects there is always a string of some sort."

"You are right," Meadow agreed. "That is so basic I do not know why I did not think of it."

"That's why none of us thought of it, Meadow," Silverwind told the elf. "It was so simple and basic that we just assumed that a rogue mage who had the ability to cast a spell of this complexity would know that too and not cast a spell that left a connection."

"It still might not," Meadow pointed out.

"Maybe, but I doubt it. If all our other hypotheses are correct, and so far we have no evidence against them, then there has to be a string. We just have to find it and we had better hurry, because we have two weeks left to do so before the curse is complete."

Fourteen

Candle decided that he preferred the alcove he had found to the courtyard bench where Silverwind had first set him the task of moving the quartz pebble by magic. There were less distractions here. He could not see the guardsmen drilling, nor could he hear the shouts of the painters and roofers who were working on one of the smaller buildings in the castle compound. The wind did not blow through his hair and the sun only beat down on him in the late afternoon if it did not rain and it rained most days at about that time.

The biggest distraction in the alcove, aside from the occasional sound of passing footsteps, was opening his eyes to find Cerdic solemnly watching him. When that happened it was inevitably decided that it was time Candle took a break. Then the two boys would go off in search of trouble.

Jason had put a firm stop to Cerdic's learning to pick the lock on the treasury room. Jason trusted his younger brother, but it wouldn't do to tempt him too much with the traditional reward for successfully picking a lock. Similar objections arose concerning the locks on the wine cellar and a long-forgotten passage that ended just behind the pastry cooling rack in the kitchen. Candle and Cerdic agreed not to break into the wine cellar any more, but convinced Jason to agree that the pastry was fair game, especially after the head cook started using the passageway they had found for the extra space it afforded him. The head cook, of course, did not agree, but his outraged shouts only made it more fun for the boys to steal the pastry.

However, in spite of these forays with Cerdic, Candle still managed to spend several hours each day attempting self-hypnosis, a state he achieved fairly easily, and to get the accursed pebble to move. Several times he thought that he might have made the pebble rock a little, but he could never be sure of that since whenever he took a second look it was just sitting there.

This day, however, Quernday, nearly a week after Jason and Galiena had decided on a little night hunting, Candle had refused Cerdic's suggestion that he could use a little more archery practice and instead had buckled down to work on the pebble. He had been at it for several hours now and wished he had gone with Cerdic after all.

A bright flash of lightning outside immediately followed by a crack and boom of thunder heralded the onset of the usual afternoon storm. Candle closed the alcove window just as the wind began to drive the elephantine raindrops against it. Ignoring the storm, he went back to his magic, but the arrhythmic pounding of the thunder made it hard to concentrate on his objective. Finally he picked up the pebble and threw it hard against the hallway wall.

Why can't I move it that easily? Candle wondered. Then, having vented his anger on his silicon nemesis, he retrieved the small stone and started over again. He closed his eyes and carefully remembered all the soothing sounds Silverwind had made. Then he touched his finger to the space between his eyebrows and imagined that he felt himself going under. *Or is it only imagination?* he thought and then quickly banished that stray thought. It didn't matter as long as it worked anyway. He touched his forehead twice again and imagined, as he had so often that in the entire universe there was only himself and the rounded piece of milky quartz. He pictured the stone rolling over the floor where he had placed it, but it did not move. Then in angry frustration he thought of throwing it away again - pictured himself picking the stone up and whipping it hard against the far wall and although he hadn't moved a muscle he heard a sharp click as the rock hit the glossy-finished granitic panel.

"Not bad," a pleasant contralto broke in through his trance, "but I doubt Jason would appreciate the way you're treating the fixtures."

"Seaweed!" Candle greeted the blond mage, forgetting in his jubilation just how much she hated being called that.

"Oceanvine," she corrected him sternly, firmly reminding him just who the apprentice was. He barely noticed.

"Oceanvine, I moved the pebble!"

"Moved, Candle? I hadn't thought you had such a talent for understatement."

"What do ya mean?"

"You didn't just move the pebble, you shot it across the hall with the speed and force of a crossbow bolt, barely missing me, I might add."

"Sorry," Candle replied, not really feeling so. "Is that good?"

"That you missed me? I think so," Oceanvine replied dryly.

"No, I mean is it good that I could make it move so fast?"

"Well, yes and no. That you were able to do more than make the pebble roll around a bit shows that you have a lot of promise. The purpose of this and every other exercise your master will give you is control. The ability to release large amounts of energy makes you dangerous." Candle briefly smiled at the thought, but was quickly crushed by Oceanvine's stern expression.. "However, if you want to be a magician you need control. You should be able to lightly lift the pebble and make it float gently around the room."

"Silverwind just told me to make it move," Candle said defensively.

"That's step one, yes. But his next instructions will be to make the pebble float. Trust me."

"Oh," Candle said rising to retrieve the stone. "It's broken," he said as he picked up two almost equal pieces. "What do I do now?"

"Get another pebble," Oceanvine shrugged.

"But he gave me this one," Candle said plaintively.

Oceanvine looked at the young apprentice. His dark brown hair was as impossibly mussed as ever. Even in the fine clothes Lady Galiena had given him, he still looked like the hungry young thief they had found rummaging through the wagon on their first night out of Tarnsa. In spite of her resolve, she found her heart going out to him.

"Oh very well," she said at last. "Give me both pieces. I'll see what I can do." Candle gave her the two halves of the white stone and she sat down gracefully on the floor in the same cross-legged position that Silverwind had shown Candle. Candle had stopped using it; he found it too uncomfortable. Then Oceanvine fitted the two pieces together and held them in her right hand. She closed her eyes and seemed to hum as she brought her left hand down on top of her right, trapping the pebble between them. Candle heard a high pitched squeal escape from between her hands and when she opened them a few minutes later, the pebble was whole again, except that there was a clear layer all along the middle where it had fractured. "Here you go," she said tossing him the reconstituted rock. "That's the best I could do."

"What's this in the center?" Candle asked. "Diamond?"

"Good heavens, no!" Oceanvine laughed. "It's clear quartz, pure silicon. Geology isn't my specialty so I don't know what impurities make it white, but I do know a bit about quartz from the university so I only re-established the bonds between the silicon molecules. That pushed the white stuff to either side. I think it looks prettier now, don't you?"

Candle, by now, knew better than to disagree with her, especially when she was doing him a favor. He nodded and said, "Thank you."

"You're welcome, Candle. Go back to work now and try not to leave any more dents in the granite, hm?" She left him staring at the far wall. Now that it had been pointed out to him he saw that his pebble had, indeed, taken a chip out of the stone panel of the lower wall. It was only a small chip, but quite visible when you knew where to look.

"Good thing I didn't hit plaster," he muttered before sitting back down. His next three attempts were wholly unsuccessful - he was too nervous after the damage he had done to the wall - but on the fourth he got the pebble to roll hesitantly around the floor. Each time he succeeded, the task became a bit easier and by dinnertime he was able to get the pebble to float up off the floor and into his hand with very little effort, although he still had trouble sustaining the spell once he opened his eyes. He trekked off to the dinner table planning to surprise Silverwind with his progress.

Most nights the mages dined at the high board with Lord Jason and Lady Galiena although Candle usual ate at one of the side tables with Michael and Cerdic. Candle entered the hall planning to float his pebble around the high board until Silverwind noticed, but when he got there he noticed that the mages were nowhere in sight and his usual dining companions were seated next to their older siblings

"Candle," Jason called him, "why don't you eat with us tonight? Your master and his colleagues won't be here and we have room for you. Besides I've already co-opted the company of your usual companions.

"Where's Silverwind?" Candle asked as he sat down.

"It's Quernday," Jason reminded him. "They expect another deer to die sometime aftermidnight, so they're out in a sourfruit orchard setting up a whole new set of wards."

"It's a shame," Galiena added, "that none of their preparations seemed to do much good last week. As I remember Oceanvine was quite testy about the whole thing after she was sure Jason would recover. She was certain that our presence in the area somehow upset the spells."

"Silverwind didn't think so," Jason commented. "He pointed out that we were both technically out of the warded area when that buck died, also out of that area. I think some of Oceanvine's temper was because she miscalculated where the deer would be."

"But it was where she expected it," Galiena countered. "While everyone was watching you, somebody moved the carcass to the right spot."

"Really? Nobody told me that."

"You've had a few other things on your mind lately," Galiena pointed out.

"So Silverwind was right about the location being the key to the curse. Well, at least we haven't had to worry about Denzell this past week. He was making a real pain of himself before he left."

"He was like that all the while you were gone," Galiena told him. "Did you know he actually told me that I should step down as Warden in favor of him?"

"You didn't, but Master Steuen did. Good thing he's been gone as much as he's been here. Speaking of

which I received a message saying he'd be back tomorrow."

"Why do we put up with him?" Galiena asked, shaking her head.

"He's family," Jason shrugged.

"How's it going with the rock, Candle?" Cerdic asked, using a pause in the conversation to change the subject. "Have you gotten it to move yet?"

"Like a shot," Candle replied somewhat ruefully. He explained about how he left a mark in the wall and apologized.

"That's all right, Candle," Jason told him with a smile. "We've all left a mark or two on the walls here at one point or another. At least you did it while doing something you were supposed to do. I did it one day while playing with a sword in my room."

"The hole is still in the wall too," Galiena laughed. "You should have seen him. As soon as he did it he came running to me to help him rearrange the furniture before anyone else found out. You know, Jase, you might want to have that fixed while you can."

"Show us how you did it," Cerdic requested of Candle.

Candle nervously put the stone on the table. "I'm still not very good at it," he warned them. *Something simple*, he thought. *Relax!* Candle pulled out the stone and placed it on the table in front of him. He closed his eyes and slowly repeated the self-hypnosis ritual by which he prepared himself to move the rock. When he finally achieved that stage he still hadn't decided what he meant to do with the rock, so he simply caused it to lift slowly off the table. A smattering of applause brought him back to the real world and when he open his eyes the pebble was floating at eye level. He was just about to allow himself a smile of satisfaction when the piece of quartz dropped back down toward the table, falling into his water glass, sending a small fountain of water upward.

His audience applauded again, thinking it was an intentional finale and he managed to cover his embarrassment with a small half-smile that he hoped looked suitably modest.

Fifteen

"Still raining," Silverwind complained. "I thought these tropical rains were supposed to clear up by evening." He was sitting with Oceanvine under the canvas roof that covered the back of the wagon they and Meadow had ridden in from Castle North. They had left shortly before the rain clouds moved in and erected the roof in haste. As a result the roof had developed several slow-dripping leaks, one of which was always where ever Silverwind chose to sit. An hour earlier Meadow had excused himself from Silverwind's company with the specious excuse that he wanted "to feel the rain", but the truth was that he was simply tired of listening to Silverwind complain.

"You could stop the rain if you wanted," Oceanvine teased him. Silverwind looked at her sourly. "Surely," she continued, "that would be a trivial feat for a great and puissant wizard of your renown."

"Vine," Silverwind replied, stressing the hated contraction of her name in such a way that she was glad he had not yet heard Candle call her "Seaweed", "I believe we had that discussion years ago."

"Sorry," she apologized quickly. Then she pressed on in a more serious manner. "It is possible, though, isn't it?"

"Most things are possible, Oceanvine," Silverwind replied absently. "What did you have in mind?"

"Weather control. The stories say you can control the weather."

"The stories are misleading," he replied. "It is theoretically possible to control the weather for limited amounts of time, but the most I've ever done is whip up a little wind."

"Whip up?"

"All right, it was sort of a tornado, except that there was no convection storm associated with it, just a lot of tightly spinning wind."

"That was on the Isle of Fire, wasn't it?"

"Aren't we inquisitive tonight?" he asked a little too sharply. At the sight of Oceanvine's hurt expression he relented as he so often did. "Yes, that was on the Isle of Fire. I was desperate and willing to try anything at that point. It nearly killed me. If it weren't for Windchime it probably would have. It wasn't particularly successful either."

"Tell me about it," Oceanvine requested softly.

A sheet of pain covered Silverwind's being and molded him to its own contours. He fought for control and won. Windchime - no, it was Geraint - had come to terms with this, but Silverwind had always tried to bury that part of his past with some amount of success. However he realized now that it was a story that Oceanvine, as his partner, should know.

"All right," he said at last so quietly that Oceanvine shifted herself closer to catch his every word. This was what she had been trying to find out from him for a long time. "The Isle of Fire. Picturesque name, is it not? It's a very cold place too. Most people don't realize that. The name 'Isle of Fire' makes it sound like the hottest place on Maiyim, but then most people know very little about geography and probably think the Granom and Bellinen Archipelagos are on completely different worlds.

"Anyway," he continued, "Windchime and I had been making quite a reputation for ourselves, as you know. Saving the grape crop on Khordel was just the start and that was while I was still a master and Windchime a journeyman. From there we went to Bellinen, solving a murder on Sanno, breaking up a drug ring on Lillo, an Aritos cult on Ponar and Tissa, and somewhere in between we took our exams at the Merinne University."

"Merinne?" Oceanvine asked. "I always thought you became a wizard at Randona."

"No, Merinne. I became a journeyman at Randona, a master at Querna, and a wizard at Merinne, The final exam, of course, was on one of the Five Demons, but the ceremony was held on my return. As far as I know, I'm the only magician to graduate from all three universities. Although that's no great feat. Most people just don't travel much, so it's easier to take all your advancement exams at the same university. I've taught at all three as well although not for very long. Well, after Merinne we started

hopping all over the globe; back to Emmine, over to Ellisto, Granom and Bellinen several times, although we mostly kept to Emmine. It was home after all. We were in great demand and actually had to turn down jobs - recommending colleagues who we felt might be up to whatever the situation might be. We were very full of ourselves.

"Have you ever noticed how most of the really powerful mages tend to live secluded lives, either out in the country like we've been the last few years or else holed up in a university? We found out why the hard way. There really are demons in the world, just like the old myths about the gods say. I don't know if they were really created by Aritos to do his evil on Maiyim or if there are only five. There have been evolutionary theories proposed to account for the development of the demons by natural, not supernatural means, and I've even met one theologian who claims that he has met Aritos and that he isn't the consumingly evil entity we've been taught."

"But the Bond of Aritos..."

"Did he create that sign or has it, because of its evil power, merely been assigned to him by us ignorant mortals. Perhaps if we ever meet Aritos - the rest of the gods forbid - we can ask him about it ourselves. Anyway this theologian claims that Aritos has always meant to do well, but things have always gone against him. If true, I suppose that Aritos could well stand for unfortunate coincidence, rather than total evil."

"Until we do meet him," Oceanvine replied, "if ever, I hope you won't mind if I continue to believe he is the quintessential devil."

"A very wise attitude," Silverwind told her. "In any case the demons are most certainly evil in every way you can imagine. They are also immortal and the most powerful magicians you would ever not want to meet. More than a match for me and Windchime in a fair fight, believe me."

"But you did destroy a demon."

"No, we defeated him and only just barely. We didn't fight fair - never give a demon an even break, trust me - and we didn't come out of it unscathed either. I have wounds that might never completely heal." He was silent for a few minutes having said that and Oceanvine waited patiently, knowing that he was still working up to telling the story.

"All right," Silverwind continued after several minutes. "Windchime and I were at the height of our careers and cocky as hell. We were good; make no mistake about that. We were the best available."

"Sounds like you haven't lost all that cockiness yet," Oceanvine noted.

"Maybe not," Silverwind admitted, "but I know my limits now. Anyway there are ways to detect the workings of powerful magic and the Demons know every last one of them. They watch for powerful new magicians and study them and if it turns out that we might be a threat to their own nefarious purposes, they do what they can to stop us."

"Windchime and I didn't know that at the time, but when a call for help came from the Isle of Fire we answered it. It played on our vanities. We were the only ones in the world who could help them. How could we have resisted praise like that? So we hopped the first ship out of Barmeport, which is where we were at the time, and sailed straight for the Isle of Fire. We didn't really believe that the problem was a demon. We didn't believe in demons; mere superstition we thought. There was, no doubt, another explanation for the pools of acid and the increased volcanic activity. We dismissed reports of demons in

the same way that most people dismiss ominous sightings."

"You were taking omens very seriously in Tarnsa," Oceanvine commented.

"With age sometimes comes wisdom," Silverwind replied. "True omens are rare, but any increase in non-normal activity is worth noting and there is often a connection, a root cause for all the abnormal activity. There were a lot of such sightings on the Isle of Fire, even more than we heard about in Tarnsa."

"The Isle of Fire," Oceanvine prompted him.

"Oh yeah. Well, we landed at Rjalkatyp, a mostly Granomish town, and almost immediately learned that nobody knew who had hired us. We nearly left right then, but the people pleaded with us to stay and promised to pay us whatever they could afford if we were unable to find the man who had hired us. So we started tracking down the demon. To this day I wish we had believed that the demon was real. If we had, maybe we could have prepared better. Certainly we'd have gone in with our defenses up.

"I won't bore you with the details, but we eventually caught up with the demon, if that's what you want to call it."

"The demon was the one who sent for you," Oceanvine guessed.

"You got it. And we strolled right into his trap like a pair of children on their way to a birthday party." He was silent again, lost in his memories. "The demon," he said some minutes later. "Don't believe all those wild stories you hear from the priests about creatures with great horns, leathery wings, and horrible fangs. And they most certainly are not made of living flame. I imagine they have individual differences, but this one, who called himself Arithan, was about seven feet tall with dark gray skin and brilliant red hair and his eyes were jet black. But aside from that he did not look all that different from any other person, more a combination of all. He was as tall as the tallest Orente and as proportionately strong as a Granom."

"What did he have in common with humans?"

"Not a lot," Silverwind replied.

"But you said..."

"Humans represent the mean between trolls and elves, while the demon has the best physical characteristics of both. He's almost our opposite in that respect, but it wasn't on the physical plain that we battled that time. It was his mind against Windchime's and mine. He sent us nightmares - hell-spawned dreams that raped our minds, invading our every thought - and we did anything and everything we could to try and stop him. The tornado was our most flamboyant attempt. It didn't do more than interrupt him for a few seconds, but it did put him on the run. The locals just assumed that it was the tornado that did the job."

"How did you defeat him then?"

"Well, he fell back to earth after the tornado picked him up and he went on a rampage destroying everything in sight, which in this case meant nearly the entire city of Rjalkatyp. Strangely enough that was the only real break we got. Don't look at me like that. While he was annihilating the city, we were able to at last go on the offensive.

"Between us, Windchime and I devised the plan that finally worked, not that it was all that easy. Arithan

had never stopped attacking us with nightmarish visions. Windchime and I nearly killed each other several times before we finally caught on. Anyway, Windchime and I took the opportunity while the demon was turning the town into kindling to cast a spell we still have no name for."

"What did it do?"

"Quite simply, it was a circularity. It used the magic power in every spell cast by the demon to neutralize those spells, or maybe it neutralized them because it stole all their power. I never did figure out which. We might have destroyed him, but in the confusion he got away. We thought we had won until we saw the destruction. We started using our magic to help put out the fires and heal wounds, but that was when we found out the truth about the nightmares; they too fed on the power of their victims. The more magic we used, the more intense the horrors became. Only when we used absolutely no magic for a few days could we get a decent night's sleep. We tried, for a while, to fight it together, but Windchime pointed out that as long as we were together, we would continue to use the magic that fueled the hellish dreams, so he left. At the time we promised to keep in touch, but that lasted only a few months, and when we lost contact with each other I went into seclusion.

"The initial effect faded after a few months, but the dreams continued to haunt us both on certain significant dates, most intensely on the anniversary of our encounter with the demon. Drinking seems to help a bit. Getting drunk doesn't actually stop the dreams, but it does deaden the sensation."

"That's why you drink so much," Oceanvine concluded.

"Only on the anniversary," Silverwind clarified, "and other times when the dreams threaten to return. Both Windchime and I drank before; it was our common interest in good ale that brought us together in the first place." Silverwind became silent and Oceanvine, not knowing what to say next sat thinking about what she had just learned.

Sixteen

Meadow returned to the wagon a few minutes later and found Silverwind and Oceanvine still sitting quietly each lost in his own thoughts.

"Hello," he greeted them softly. There was no response. "Hello?" he tried again a little louder.

"Oh, g'deen, Meadow," Oceanvine responded at last. "Did you just get here?"

"A minute ago, yes. What is going on here?"

"Just talking," Oceanvine replied.

Meadow looked at the motionless Silverwind and replied, "Talking? Right. How long has he been like this?"

"Don't know, my mind was wandering a bit."

"Silverwind?" Meadow called, giving him a small shake by the shoulder.

Silverwind began to glow - dimly at first, gradually brightening until he was surrounded by a bright sky-blue nimbus. "Ah, Meadow, my good friend!" he said from within. "How nice it is to see you. And you, dear child," he said to Oceanvine, "thank you. I haven't felt this well in years. How did you know I needed to tell that story?" Oceanvine's confusion showed. "Ah, you didn't know. No matter, it's done me a world of good."

"Silverwind, you're glowing," Oceanvine pointed out.

"Purely intentional," he laughed and the blue nimbus promptly winked out. "Oh, gods! What a release."

"It is nearly midnight," Meadow interrupted. "I think we should go to our stations." The others agreed and they split up as they had the week before.

Silverwind felt so good that when he reached his station on the northeast edge of the citrus grove he literally floated himself upward and sat on one of the larger branches of the tree. He cast a far-seer spell almost playfully. He had never admitted it, not even to Geraint and Oceanvine, the two closest people in his life, that ever since the Isle of Fire he had always experienced some form of mental agony whenever he used magic. It was only through his own will power and pure stubbornness that he had been able to endure it at first. Unwilling to give in to the anguish - damned if he would concede victory to the demon - he had forced himself to continue on. After a while the pain had become second nature to him, an old acquaintance he could tolerate, but now, for the first time in years there was only joy. Magic had once more become his personal toy and with it he could do practically anything.

Watch it, kid, he admonished himself. *That's precisely the sort of thinking that got you in trouble in the first place*. Even so, he was unable not to play just a bit. He felt too good not to.

The far-seer spell was the magical equivalent of a spyglass. With it he could get an expanded view of any visible object. The problem was that unlike a week earlier, when Midbar rose at sunset, it would not rise for another two hours yet and it was still too dark to see much. Not to be outwitted by an unthinking fact of nature, Silverwind altered the far-seer spell to convert infrared radiation to visible light.

"There," he chuckled, "that's more like it. A bit funny looking and fuzzy to boot, but..." *at least I have something to look at*, he finished the thought silently. Turning around he could see the warm glow where the horse and wagon stood. A little farther away he saw Oceanvine glowing almost as brightly as the horse where she stood at the edge of the warded area. Meadow was nowhere in sight, but there were a lot of trees between him and Silverwind. Looking out beyond the grove, Silverwind was able to make out widely scattered farmhouses and on the horizon, just over a low, wide hill, he saw the diffuse glow of Northtown.

I wonder what Adelulf is up to tonight, he thought. *Probably nothing good. I'd better check on him tomorrow or the next day. So far his information hasn't led anywhere, maybe he has something better by now.*

He continued scanning the surrounding area for another hour and was just getting bored with it when he spotted two men walking toward the grove about a hundred yards away. One was obese but of medium height and the other was taller and slimmer, but moved with a dancer's grace that suggested a finely honed musculature. In spite of the warm summer night, they were wearing hooded robes.

Silverwind thought of warning them off, but quickly changed his mind. He had expected the rogue magician to show up with a deer in tow since there were presently none in the area, but soon realized that

they might be intending to summon one in some way. No problem, Oceanvine's ward would stun the two as soon as they attempted to cross it. This time they made sure that there was no one within the area before casting their spells, although Jason and Galiena had been technically out of the warded area when the deer had died the previous week. This time they extended the size of the warded area in the hope of stopping the enemy mage before he completed his work.

Silverwind quietly watched as the two men walked up to the wards and passed through them as though they were not there. It was not his usual practice to call anything he witnessed for himself impossible, but this once he made an exception. Nobody should have been able to do that.

Okay, Silverwind thought as he floated himself back down out of the tree, *so much for established theory. Time for Plan B, whatever that is*, he added. In lieu of a plan he followed the pair while trying to figure out how to signal Oceanvine and Meadow.

Without warning the mysterious pair ahead of him stopped in their tracks. Silverwind froze and pondered the state of being in a vacuum for good measure. The two figures turned around and stared behind then intently. Silverwind was aware that his far-seer spell was still in operation, but could not get a clear look at their faces. Finally, the two started forward again, having failed to spot Silverwind behind them.

Silverwind stayed still a moment to make sure they weren't going to stop again to try and trip him up. They did and then with a shrug visible through the wizard's spell they continued on. This cycle was repeated twice more at random intervals. Silverwind countered that by levitating himself and following them in the air. Self-levitation was a variant on the spell he had taught Candle, but far more complex and difficult to maintain. It was also considered quite dangerous as failure to maintain concentration would bring the unsuccessful mage crashing disastrously to the ground.

This ploy worked fairly well, but only for another five minutes when Silverwind's tunic got caught on the thorns of a nearby branch of a sourfruit tree. The sourfruit thorns were in a bad mood that night. As soon as Silverwind managed to extricate one part of his tunic another part was snagged. It took every ounce of willpower he had not to swear out loud from the minor pain and frustration. By the time he was finally free of the thorns, the two men had eluded him.

Oh well, Silverwind thought, *no help for it*. With a casual gesture he sent a spectacular but essentially harmless fireworks spell up into the sky. *If that doesn't alert Meadow and Vine, nothing will*.

Oceanvine saw the brilliant flash of red light in the sky following by a roaring boom, but had very little notion as to what it meant. Obviously it was a signal, but of what and who sent it? The wards would warn her if they worked as planned so she moved in from the perimeter to investigate.

Meadow, as was usual, used the slack time to take a nap. The wards were supposed to wake him up and a nap would allow him to be most alert when things started happening. Silverwind's fireworks were, however, only a minor annoyance, which, with a sleepy gesture and thought, Meadow managed to silence with a ten-minute delay spell before rolling over and returning to his latest perambulation through dreamland.

Oceanvine walked briskly through the neatly planted rows of fruit trees looking in all directions for anything unusual or unexpected. She caught sight of a strange yellow-green light off to her right. Carefully she moved closer to get a better look and as she watched, the unwholesome-looking light slowly changed shape from a globe into that of a deer. Near the light were two men in hooded robes. Oceanvine was unable to see their faces but there was something about them she found vaguely familiar.

As she watched, the deer-shaped light darkened and went out, leaving a perfect doe behind in its place. Then the fat man raised his right arm and, after a slight flinch that looked like he was in some pain, pointed at the doe.

Oceanvine saw the glowing Bond of Aritos form on the flank of the doe, just as Jason had described it. Knowing she had to do something, she quickly sat down and went into a trance. She knew that Silverwind would have been more creative in this situation, but on the spur of the moment she could only think of disrupting the ritual going on in front of her. She worked a displacement spell, intending to slam both men as hard as she could into the thorny trees around them. As she did this, however, she immediately felt something was wrong and, before she could react, felt herself flying through the air. This sensation lasted only a fraction of a second after which she didn't feel much of anything for a while.

As Oceanvine lost consciousness, a disturbance rippled through the surrounding wards, waking Meadow up. Instantly alert, he sensed that the wards had lost a full third of their strength and quickly pinpointed the source of this power loss. Meadow did not normally run, it wasn't in his nature, but he did so now. Speed was clearly of the essence.

Silverwind also felt the wards lose power as Oceanvine collapsed. He was already going in the right direction, but now he threw caution to the wind in the hopes of arriving in time. Charging down the path, he nearly over-shot the location of the stricken doe and the two mysterious men who lifted it almost effortlessly. He stopped short, slipping on the wet grass and falling on his side. A shooting pain traveled up his left arm as he tried to raise himself on it. He nearly passed out, but managed to keep a stranglehold on consciousness as he rolled to his right and got up from that side just in time to see the two men illuminated by the light of Midbar which had only just climbed into the night sky of North Horalia, but before he was able to stop them, they faded out and disappeared.

Meadow ran up just then. "What happened?" he asked breathlessly.

Silverwind told him what he had seen. "Where's Vine?" he added.

"I have not seen her," Meadow replied and together they searched for her.

"Here she is," Silverwind called a minute later. "She seems to have made a bad enemy of this tree."

"Let me see," Meadow said shortly as he came running up. Silverwind deferred to his colleague knowing that he was better at healing spells. "Minor concussion and some contusions. I would say that she was thrown against this tree."

"Accident?"

"I doubt that. Oceanvine, for all the bad habits she has picked up in her association with you, does not impress me as being so clumsy as to throw herself backward against a tree, nor athletic enough to accidentally hit it two feet above the ground."

"Two feet? How can you tell? No, never mind, I see it now. Some of her hair caught on the upper trunk. How much can you do for her?"

"Most of the healing, actually. She will be a little stiff tomorrow, but should be fine by noon. Her injuries are far less severe than Lord Jason's were, and I am sure she will use magic to speed her recovery still more. There," he said after a brief pause. "She ought to wake up in a moment."

"Oh," Oceanvine moaned softly then opened her eyes. "Are they gone?"

"Sorry to say it, but yes," Silverwind replied. "How are you feeling?"

"Pretty stupid. I attacked before completely assessing the enemy's power."

"What happened?"

"I saw the fireworks. Was that some sort of signal?" Silverwind nodded.

"What fireworks?" Meadow asked. "I never noticed."

"Sleeping again?" Silverwind asked dryly. Meadow nodded, abashed.

"Silverwind," Oceanvine interrupted before they could start in on another of their fights, "next time we are going to have to work out our signals in advance. I didn't have any idea of what I was to look for."

"I was a bit preoccupied at the time," Silverwind admitted. "I'll tell you about it later."

"Okay." Oceanvine went on to describe her own experiences. "Wish I'd thought of a reversal spell of my own," she concluded.

"No you don't," Silverwind corrected her. "The power would have kept bouncing back and forth, building up an enormous potential that wouldn't have been released until one of you cracked. From what I can tell, you were maintaining more spells than he was so if his defenses were only slightly stronger than yours, the backlash might have been fatal."

"I never thought of that," Oceanvine admitted, "but it might have given me some reaction time, wouldn't it?"

"Maybe, but let's not go back and find out."

"Suits me. May I stand up?" Oceanvine asked. Meadow nodded and helped her up. "Thank you. Now, why didn't we detect those two? Were they here before we cast the wards, and if they were, why didn't we find them?" Silverwind told his story then.

"Impossible!" Meadow scoffed.

"I had that same thought," Silverwind told him. "Changed my mind, however. The evidence was a little too compelling to ignore."

"But how? I'd have thought it would take the power of a god to get through the wards undetected..." Meadow's voice trailed off in horror.

"I doubt it," Silverwind disagreed with Meadow's unvoiced conclusion. "Aritos is the only god who might do such a thing, and if He did I doubt He would choose to work incognito. Who could stop a god?"

"Another god," Oceanvine put in.

"The gods haven't been directly involved with life on Maiyim these last few millennia, at least not very often and not on a wide scale, and that includes Aritos. No, I'm more inclined to believe that one of those

men was a wizard-class mage, maybe both were. If they expected wards, they could have detected them well enough in advance and set up some sort of counter spell."

"Could you?" Meadow asked skeptically.

"I think so."

"Then you will prove it before I believe."

"All right. How do you propose I prove it?"

"Tomorrow Oceanvine and I will set up wards of an undetermined number and nature and sometime during the afternoon you will attempt to navigate them without setting any of them off." Oceanvine nodded her agreement with the terms of Meadow's proposal. If Silverwind said he could do it, she believed him, but she still wanted to see it for herself.

"An interesting contest," Silverwind replied with more confidence than he felt. "You're on! Care to put any stakes to the wager?"

Seventeen

"You'll have to pardon me," Jason said nervously, "if I confess that I am starting to get scared."

"Only starting?" Silverwind asked from across the dark wooden breakfast table. "It's been terrifying me since you arrived in Renton."

Breakfasts in Castle North were a flexible affair. As often as not Silverwind had his served in bed, but they also served as a good informal way to update Jason on the progress of their investigation. This morning they were eating on the large flagstone patio just off the kitchen. Jason and Galiena were sitting at an improvised high board with Silverwind, Oceanvine, and Candle and various other castle denizens were seated around nearby tables. Neither Silverwind nor Oceanvine had much sleep before finding their way to breakfast, but of the trio only Meadow had chosen to sleep in after the long night. Silverwind and Oceanvine had too many things to do this day aside from the wager Silverwind had made with Meadow.

"Up until now," Jason replied, "this whole affair has seemed unreal. As though it was just a bad dream that I would wake up from soon. I mean look at what's been going on; pirates, sea monsters, dragons, omens, and evil magicians. It's the stuff fairy tales are made of."

"Let's just hope," Oceanvine told him, "that we'll all live happily ever after when we wake up." The others all nodded.

"Agreed," Jason replied, "but now, by your own reckoning, this great curse will be completed by this time next week and we don't even know what it will do when that happens."

"I'm hoping to find our enemy mages before next week. If they are unable to complete the curse on

schedule, they will have to start over from the beginning, assuming they survive the encounter."

"Also assuming they are both magicians," Oceanvine corrected him. "One might be only a servant."

"I would rather put them on trial and execute them publicly," Jason pointed out. "That would put the people's minds at rest."

"We aren't likely to have that option. Knowing their fate if captured, they will probably fight to the end," Silverwind opined. "For that matter I don't know that I would trust chains and binding spells to be able to hold them. They couldn't hold me. If you give them a fair trial you will need to give them the right to defend themselves and if they have that ability, they can use magic to escape as well. No, we will be much better off if we don't have to give them that chance."

"You would slaughter them so ruthlessly?" Galiena asked uncomfortably.

"Probably, yes. The one thing I haven't mentioned as yet, because I have no proof to support me, is that I strongly suspect our enemy is attempting to summon a demon. It's a damned stupid thing to do, literally, but great power does not, by itself, bring wisdom. Demons are not reliably controllable, nor are they generally reputed to be capable of gratitude."

"Will you be able to stop a demon should our enemy manage to summon one?" Jason asked.

"If we can't," Silverwind replied, "no one can. I learned a lot on the Isle of Fire. Admittedly most of what I learned was what wouldn't work, but I've had years to reconsider what I did there."

"And you did drive off that demon," Oceanvine pointed out.

"I did, but there's no guarantee that the same ploy will work again. In fact, there are stories - just folk legend, mind you - that say that nothing would stop a demon twice. We'll see. In the meantime I plan to make finding and stopping the two men we saw last night my first priority."

"Oh?" asked Oceanvine. "Backing out of your bet with Meadow?"

"Not at all. Duplicating that feat I witnessed last night will tell us a lot about our opponent."

"What bet was this?" Jason asked.

"Silverwind says he can find a way to pass undetected through wards like we set up last night," Oceanvine explained, "and Meadow doesn't believe a word of it, So Meadow and I are going to set up some wards later today which Silverwind has to negotiate."

"Sounds interesting," Jason commented. "Will we get to watch?"

"You may if you like," Silverwind shrugged, "but it really won't be all that interesting to watch. I'll have the better part of the afternoon to make the attempt and I'm not saying exactly when."

"That reminds me," Oceanvine said. "When do you want to start and where?"

"Good question. I have to go into town this morning, but I should be back shortly after lunch. Have your wards up by then and sometime within two hours of my return I will walk on through them. As for where, it will probably be safest to put them on the door to my room." Oceanvine nodded. "Now, Candle,"

Silverwind continued, "do you have any news for us, or did you put that rock on the table just to admire it?"

Candle looked up guiltily. He had put the milky quartz pebble, repair and all, on the table while deciding how to surprise his master, but he had hoped no one had noticed it yet. He nodded a quick affirmation to Silverwind's question and concentrated on the pebble. He hadn't noticed that the exercise had gotten all that easier with repetition since he first figured out how to do it, but he no longer doubted his ability. After the usual ritual, the pebble rose and slowly traced a circle around the table. Then Candle held his hand out and, when the stone had completed its orbit, he caught it as it dropped. Self-satisfied he looked smugly to Silverwind for the expected praise.

"Excellent, Candle!" Silverwind lauded. "Next I want you to do the same thing with two pebbles."

"Two?" Candle's mouth dropped open. "At the same time?"

"That's the idea. You got it!"

Candle sighed dramatically and Silverwind chuckled at his reaction.

"That's what learning is all about," Oceanvine told him gently. "Each lesson gets harder than the last. Eventually you'll have trouble remembering why you found this first one so difficult."

Candle didn't believe her, but occupied with the problem of controlling two objects at once, he merely nodded absently. A moment later he realized that he was the only one still seated and that everyone but Silverwind was leaving the patio area. Breakfast was over.

"Candle," Silverwind called to him. "Coming?"

"Where?"

"Into town. I have to talk to Adelulf again."

"Okay." Candle stood up and replaced the pebble in his pocket. "Should I change back into scruffies again?"

"Not necessary," Silverwind told him. "You've already managed to convince him that you're actually from a reasonably prosperous family. We might as well show him the picture he expects to see. Can you ride a horse?"

"I can lift a pebble," Candle replied. "Is it harder than that?"

"No, but I don't think this is the time to further that part of your education." Candle looked disappointed. "But," the wizard continued, "you should have your friend Cerdic give you a few riding lessons while you are here. They might come in handy later. Come on. We'll borrow one of the duke's coaches instead. Always pays to make a good impression."

Jason agreed when Silverwind caught up to him and a short time later Silverwind and Candle stepped out of the coach and walked boldly up to Adelulf's door.

"Whew!" Candle exclaimed. "It's hot out here."

"I was keeping the interior comfortably cool," Silverwind confessed. "I've been living in the mountains in a cooler area for some years now and I'm still not used to the heat, especially in a hot box like that contraption."

"Will you teach me that spell too?"

"When you're ready."

"When will that be?"

"That depends on how quickly you learn everything else I have to teach you, and I warn you - much of what you have to learn has only peripheral connections with casting spells. More about this later. Okay?" Candle nodded and Silverwind lifted his hand to raise the large brass doorknocker.

However, before his fingers could mar the perfectly polished surface, the door opened to reveal two of Adelulf's men. "Tha boss'll see ya in his office," one of them grunted and pointed the way.

Adelulf was seated behind his desk just as he had been during his first meeting with Silverwind. In fact, the only difference that Silverwind could detect was that Adelulf was wearing a different tunic, one of black silk that made him blend in with his dismal surroundings.

Black, thought Silverwind, *is only at its most effective when adequately set off by lighter colors*.

"Wizard, apprentice," Adelulf greeted them both pleasantly. "To what do I owe this delightful surprise?"

"Just wondering if you have any new information for us, Adelulf," Silverwind replied. "So far what you've told us hasn't been of much help. Every time we look for the people you pointed us at, they seem to have disappeared shortly before we got there. It's all very disappointing as I'm sure you'll agree."

Adelulf looked deeply disturbed. He was a consummate actor so Silverwind could not be sure, but it seemed as though Adelulf was truly sincere. "That is a problem," Adelulf agreed. "I assure you that there have been no leaks at my end as far as I know. I will, of course double-check that. Have you considered a possible traitor at the castle?"

"Do you have anyone in mind?"

"What do I know of castle politics?" Adelulf shrugged.

"If you don't know," Candle interrupted, "you're the only man in your position who doesn't."

Adelulf looked hard at Candle for a moment. What would a well brought-up child of his age know of such things? Last time he had thought that Candle was acting a part, now he wondered. *Would the wizard apprentice a street urchin? Not bloody likely*, he decided. That sort of thing did not fit into his picture of how things were in the world.

"All right," Adelulf conceded at last, "I do try to keep track of the intrigues of the court, but they have been an amazingly close-mouthed bunch up on the hill lately. I imagine that you have a better idea of what's happening there than I do.

"So you have nothing new to offer us?" Silverwind asked.

"I am afraid that is so. However, I will have my men ask around again and we'll see what turns up. I'm hoping to find their headquarters very soon. Maybe my boys can set them all to running."

"Don't move in on your own," Silverwind warned. "You couldn't handle them, not the bosses anyway."

Adelulf smiled as though he was capable of seeing a joke nobody else understood. "I think you underestimate my resources and business contacts," he replied smoothly.

"I don't," Silverwind stated flatly, "but you do underestimate what we're up against. This is not some little nut group that gets its jollies from sacrificing the occasional barnyard animal or household pet. Last night I saw some real power being exercised. Power so great that I am still trying to figure out how they did what they did."

"Oh? And what was that?" Adelulf asked skeptically.

"They neutralized one of my spells. One I always thought was fool-proof."

Adelulf swallowed hard. "I'm impressed. I've heard stories about just what wizards were supposed to be able to do."

"Probably all wrong," Silverwind shot back. "I've heard those stories too. Wizards are not the gods, we're quite mortal, but you're right in being impressed. We are impressive when we want to be."

"Have you considered that maybe this mage you saw last night just happens to know a spell you don't."

"Yes, I have considered that, and I sincerely hope that it is the case."

"And if it isn't?" Adelulf asked.

"Don't ask."

Eighteen

Silverwind's pace measured the corridor outside his room. The door to his room had been left wide open. It was his only overt clue that Oceanvine and Meadow had been there. It was also the only nasty trick they had not set up for him. Had they truly wanted to trip him up, they would have left the door closed, not only hiding all evidence of the wards behind it, but set to trip them as he opened it. Fortunately that was not the purpose of this wager.

There were several understood rules of this game that had never been expressed, but nevertheless had been observed. Oceanvine and Meadow did not set the door to trip the wards before Silverwind could detect them so consequently he would not levitate up the outside wall and enter the room through the window, a move that might otherwise have been considered fair. No, the understanding was that he could study the wards freely for several hours just as the enemy mages had the opportunity to do, but once he started his attempt to pass through the wards, he must do so at a steady walking pace and enter his room without hesitation. He could not see them, but he assumed that Oceanvine and Meadow were waiting silently for him just inside.

Silverwind stopped his pacing and sat down on a nearby bench and considered the problem. Meadow and Oceanvine had not hidden their work, but they did make the wards more complex than the ones that had shielded the citrus grove. With only a small doorway to block rather than a large area, they had the ability to get truly ornate. *A magical ward - a specialized form of trigger spell*, he remembered from his university days, *is a shaped field of energy which, when interrupted, would activate another spell. All I have to do is walk through these without letting them think they've been interrupted. How?*

He slipped into a trance to study the wards more closely. They became quite visible in his mind's eye. Two wards were curtain-types, even fields with no apparent pattern. Sandwiched between them was a series of vertical bars and another of horizontal bars and interwoven through both types of bars was a ward that looked like an artistic rendering of ivy, leaves and all. Nasty. Silverwind thought he detected Oceanvine's touch there, but it had to be Meadow who set up the subtlest trap. Inside the horizontal and vertical bars were hidden another series of bars. Silverwind probed deeply but decided that he had found all the wards. Now to analyze them.

The two curtain wards were just auditory alarms. Each of the bar wards triggered different spells; stun, paralysis, blindness, and one normally humorous one - a compulsion to jump up and down while singing the "Happy Elf Song". Silverwind laughed at that one and almost forgot to check the spell locked up in the ivy ward; slow poison. Definitely Oceanvine's hand there; Meadow would have been more subtle.

He could counter the auditory alarms by simply suppressing all sound in the immediate area, but that wouldn't help at all with the others. The bars, he might be able to push gently aside with a temporary adjustment spell and then squeeze through except that the ivy ward was holding them too firmly together and plugging up too many holes. Besides, the two last night just walked straight through. They never had to squeeze between the bars. No, there had to be a simple way through. Well, maybe not simple, but a single spell that would neutralize all the wards at once. The interlacing of the middle spells was just too complex to handle it one layer at a time.

Silverwind stood up and started pacing again. The afternoon was wearing on and he still didn't know how he was going to pass the wards without disturbing them.

Reasoning that a change of venue might help and certainly wouldn't hurt, he turned left at the end of the corridor instead of heading back toward the room. Two more turns brought him to the pleasantly cool alcove where Candle was still trying to mentally lift two stones at once. Careful not to disturb him, Silverwind watched for a moment. Candle had gotten fairly comfortable at moving a single light object. First one object would rise from the bench where Candle had placed them, but as soon as he tried to move the second one, the first would fall back down. Silverwind was impressed that the boy had actually lifted the pebble. The original lesson was only to move it. Silverwind had planned to assign lifting as the next lesson, but Candle had already accomplished that on his own, an auspicious start.

"Damn!" Candle swore.

"Have you tried to move both at once?" Silverwind asked.

Candle jumped slightly, startled by Silverwind's seemingly sudden appearance. "I did," Candle admitted, "but then they only move together. I want them to move separately."

"Independent of each other," Silverwind clarified.

"Right," Candle agreed in a tone that actually said, "That's what I said." Silverwind nodded. Once more the boy had anticipated his next lesson. Most apprentices would have been satisfied merely by moving the two stones at once, but Candle seemed to realize that the real exercise would only be mastered when both objects could be controlled by two discrete sets of commands. *Should I tell him?* Silverwind wondered and then decided not to. It would take Candle a few more days to master this lesson and explaining might only encourage lazy thinking. Candle was right. The two objects are independent of each other and therefore should be controlled that way.

The late afternoon sun streamed in through the alcove window, striking Silverwind in the face with its waning brilliance. He closed his eyes against the blinding glare and then opened them again as the experience inspired him.

"Transparency!" He shouted, turning on his heels and heading back toward his room. "That's it!"

Candle remained behind wondering whether his master had just given him a clue. He picked up the repaired piece of milky quartz and looked through the clear middle section trying to decide if there was some way to use it to pick up two pebbles.

Silverwind rushed back to his room. It seemed so simple. All he had to do was to become transparent to the magic wards. As he approached the final turn before his door, however, he stopped short. *Now how am I going to do that?*

Without the benefit of a trance he set up a quick curtain ward across the corridor in front of him. Then he imagined the forces of that ward flowing through him and stepped forward. The result was almost anticlimactic. Nothing happened. He dissolved the simple ward and returned to his doorway.

It couldn't be that simple, could it? he thought, studying the seven wards across his door way. *Flow through. That's the key. I knew how the energy flowed through my own ward. All I have to do is figure out how it flows here and make certain that I don't inhibit the flow.*

Silverwind sat cross-legged on the floor once more and, trance-assisted, studied the wards. There was very little rhyme or reason to the flow of energy in Oceanvine's and Meadow's wards. The energy in the curtain wards flowed conveniently vertically, but spiraled its way through the bars and flowed back and forth like a high-speed tide along the shape of the ivy ward.

Total transparency, Silverwind thought. *Just go with the flow.* He mentally braced himself as he stood and, still partially entranced, he stepped forward. *It's only life.* He felt a slight tingle as he stepped through, but nothing more.

"What took you so long?" Oceanvine asked lightly as he stepped into the room and opened his eyes. "You almost lost the bet on the time limit." She and Meadow were seated at a small table with a pile of game tiles and a pitcher of iced fruit juice between them. Oceanvine's expression was one of amusement, but Meadow was staring incredulously at Silverwind.

"Oh," Silverwind replied tongue in cheek, "I just thought I'd make as dramatic an entrance as possible.

"How?" started Meadow. "How did you do it?"

"Quite simple really," Silverwind shrugged and then actually answered his colleague's question.

"It doesn't sound all that simple to me," Oceanvine commented. Meadow nodded.

"Well it did take all the concentration I could muster," Silverwind admitted, "but you must admit that the basic theory is both sound and simple."

"Maybe," she allowed.

"Why don't you try it for yourself?" Silverwind suggested.

"On that?" she asked pointing at the complex structure of wards across the door.

"Something simpler, perhaps. Drop those wards." Oceanvine and Meadow worked in concert to drop them safely. Merely releasing them might have produced an unpleasant or even dangerous backlash of power. "All right," Silverwind continued, "now try this," and he raised a simple curtain ward.

Oceanvine closed her eyes and, a few moments later, hesitantly got to her feet and stepped through the magical curtain.

"Oh!" she gasped, jumping in shock. "You goosed me," she accused Silverwind.

"Would you have rather it was slow poison?" he replied mildly. She was wisely silent. "Try it again." She did, with the same results.

"Let's see you do it," she demanded.

Silverwind walked through the ward without saying a word and then walked back again. "Keep trying," he suggested.

She did twice more, each time with the same results. "If I have trouble sitting down tonight," she warned Silverwind, "I may never forgive you." Then she got a stubborn gleam in her eye and tried it once more. Finally she made it through unscathed.

"Well, Meadow?" Silverwind asked mildly. "Care to have a go at it?"

"No thank you, Silverwind, I would rather go to dinner now.

"Very well. Oceanvine?" He offered her his arm and together they walked through the still erect ward, waiting to hear Meadow's yelp as he followed them. They did not have long to wait.

Nineteen

"Explain it to me again," Oceanvine demanded softly.

"What?" That was Silverwind.

"Explain to me what we are doing, dressed in dirty, worn-out clothes, sitting in a smelly, run-down tavern in one of the worst parts of town, and pretending to drink and enjoy some of the worst watered-down ale in the world."

"We're watching that building across the street."

"I got that part the first time around," Oceanvine told him, voice dripping with vitriol. "Why?"

"Because Adelulf says that is the main meeting house of the local Aritos cult."

"Go on. Why are we just watching it? Do you expect it to get up and dance around the square?"

Silverwind rolled his eyes theatrically and briefly studied the battered, termite-infested ceiling. "We are watching the building to see how much activity is going on there," he explained.

"We've been here all afternoon and so far there hasn't been any activity at all."

"So what does that tell us?" Silverwind prompted maddeningly.

"Let's see. It could mean that the occupants of that building are taking the day off. It could mean that they are all night-stalking ghouls, waiting until the last hated rays of the sun disappear before they shamle outward, and it could also mean that the damned building is empty and Adelulf has handed us yet another worthless lead!" Oceanvine's voice had gradually risen from a just over a whisper until she was nearly shouting. She was too angry to notice, but at the mention of Adelulf's name, Silverwind noticed that most of the others in the crowd turned and studied them closely. He casually wondered whether they were still in Adelulf's self-proclaimed area or whether they were now in one of his "competitors'" districts.

"Would you rather we just barged on in there?" he asked.

"It wouldn't be as boring."

"Oceanvine," Silverwind told her in an uncharacteristically stern voice, "I would have thought you had learned your lesson the other night. We're up against a major power here. We can't afford mistakes especially since if we fail now, there isn't time for anyone else to come in and save the day. We're it! If we fail, a major evil will flourish in North Horalia. This is not the time to take unnecessary chance."

Oceanvine was visibly chastened. "All right. So what's your plan?"

"I say we should go on over to that building and check it out," he replied lightly.

"But you said..."

"I know, but we aren't likely to learn anything else by sitting here. The difference is that you would have gone in first and might have been killed in the attempt if there was somebody waiting for us. I, on the other hand, sat back and waited to make sure that the building is as deserted as it seems. Let's go." They got up and left the grimy tavern behind.

"How do we know there isn't someone inside waiting for us?" Oceanvine asked as they crossed the street.

"I don't, or at least not for a certainty. But none of my search spells have turned up any signs of life, but there are easy ways to shield against that. I also think that we might have notice someone moving around in there by now. Keep your guard up, however."

"You sure you want to go in the front way?"

"There you go," Silverwind commended Oceanvine. "Now you're starting to think a little more deviously. However, no, we'll use the front door this time. The way I see it, if there is someone shielding their presence then they already know we're out here. We won't be surprising them in any case. And if there isn't anyone around, then maybe we can look like we belong here." So saying, he reached for the door and tried to open it. It was locked. "We could use Candle's abilities about now."

"You're the one who wants to look like he belongs here," Oceanvine countered. "How legitimate would we appear, picking the lock?"

"Good point. Let's walk around back. At least there we can force our way in without attracting too much attention."

The back door, accessed from a narrow alley, proved to be just as secure as the front, except that here, at least, there was no one in sight to see Silverwind magically pull the door off its crude hinges.

"That was subtle," Oceanvine commented dryly.

"Let's just get in and out of here before anyone notices."

They made their way quickly into the rotting half-timbered building, holding their noses against a collection of foul stench, too homogeneously mixed up for them to tell apart even if they were so inclined. The reek became less noisome as they left the back room and closed the door behind them.

"Must be the garbage dump," Silverwind muttered softly. Oceanvine nodded.

Together they searched the downstairs rooms but aside from finding random bits indicating that someone had been living there, which could have just as easily been homeless people taking refuge at night as an illegal Aritos cult, there was nothing to be found. They climbed the creaking stairway to the second and top floor. It was as though they had entered an entirely different building.

The floors, where the wood showed between exquisitely woven carpets, were made of white-stained and highly polished oak, each board expertly fitted to the next without enough room for a single hair to slip between them. The ceilings were freshly painted and the walls were covered with expensive paper. The suite of rooms would have fit in Castle North as well as it was out of place in this antiquated slum.

"Not bad," Oceanvine commented. "I wonder who does their decorating. Are we looking for anything specific?"

"No. Anything that might help. Let's split up; we can cover the place faster that way." The sun was diving toward the southwestern horizon by the time they had finished their search.

"Find anything?" Silverwind asked as they met again at the top of the stairs.

"Uh huh!" Oceanvine replied, tossing a heavy gold ring at the wizard.

Silverwind caught it deftly and examined it. The heavy lines of the gaudy trinket were embossed with an ornate knot-work design. On the top was a cloisonné disk bearing an heraldic emblazon.

"The ducal arms!" Silverwind exclaimed. "So Adelulf was right, there is someone at the castle behind all

this. It's not a signet, though, so there isn't any official backing here."

"Denzell," Oceanvine said flatly. "I found several documents bearing his signature." She waved a few pieces of paper before storing them away in a pocket.

"Hm. This ring is enchanted."

"Charming," Oceanvine couldn't quite get that out with a straight face. "What does it do? Shoot balls of fire?"

"No, it appears to be some sort of binding spell. A sort of unwholesome variant on the apprentice spell, and the string is uncut, which means we can follow it to whomever this ring belongs to."

"I told you, Silverwind, it's Denzell."

"Maybe, maybe not. He was supposedly out of the duchy during many of the Arsdays incidents. It could be someone using his name like that servant of his."

"Hiram? I'm not sure he's smart enough."

"That could be an act. Why would Denzell leave his ring here? It's just as likely it was stolen. In any case, this ring will lead us to the real culprit." There was a creaking sound from downstairs.. "Did you hear something?"

"Someone just came in. We'd better get moving."

"Wait a minute. Let's see who it is."

As the two magicians watched, four figures - three men and a woman - could be seen approaching the stairs. They were not richly dressed, but their clothes were in good condition and cleaned and pressed. They looked like well-off merchants. As the newcomers started walking up the stairs, Silverwind motioned to Oceanvine that they should back up. Soon they were trapped in one of the second story rooms when they heard a voice from another room.

"Hey! Someone's been in here!"

"This place is a mess."

"Quick, whoever it was might still be here."

"Time to leave," Silverwind whispered, opening a window. He stepped outside and levitated in place. "Need a lift?"

"Just the opposite," Oceanvine returned as she climbed out the window, put her arms around the wizard, and held on while trying hard not to think of how she would look in only two dimensions.

"You know, you're heavier than you look," Silverwind grumbled as they drifted slowly back down to ground level.

"Maybe you're just not as strong as you think." They floated down until Silverwind's feet gently touched the ground and Oceanvine disengaged herself.

"There they are!" a man's voice shouted from above. "Get them!"

"Terrific," Silverwind and Oceanvine harmonized.

"Your choice," Oceanvine shrugged. "Do we fight or run?"

"We have a fair head start," Silverwind replied. "Let's try running." He matched his actions to his words and Oceanvine followed close behind. Five minutes later they had sprinted a winding path two-dozen blocks long and were starting to run out of wind. "I have got to get in better shape," he gasped. Oceanvine had similar thoughts, but kept them to herself. "Are they still following us?"

"They're about three blocks back and closing," Oceanvine reported.

"Maybe we can lose them in this alley."

"It might be a dead end."

"I hope so. Come on." They ran down the narrow, garbage-clogged passage and, as Oceanvine had predicted, found a tall wooden wall at the end.

"Be careful what you wish for," Oceanvine said ruefully. "Well, you got your wish. Now what?"

"Stand very still up against that wall and don't make a noise until I tell you to."

"Why?"

"Sh!"

Oceanvine did her best statue imitation and a moment later everything went black. She felt a brief flash of panic course through her, starting at the tips of her toes and fingers and converging on her brain. However it was only a token nod to the claustrophobia locked within her soul and she quickly recovered when she realized that the only reason she couldn't breathe was that she was holding her breath.

"Where are they?" she heard one of the pursuers say from ten feet away at most.

"They came down this alley," another voice said a little closer. "I'd put my life on it."

"Damn that. They must be hiding in here somewhere. Start turning over boxes. We'll find them." The sounds of their search continued for almost fifteen minutes during which Oceanvine remained blind. It felt like an eternity but she fought back the incredible urge to cast a light spell.

"Face it," the first voice grumbled. "We've lost them."

"I think you're right. Damn it all."

Oceanvine listened patiently as the sound of two men walking gradually faded away. The blackness, however, remained for another two minutes until a third voice said, "Too bad. We'd better get back too." and another two pairs of feet could be heard walking away. Another two minutes later Oceanvine could see again.

"That's a relief," she sighed as her eyes adjusted to the only relatively brighter light in the dark alley.

"Sorry, but I didn't have time to warn you. It can be pretty frightening the first time that happens."

"What did you do?" she asked, professional curiosity taking precedence over irritation.

"Simple illusion spell. I took the image of the wall behind us and projected it to about a foot in front. The problem is that the illusion blocks out all available light so if you happen to be inside, you can't see anything."

"Where did you learn that one?"

"University. I got caught sneaking out after curfew one evening and used the same trick to fool the professor who chased me. At the time I thought I'd be blind permanently."

"I know the feeling," Oceanvine shivered.

"Fortunately I was wrong."

"That does happen from time to time, I notice," she snapped.

"Problem?"

"I suppose not. I'm still a bit edgy from the enforced darkness. I'll be better in a minute or so. Back to the castle now?"

"Maybe. It occurs to me we should follow the string of this binding spell while we can. When they discover that it's missing, they're bound to cut it themselves. Want to reel in the slack?"

"I've never done that sort of thing before," she replied reluctantly. "If it's as tricky as you say it is, perhaps I should leave it to your greater experience."

"I've only done it once."

"What?"

"Well, it isn't the sort of thing one normally has to do. I knew it could be done in theory, but the time we went searching for Candle was the first time I ever had the occasion to try it."

"Since you put it that way, yes, I'll do it. How?"

"It's sort of like reeling in a fishing line, except that you have control over the entire string as you pull it in, not just the section closest to the reel. Use that as a mind picture. It helped me anyway."

Oceanvine sat lightly on an overturned box and took the ring from Silverwind's outstretched hand. Then she closed her eyes, slid into her trance, and concentrated on the ring and the enchantment on it. "I can see the string," she reported from within the trance state.

"It's pretty easy once you know to look for it," Silverwind commented.

"Yes, and you're right. I am aware of every part of it."

"Right. Now stop dividing your attention and concentrate on gently pulling the string taut. If part of it tangles, just work on another part. It isn't really like string, it won't bind on itself and the excess will flow through the shape of any tangle as you pull it in. Many tangles will probably undo themselves as you work. The important thing to remember is that you should never pulled the string if you get resistance."

"Silverwind."

"Yes?"

"Shut up."

Silverwind became very quiet and let the pretty young mage work unmolested. He tuned in on the string of the ring's binding spell and watched her slowly and carefully reel it in. It was a long process, but he admired the patience and persistence she exhibited as she worked. In many ways it was a far better job than the one he had done while searching for Candle. He had left several tangles in the string, but Oceanvine patiently work out all but two that, due to the subject's movement, had become actual knots. Twenty minutes later she was finished and once more opened her eyes.

"Excellent, Oceanvine!" Silverwind praised her work. "Far better than I would have done."

"Thank you," she replied modestly, wondering how sincere he was about that. That she could do something better than he seemed utter hyperbole. "Let's get out of this alley."

"Good idea. It is a bit ripe in here, isn't it?"

The magical trail, even with most of the kinks out, still meandered a bit through the town. Silverwind explained that was because buildings got in the way.

"Buildings shouldn't be able to keep this sort of trail from running through them," Oceanvine protested.

"They don't, but the minor amounts of psychic energy that went into their construction do put up a little resistance to the string, that's why I told you not to pull too tightly, so we could follow the trail easier."

"I thought that was to keep from breaking the string."

"That too, but before you break the string it will pass through magic and psychic constructions with less power than itself. Buildings generally have psychic energy in them of only incidental amounts, put there through the unconscious exertions of untrained people with magician potential. A binding spell string, on the other hand, is more coherent. If you had straightened the string too much, we might have lost the trail as it became obscured when it passed through buildings and even terrain."

"Then why didn't you tell me that before? I'm not an apprentice, you know, and if we were in such a hurry you should have done it yourself."

"My own fault," Silverwind apologized. "I just wasn't thinking."

"All right," she accepted the apology. "Let's get moving and trace down this string."

The mystic trail soon lead out of town and made its way toward Castle North. As they passed through the main gate, however, the string began to flicker.

"What's happening?" Oceanvine asked.

"Someone is dying," Silverwind replied. "Hurry!" They ran haphazardly through the hallways of Castle North, narrowly missing various people in their desperate rush. However, the two people they entirely failed to miss were Jason and Galiena.

"Oof! What's the hurry?" Jason asked as he reluctantly disentangled himself from Oceanvine where they had crashed together to the floor. Oceanvine quickly explained and as she and Silverwind resumed their race they were joined by the two eldest ducal heirs. A minute later, as the waning mystical string was gleaming its last, they arrived at the locked door of a well-appointed suite on the top floor of the keep.

"Whose rooms are these?" Oceanvine asked as Silverwind and Jason broke through the door

"Denzell," Galiena replied sourly. "I should have known. If there's trouble in Castle North, you can bet the treasury that Denzell is in some way connected."

There wasn't much to say to that and the quartet rushed into the suite where they found Denzell lying face-up on the sitting room carpet. The blood had drained from his obese face leaving it almost white except for the jet-black Bond of Aritos indelibly marked on his forehead. Unlike the duke before him, he was too far gone by the time he was found and breathed his last as the four knelt beside him. "Hiram!" he choked hoarsely and then died.

Twenty

"What did he mean?" Jason asked aloud the question they all were thinking. It had been several hours since Denzell's death and given the recent developments, Jason thought it wise if they were to eat privately that night, joined by Meadow and Master Steuen, and discuss the events of the day.

"He might have been accusing Hiram for his death," Master Steuen opined.

"We would all like to believe that," Meadow replied, "but we must also consider the possibility that he was merely trying to summon his servant."

"Does anyone know where Hiram is?" Silverwind asked.

"Not yet," Steuen replied. "He was seen leaving the castle around sunset."

"Tomorrow night," Jason reminded them, "according to Oceanvine's calculations, someone is going to complete the curse on this land. As it looks like it might be Hiram, I think it behooves us to find him as soon as possible. Silverwind, can you not find him in the same way that you found the connection to Denzell?"

"Unfortunately not," Silverwind replied. "In Denzell's case there was a binding spell between him and his ring."

"His ring? What sort of binding spell?"

"We never had the chance to analyze it before the spell was broken by his death."

"Well, could you make an educated guess?"

"Always," Oceanvine laughed. "It's what he does best." Laughter all around.

"She's right, actually," Silverwind admitted. "The problem here is that there are any number of possibilities. For example, Denzell might have been apprenticed to a powerful magician. That's the most common type, but this spell didn't seem that normal to me. It was rather unwholesome. He might also have been under some sort of compulsion or curse. That seems more likely. Finally the spell might have been evidence of a magical contract made."

"Contract?" Galiena asked.

"Yes. Actually all these uses relate to each other in some way. The apprenticeship spell is a contract bond and it does compel those bound, as Candle here has learned these last few weeks." He smiled gently at the former thief who quickly smiled back. "The only real differences are the uses to which the spell is put. In Candle's case the spell merely guides his behavior. If he truly wished to do something counter to the spell's compulsion, he could, but would probably feel very guilty about it later. When we caught him trying to rob us on the road, I put another type of binding spell on him, the sort commonly used on criminals before they are placed in jail. Under that spell, he was unable to disobey my commands either expressed or implied. For that matter, a binding spell can be used to hold compound spells - actually groups of related magics all acting with a common purpose - together, but that is not the sort that was used in this case."

"But you said this binding spell might have been part of a magical contract," Jason asked. "What sort of contract?"

"I was getting to that. Your cousin might have made a deal with the devil."

There was silence all around the table. Meadow nodded sagely and Oceanvine's beautiful face showed muted signs of fear. Candle was just puzzled and Jason and Galiena were trying to figure out whether Silverwind was trying to tell them an incredibly bad joke, but it was Master Steuen who spoke first.

"Oh come on now, wizard! This isn't the dark ages. There is no demon worship and there never was any evidence that Aritos paid any particular notice of his worshippers."

"You are misinformed, Master Steuen," Meadow corrected him. "There is demon worship as Silverwind can tell you from personal experience, and as for Aritos, you are correct in believing that there is no proof that he has been listening to any of his worshippers, but you fail to take into account that he is a god. He is fully capable of answering prayers unconsciously. We freely assume that Emtos, Bellinen and the other gods do that, so we must assume that Aritos is able to do likewise." Steuen was unconvinced, but kept his silence, and Meadow made a mental note to keep an eye on the man.

"Silverwind," Jason began, "let's go back a few steps. What happens tomorrow night?"

"We honestly don't know. The best thing would be to find whoever is behind all of this before then. I think we should have your guardsmen raid the headquarters building we found today, but I suspect that they have moved out by now."

"Not necessarily," Oceanvine disagreed. "I've been trying to plot exactly where in town the final sacrifice will be made. Unlike in the fields and the citrus grove, a slight miscalculation could leave us watching the wrong building or alley until it is far too late. However, I did a quick check before dinner and that building we were in today is nearly in the center of the area I have projected as the location for the final sacrifice."

"How close to the center of your other sites did the sacrifices take place?" Galiena asked.

"The second one was dead on, but the first, as you know, took place just outside the warded area."

"However the carcass was carried to the exact site you plotted," Silverwind reminded her.

"That's true, and that is also what makes this so hard for us. We've witnessed two sacrifices and each one was done in a different manner. There's no telling what might happen next."

"No deer were found the week my father was struck down," Galiena pointed out. "How can we be certain that they haven't sabotaged or delayed their own work by killing Denzell."

"It's a good point," Oceanvine replied easily, "but we have to labor under the assumption that Denzell's death had no effect on the workings of this curse."

"Gentles," Silverwind brought the conversation to a conclusion, "tomorrow is going to be a very long day. I think we should all get to sleep early tonight. Who knows how late we'll be up tomorrow."

"Good idea, Silverwind," Jason concurred. "Good night, all." He stood and the group split up, promising to meet again at breakfast.

Silverwind dreamed. There was something terribly wrong and now he was at the center of it. He was completely surrounded by the oily black shadow of which he had dreamed so often. The soul-ravaging darkness sucked in all the light and begged for more, unsated by what it devoured. There was a difference from the previous dreams however. He was not completely entombed in the blackness. He could move and he glowed. The brilliant light of his soul was reaching to the surface of his skin and holding the darkness at bay.

The shadow would snake an oily tendril toward him and a bolt of lightning would flash forth from his fingertips and destroy it. But for every tendril destroyed, the darkness had an unrelenting supply. Slowly, ever so slowly the blackness oozed closer and closer. Soon he would once more be within its clutches. And then a small white stone burst forth within his temporary haven. It was the pebble he had given Candle and it floated, spinning before him with that strange clear stripe where Oceanvine had repaired it. And then, once recognized, it flew with incredible speed back toward the wall of shadow and punched a hole in it the size of Silverwind's fist. Beyond the darkness was the sun and its power fueled Silverwind's own struggle. The shadow dimmed and faded. Soon there were only a few vestiges of blackness left and they fled like wisps of smoke on a stiff breeze taking refuge in crevices and behind rocks. As the cloud of black vapor dissipated, Silverwind saw that he stood on the bleak volcanic plains of the southern shores of the Isle of Fire. The last thought that came to him as he woke up was that the blackness was only hiding, not destroyed.

Then he opened his eyes and found himself back in his room in Castle North, the light of dawn seeping into his room from between the wooden slats of the window shutters. He tried to ponder the meaning of his dream but the memory of it fled even as he tried to hold on to it. Rising from the bed, he walked to the window and opened it to view the still awakening land below him. All seemed so right. Would his view tomorrow be one of absolute horror?

He took his time getting dressed. This wasn't a day for rushing into anything. The temperature was already high and threatening to go even higher. Whatever the curse was going to accomplish, the timing of it with the hottest part of the summer, just before the long slow descent into autumn, seemed about right. He chose a light silken tunic with wide short sleeves and was tempted to put on a pair of Bellinen-style short pants but decided that he just did not have the legs for it. The consideration of what the North Horalians might think never crossed his mind.

It was too early for breakfast, so he wandered over to the room he and Oceanvine had been using as an office and was surprised to find Oceanvine hard at work.

"You're up early this morning," he said as he entered the room.

"Not really," She replied with a yawn. "Been up all night. No, don't look at me like that. I'll go to sleep right after breakfast. I've been busy refining my calculations for tonight's sacrifice."

"All right. We both know nothing's going to happen until at least midnight and maybe later. Have you learned anything new?"

"Yes. That building is definitely not one of the locations where the sacrifice might take place; it isn't at the center of my calculations. In fact it is just beyond the outer edge of the possible area, but I'm beginning to believe that it might have another use to this curse."

"What do you mean?" Silverwind asked.

"You remember what you said about this curse possibly being drawn in order to raise a demon?" Silverwind nodded. "Well, the Bond of Aritos is an odd shape, you'll agree, but on the outer edge it seems to roughly form a broken wheel of six spokes except that one of the spokes and the rim attached is broken off."

"Very roughly," Silverwind agreed, "but now that you point it out it does remind me of the rotten wagon wheel we had to replace."

"Exactly. If Hiram is our evil mage, and I'm thinking that's likely, he might have been hiding along the road with Denzell and watched us pass, cursing the wheel as we rode. Then after giving us enough of a lead, they rode by to take a look at their handiwork."

"Sounds reasonable if the fat mage last week was Denzell and Hiram the tall one, but what does that have to do with the Bond of Aritos or the building?"

"Very little," Oceanvine admitted sheepishly, "I got distracted. Anyway if you extend the five major spoke lines as they are drawn on this map they converge directly over the building we found Denzell's ring in."

"Hmm. Not exactly centered, but you're definitely right. Something might be happening at the house.

We'd better keep an eye on both locations tonight."

"I was about to suggest that," Oceanvine told him sleepily, "and before you ask; yes. This time I'm certain."

"I never doubted it."

"You would have eventually. I'm just saving you time." She yawned again.

"Are you sure you're going to make it until breakfast?" Oceanvine's answer was another yawn. "As I thought. Why don't we see if we can persuade the kitchen staff that now is the proper feeding time for magicians."

Possible threats and bluffs proved to be unnecessary. As they entered the kitchen, they found Meadow seated with several members of the kitchen staff at a table in one corner out of the way of most of the kitchen activity. On the table were several piles of food - testimony to the universal fact that the kitchen staff always eats better than the lord of the manor.

"You're up bright and early," Silverwind commented after the polite ritualized greetings.

"I could not sleep," Meadow replied.

"You, Meadow? The world is coming to an end!" Silverwind laughed, echoed sleepily by Oceanvine. Meadow merely scowled. It was the start of another day.

After breakfast, Oceanvine excused herself and stumbled off to her room while Silverwind filled Meadow in on Oceanvine's latest conclusions. They were on their way to the office when they ran into Jason on his way to breakfast on the patio.

"G'morning, wizards!" he hailed them. "Care to join me for breakfast?"

Silverwind and Meadow look at each other briefly, wondering whether they should admit to have already eaten and promptly shelved the idea, assuring the young lord that they were just on their way to breakfast themselves.

Silverwind repeated Oceanvine's conclusions for Jason's benefit.

"You're not going to be able to handle both sites at once," Jason pointed out. "And if you somehow fail at the sacrifice site, how are you going to get to the cult building in time?"

"We plan to split our forces," Silverwind replied. "Meadow and Oceanvine will be at the sacrifice site and I'll be at the cult building."

"By yourself?"

"You have any spare wizards around the castle? The town master is a good man with cures and blessings, but he is getting on in years and the strain would do him no good at all."

"True enough," Jason admitted, "and his apprentices are only slightly more advanced than Candle for all his inexperience."

"Candle is an exceptional student. He has both the talent and the motivation. All he needs now is the education."

"I'm finally catching on to you, Silverwind," Jason pointed out. "You're trying to change the subject. Tell me straight. Do you really think you going to be able to handle anything that comes up on your own?"

"What do you have in mind?"

"The duchy does have guardsmen," Jason reminded him. "They may not be magicians, but they're pretty good with conventional weapons. Now don't you go telling me how useless they'll be. You need all the help you can get."

"You're right," Silverwind agreed.

"You're kidding."

"Not at all. It is more than reasonable to assume that every available cult member will be on hand for the resolution of the curse they've been working toward these months. They aren't all magicians. In fact, I doubt that any of them, aside from their leader, has ever even been an apprentice. Your guardsmen, at both sites, should be more than a match for any cult members who show up."

"Good," Jason said uncertainly, wondering how he had been so deftly managed.

Dinner was served early that evening - before the sun actually set - so Jason and Galiena could formally give their best wishes and support to Silverwind, Oceanvine, and Meadow. Dinner conversation was subdued both by the somber, foreboding mood of all in attendance and by the tremendous afternoon storm that had rolled in off the horizon with its great ink-black clouds shortly before they had been seated. The thunder crashed almost incessantly during the meal adding an ominous note to the occasion.

The storm cleared up shortly before sunset and now Candle and Cerdic were perched in one of Castle North's towers overlooking the departing company of guards with the magicians at the head of the column. The blood-red sun on the western horizon shed its gory light against the retreating storm. The rainbow that formed against the eastern sky looked as though it had been drenched in fiery blood. It was formed of bands of red in which the more normal colors showed through with mere fractions of their normal intensity filtered down by the glowing red clouds.

"That's very odd," Cerdic commented.

"Yeah," Candle agreed. "I've never seen a rainbow nearly all red before."

"That too, but I meant the direction of the storm."

"Huh?"

"Normally storms go from east to west."

"Not always."

"No, not always, but most of the time, at least in the summer and winter. My teacher says that we're well within the tropical convergence zone, so our weather gets a bit mixed up sometimes, but usually storms come from the east. Haven't you noticed that?"

"Well," Candle replied uncertainly, wishing now that his education had included something besides picking pockets and locks, "yeah, but I never thought much 'bout it. What difference does it make? If it rains and you're outside, you're going to get wet."

"But some people can predict the weather," Cerdic told him, "by looking at the clouds and the direction of the wind."

"Can they tell fortunes too?"

"No, not by magic," Cerdic insisted. "They can just tell by looking. There are also other clues, like how heavy the air is."

"Air isn't heavy," Candle replied. "It's the lightest thing there is."

"I don't understand it either," Cerdic admitted, "but that's what my teacher says."

"Maybe Silverwind knows," Candle said thoughtfully. "We can ask him tomorrow."

"If there is a tomorrow," Cerdic replied worriedly.

"Of course there'll be a tomorrow."

"But what if Silverwind can't stop the cult tonight? Then what?"

"I don't know," Candle admitted fearfully. "But he'll win. I know he will!"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course!" Candle replied with more confidence than he felt. The two boys settled into a long silence as they saw the last of the guardsmen disappear from sight.

"I got an idea!" Cerdic said, breaking the silence a few minutes later.

"What?" Candle asked.

"Let's follow them and watch them defeat the cult."

"We shouldn't," Candle cautioned his friend. "Silverwind said it'll be dangerous. He told me to stay here."

"But if we were there," Cerdic asserted, "maybe we could help out if they need us."

"Us? What could we do?" Candle felt the apprenticeship spell trying to stop him.

"I don't know," Cerdic admitted, "but if we can, then we'll be there and ready. And if not, we can remain

hidden and they'll never know we're there."

Candle was at war with himself. He knew he shouldn't disobey his master, but he wanted to help as well, and it did sound like fun. It was the fun aspect that decided it for him. Silverwind was right; the apprenticeship spell was only a guide. Candle could ignore it if he really wanted to.

Candle nodded his agreement at last and he and Cerdic rushed down from the tower and ran out the castle gate before anyone noticed them, hoping to keep within sight of the army so they wouldn't get lost.

Twenty-one

Chamarket at midnight looked like an ordinary, although slightly wider than average, cobble-stoned street, and in fact, on all but the third and sixth days of the week, that is all it was.

On Belnday and Quernday, however, Chamarket turned in a wonderland of shopping experiences. The vast majority of the merchants were local farmers who came to sell their crops directly from their carts and wagons, and traveling grocers who traded all over the island to bring more exotic foodstuffs to the ducal seat of North Horalia, but there were others as well. Three butchers had permanent shops in Chamarket and a spice merchant brought in the finest herbs and spices from all over the world.

Food, however, was only part of Chamarket. Where there are people with money to spend, clever entrepreneurs will find a way to get their share of it. Also in Chamarket both in permanent shops and set amid the produce carts could be found jewelry, books, yard goods, home furnishings, and almost anything else the indiscriminate shopper might care to buy.

At midnight, however the magic was on hold. The streets were empty and now only the ghosts of the memories did their shopping there. The town's street cleaners had moved in on the tails of the merchants as they departed at dusk so that now the market was visibly clean, but here and there in the crannies where the mortar between paving stones had eroded, or in the well-planned storm drains so necessary in this tropical environment, bits of flotsam had become embedded - part of a discarded lettuce leaf or a rotten carrot here, some flower petals or a broken egg there - all loaned their fragrances to give the market a subtle aroma all its own. The smells would be washed away by night showers before they became unbearably foul but just now were a subtle perfume on the night air.

"All my men are in position, lady," the Captain of the Guard informed Oceanvine. She turned her head to take in the unusual scene. This was definitely not the normal look of a market at night. Evenly spaced around the periphery of the three-block-long market stood over one hundred guardsmen. Oceanvine and the captain stood near the center to one side of the wide street and Meadow was waiting on the other side. "Any idea of what we are waiting for, lady?"

"Hopefully nothing," she replied to the nervous man, "but if this is anything like last week or the week before, then sometime in the next few hours a man will attempt to enter the market and sacrifice a deer to Aritos. Our job is to stop him at all costs."

"Sounds very simple," the captain commented.

"It won't be. The man is a very powerful magician."

"So are you and the Wizard Meadow," he reminded her.

"Perhaps, but the task of our enemy is fairly simple and quick. So far he's been able to do it before we could react. This time we hope will be different, though. We have a wide open area with plenty of visibility. Just make sure that if anyone attempts to force his way past your men, kill him," Oceanvine said flatly.

"Kill him?" the captain was taken by surprise by the cold manner of Oceanvine's speech.

"That's right. You probably won't be able to, but lesser measures aren't likely to be effective."

"Yes, lady," the man saluted. "I'll inform my men." He walked off and Oceanvine signalled to Meadow that it was time to raise the wards. These weren't the tame, low-power wards they had used in the preserve and the grove, nor were they invisible. These protections burned visibly with raw white-violet light and sizzled audibly. These weren't designed to trip up an intruder; they were designed to fry him in his tracks. Nobody would bump into them accidentally either; only a blind, deaf person could fail to be aware of them and even then would probably smell the ozone they produced. These wards were neither subtle nor defensive. They were the greatest harnessing of energy ever attempted by either Oceanvine or Meadow.

The guardsmen had completely occupied the building that had been the headquarters of the Aritos cult, arresting all the cult members within. In all they arrested seventeen people, mostly young middle-class men and women who had been looking for anything different and exciting with which to get their parents' attention, but there were three older people among them as well, embittered middle-aged folk who had never managed to make it in life and so had turned to something that seemed the easy way into success.

Once they had taken the two-story building, most of the guards had been ordered outside and told to prevent anyone from entering without Silverwind's permission. Other than that their orders were similar to those Oceanvine had given to the men in Chamarket.

All buildings in direct sight of the cult building had been cleared and the people within had been brought to Castle North for a banquet and revel. They would be allowed to return at sunrise. In the meantime Jason and Galiena were busy entertaining some of the poorer subjects of the duchy as though they were nobles. It was turning out to be such a success, they decided that it would be an annual event thereafter, if the mages succeeded this night. Certainly, deliverance from a curse was a holiday worth celebrating.

There were, however, two unauthorized persons within the cordoned off area. It hadn't been easy, but Candle's days as a street urchin stealing food from market stalls and running from the pursuing guardsmen after a cry of "Thief!" stood him in good stead and now he and Cerdic were crouched behind a large crate next to the decrepit tavern across the street from the cult building.

"Well," Cerdic whispered, "this is boring. Now what?"

"We wait," Candle replied. "You want to go back?"

"No," Cerdic stretched the word out. "Something's supposed to happen tonight. Right?"

"Silverwind thinks so."

"Okay."

Two guardsmen walked by on patrol then and stopped in front of the crate, forcing the boys to be quiet for several minutes.

"We should have brought something to eat," Cerdic muttered after the guards had finally moved on.

"Everything's closed around here," Candle replied, "and any place open this time of night wouldn't serve kids anyway."

"Why not?"

"Adults got peculiar notions regardin' kids an' ale." His language skills tended to slip back to old habits when he was tired.

"Oh yeah. Is it that late?"

Candle looked up at the sky. It was a moonless night and the heavens sparkled with the crystalline brightness of the stars. He had to work to remember what stellar positions had been like when he first met Silverwind. He had no names for the constellations and therefore no handy mnemonic devices to help him remember. After a minute of intense thought, he told his friend, "I think it's about an hour and a half pastmidnight, but it might be later."

"No, really?" Cerdic asked. "It doesn't seem that late."

"Sun sets late this time of year," Candle replied, "Don't take so long getting to midnight as it does in winter, but it's late, trust me," he added one of Silverwind's pet phrases.

In the distance a dog started howling.

"What's that?" Candle jumped.

"Just a dog," Cerdic replied calmly. "Howling at Midbar, I guess."

"Midbar's not out tonight," Candle pointed out. "New moon."

"So it's howling at something else." Another dog started howling a little closer and was soon joined by a few others. Gradually, every dog in the town joined in filling the air with their mournful cries.

At Castle North, Jason had decided to take a brief walk around the courtyard, greeting the enforced

revelers who were still up and partying. It had been a good party and next year's would include the entire duchy with all the local nobles donating their share toward the festivities. However, all thoughts of the future abandoned him as he passed the stable in which the preserved deer corpses had been stored. There was a fear-inspiring yellowish-green glow seeping out from around the door and through cracks in the walls.

Jason ran to the door and flung it open in time to see all the deer slowly fade out. Five minutes later the stable was empty save for an incredible reek of dung, which would take weeks to air out.

Then the sound of howling dogs reached his ears.

The sound of howling dogs stretched Oceanvine's nerves almost beyond the breaking point and then began to bend and twist them about. Resolutely holding on to her sanity, she looked about for a possible cause. The sky began to close in. Heavy supernaturally black clouds irised in all around from the horizon. The pale yellow light of the oil lamps that illuminated the night streets of North Horalia failed to show those oily black shadows as anything more than menacing black blotches against the night sky, blotting out the stars.

The black shadowy clouds swirled in until only a single star was visible directly overhead - the eye of a sinister god staring balefully down on the capital city of a doomed land. Then the eye snapped shut and the murderously powerful, violet ward in the center of Chamarket glowed all the brighter, doubling its intensity, and inside that ward was an amorphous yellow-green blob whose light gleamed through. The blob pulsed rapidly through a long series of shapes and finally settled on the shape of a man with an eight-point buck standing beside him. The yellow-green light began to fade and Oceanvine could see that the man was Hiram, whom she had taken for the imbecilic servant of Lord Denzell. His hand rested lightly on the flank of the deer and as he brought it away the yellow-green aura flowed from him to the deer and coalesced into a glowing Bond of Aritos. All the while Hiram was laughing maniacally

Working quickly, Oceanvine and Meadow dropped their great violet death ward and rushed toward the laughing Hiram. As they ran, the deer fell dead at his feet and, still laughing, he disappeared as rapidly as they approached, his laughter lingering on the air joined by the faint stench of dung.

They continued forward, nevertheless, and hit a hard invisible wall around the fallen buck. Both mages worked hard at breaking that mystic wall, but their efforts were futile. Distant flashes of lightning and rumbles of thunder, that could be seen and heard in all directions and were approaching rapidly in the same way the clouds had, distracted Oceanvine from the carcass long enough to give the guardsmen new orders.

"To the cult's headquarters!" she shouted to the Captain of the Guards. "As fast as you can get there! Hurry!" She got to her feet as the guardsmen rushed out of Chamarket. "Come on," she ordered Meadow so forcefully that he didn't think to question the authority of a mere journeyman. "It's too late here." Together they ran just behind the guards.

Silverwind looked out a second story window of the building that stood at the heart of the curse. He watched as the dreadful black clouds surged inward from the horizons and converged overhead. The dogs of North Horalia continued to bay and the distant rumble of thunder shook the windowpanes.

He could not see Chamarket from here, but knew when the violet glow a dozen blocks southeast of him winked out that Oceanvine and Meadow had failed and that whatever happened next was up to him to stop.

The thunder and lightning swirled ever closer and, between the arrhythmic staccato that now shook the land itself, he heard the cries of the guardsmen outside. Looking through the window he saw Hiram, once more glowing with the unwholesome yellowish-green light that Silverwind had begun to associate with the Bond of Aritos. Hiram was marching purposefully toward the building and the guardsmen who tried to stop him were being flung away like rag-dolls at the hands of a willful child.

Silverwind ran down the stairs which threatened to collapse beneath him as he went.

"Out!" he shouted to the guards still inside, demonstrating what he meant. "Out of the house!"

Hiram was just outside as Silverwind got to the door. Silverwind stood in front of the door to block Hiram's way, leaving only enough room behind him for the guards who continued to file out at a run. Hiram laughed and attempted to walk through Silverwind, but the wizard through up his hands and cast a wall of repulsive force toward Hiram. The rogue mage bounced back and threw a spell of his own, paralyzing Silverwind in his tracks.

Then, finding to his surprise that Silverwind's repulsion ward was still erect, Hiram shrugged and walked around it and straight through the wall of the cult's building, leaving a neatly cut hole, charred at the edges, to mark his passing.

Struggling with all his will, Silverwind managed to free himself from Hiram's spell, but as he turned to follow Hiram into the building, he heard the sounds of that building collapsing and instead Silverwind ran away before he could get caught in the falling rubble.

The ground shook under the dual vibrations of the collapsing building and the thunder that now roared continuously in accompaniment to the lightning that erupted from out of the dense black clouds. As the building collapsed into its foundation, the greasy black clouds sent a thick, ropey tendril twirling down toward the pile.

Mesmerized by this living embodiment of his dream of the night before, Silverwind watched the fat smoky tendril snake down toward its goal like a lazy tornado, but just before it touched the top of the pile, he burst into action. He launched spells of intense heat and force at the tendril, blowing it apart and scattering the pieces. As he expected, the cloud formed another two tendrils, both of which were twice the size of the first one. The inky snakes writhed down toward the ex-building avoiding Silverwind's attempts to stop them.

They each touched the rubble and sank their substance deep into the pile. They joined to become an obscene black tower that resisted Silverwind's attempts to destroy it. The top of the oily-surfaced tower detached itself from the rolling black clouds above and poured itself greasily over the collapsed building

and then oozed in toward the bottom.

The guards from Chamarket flooded into the area as the pile of rubble began to pulse with the lightning that gradually became more rhythmic and unnatural. The thunder became a solid, featureless sheet of white noise and Oceanvine had to shout at the top of her lungs in order to get Silverwind's attention as she and Meadow joined him.

"What is it?" she screamed in his face.

Silverwind started to answer then stopped, but Oceanvine could tell from the bleak look he gave her that he believed they were about to witness the rising of a demon. Silverwind, unable to communicate any more against the incredible storm, returned to his magical assault on the pulsating pile of rubble.

"Cover me!" Oceanvine shouted to Meadow. She wanted to unleash the full potential of her own power but to do so would leave her vulnerable to the evil before them. Meadow was a wizard, however, and was capable of casting protective wards about her without the need of a spell trance. He nodded his acquiescence and Oceanvine sank to the street, cross-legged and in a trance almost before she had finished sitting.

From within the trance she could sense the evil reaching out toward her and dashing itself against Meadow's protective force. Then she concentrated on the greatest destructive force she could imagine. She envisioned the very atoms of the pile of rubble, including whatever was beneath it, literally exploding, scattering themselves across the world. The storm grew suddenly quiet as she cast her spell as if it had been put on hold in order to handle a more urgent matter.

The pile expanded briefly as a muted explosion shook the ground. Then the storm returned in earnest and the rubble began to glow the same sick yellow-green as had the other magics associated with this curse. A bolt of jet-black lightning stabbed out from the pile toward Oceanvine and flung her backward and into the crate behind which Candle and Cerdic were hiding. It had been unable to breach Meadow's defenses directly or she would have been visited by the same destructive force she had thrown at the source of evil, but so mighty was the counterattack that it had physically lifted and thrown her.

Candle and Cerdic dared to edge around the crate and pull her limp body into the illusion of safety where they assured themselves she was still alive.

Meadow fell to the ground where he was when the black bolt hit his ward. The indirect shock of the mystical impact knocked his consciousness from him too, leaving Silverwind alone against the evil power.

Slowly the pile began to expand as though some deadly plant had germinated within. Taller and taller it grew until the grotesque visage of a demon sprouted from the top. The demon had Hiram's face, but the dozen dripping fangs that crowded his mouth and the death-black curved horn that grew from the center of his forehead monstrously contorted it. The demon looked vaguely like Arithan, the demon Silverwind had battled on the Isle of Fire, but this was not the same creature he had routed at great cost years earlier. He was much larger - Arithan was only seven feet tall - and seemed even more malevolent, if that were possible.

The demon, twenty feet tall and still growing, looked down on the guardsmen surrounding him. Silverwind became aware, for the first time, that the guardsmen had been shooting arrows at the demon to no effect. Then the demon's attention turned to Silverwind himself. The demon roared and pointed a stabbing black-nailed finger toward the wizard. In reaction, Silverwind began concentrating on a powerful protection, but before either could cast a spell, they were both distracted by a small, glowing

white projectile fired at the demon's chest from somewhere off to the wizard's right.

Candle, watching his master in trouble, performed to only spell he knew and envisioned himself throwing the little white pebble as hard as he could at the demon. The stone shot out with far more force than it had that first time he performed the spell solo and burst on contact as it hit the demon square on the chest.

The impact tore a hole through the protective substance of the demon's flesh and the ghastly yellow-green light poured forth and bathed the area around him. Silverwind recognized the opportunity for what it was and thrust a bolt of disruptive energy into the heart of the demon before it could heal the wound that Candle's spell had formed.

The demon shrieked in agony, lifting its hand to the roiling black clouds in a vain attempt to draw energy from them. Silverwind continued to strike the demon with every form of destructive energy he could think of.

With a massive roar of frustration, the demon dissolved into a cloud of oily black smoke and rejoined the clouds overhead, and then as quickly as those clouds had swirled in from the horizon, they reversed their direction and swirled away again, leaving only the crystalline night sky behind in their wake.

Twenty-two

Silverwind woke up the next day in time for lunch, although it was nearly dinnertime before he actually got around to eating. He opened his eyes to the canopy above him in the shutter-darkened bedroom with a deep-seated nagging feeling that there was something left undone. Not wrong as he had felt so often in recent years, just left unfinished.

Running down the events of the previous night, he remembered what it was. Dressing quickly, he rushed out the door to his room and went to the small suite that Oceanvine had been using. The door to her suite was open and he found her sitting comfortably in an over-padded chair in a silken robe, drinking tea with Galiena and two other ladies. They looked up as Silverwind entered the room and a brief round of giggles filled the air.

The wizard calmly endured the unexplained laughter and greeted his partner, "G'morning, Vine. How are you feeling."

"Quite well, thank you," she replied sweetly before hardening her voice a bit, "and that's Oceanvine!" Silverwind smiled.

"That was quite a bump you took last night, and with Meadow down as well, I was worried," he admitted.

"I appreciate the concern," she told him, "but you forget we aren't the only mages in North Horalia. As you pointed out to Jason the other night, the town master is a good man with cures and blessings."

"So he is," Silverwind agreed.

"You could tell me what happened after I was knocked out, however. Candle told me that he killed the demon with that pebble of his. Naturally I didn't believe a word of it."

"He was half right," Silverwind corrected her. "The stone evidently had enough magical potential in it from when you mended it so that, unlike the guardsmen's arrows, it was able to penetrate the demon's flesh. Once he managed that, I used several types of dispersal spells." He explained in detail. "I guess you could say it went up in smoke."

"Ugh!" Oceanvine wrinkled her nose.

"What about the rest of the curse?" Galiena asked.

"I believe we've countered it effectively," Silverwind replied, "but I'll have to consult with Meadow to be sure. Hiram survived, but his mind was utterly destroyed when we vanquished the demon. Neither he nor Denzell were truly magicians. They were only vessels through which the demon was able to work its most rudimentary spells. The whole curse was laid out so that it could be freed from what ever captivity the gods placed it under."

"What sort of captivity?" Oceanvine asked.

"We don't know and the gods aren't talking, but if you believe the religious myths - and they may be truer than we'd like to admit - then the other gods found Aritos' creations to be abominations and imprisoned them in the lower-most reaches of Hell. Since then they have been searching for ways to be free."

"Even Arithan on the Isle of Fire?"

"Even so. Arithan was nearly free when Windchime and I battled him, more so than this one last night, but we might have never defeated him if he were."

"Did you know that the all the marks on the deer carcasses disappeared?" Galiena asked him. "The one on my father too?"

"No, I just woke up. That may be good news, though. If you'll excuse me, ladies, it appears I have a lot to discuss with Meadow."

"Silverwind?" Oceanvine asked softly before he could leave the room. "Is it over? Did we really win?"

"Are you all right?" he showed great concern. "Any bad dreams? Depression?"

"No. I'm fine really," she reassured him.

"All right. Yes, we did win and I think it might be over."

"Might be?" Galiena asked tensely.

"For you, Lady Galiena, almost definitely. The demon isn't likely to return here. You know the signs now and we know how to break the curse. For Oceanvine and me, however, that's something else. We don't really know very much about demons. We do know that each one is different and they manifest in different ways. We don't really know much about the way they think - they tend to see us as dinner rather than dinner companions - but it's a safe bet they believe in revenge. Oceanvine, Meadow, Candle

and I may well meet this one again, probably somewhere else, maybe not at all. Demons and their activities are rare so I can say for a certainty that it's over for now, probably forever in North Horalia."

Silverwind left a few minutes later after the subject had changed twice and the ladies giggled again at his passing and he briefly wondered just what Oceanvine had been telling them. That conjecture, however, was shelved a few minutes later when he met Meadow and Jason in the corridor.

"Silverwind!" Jason hailed him. "Good news! Meadow says the curse on my father has been lifted."

"That is correct," Meadow agreed. "All traces of the disease have disappeared and I have just removed the stasis spell from the duke. He will be very weak for a month or so, but he will recover."

"Excellent."

"Indeed," Jason said enthusiastically, "and his first command was to hold a celebration in three days time. It will be in your - all of you mages that is - honor, so I hope you'll stay that long at least."

"My pleasure," Silverwind replied.

"Good! Then you can convince Wizard Meadow. He wants to leave first thing in the morning."

"I have been away from my own practice on Orent far too long," Meadow explained.

"Would three days really make all that much difference?" Silverwind asked.

"Perhaps. Who is to say what urgent problem may be waiting for my attention. I would not like to arrive home only to discover that someone died needlessly while I was spending my time at a revel."

"I hadn't thought of that," Jason admitted. "Sorry, I'll stop pushing."

"Thank you, my lord," Meadow replied. "And now if you will excuse me, I must continue packing."

"Of course," Jason replied to Meadow's already retreating back.

The celebration was a little smaller than Oceanvine had expected. When Galiena told her that all the nobles and important families in the duchy would be in attendance, she had expected that would be well over two hundred people, maybe more, but in truth there were less than half that number of guests.

The celebration back in town was more to her taste and experience where wild country-dances filled the central square and the revelry would continue well past dawn. The party here in the castle was far more sedate, but she found the formal dances of the nobility both fascinating and romantic. She longed to try them out but the stories of her magical prowess had spread and the young noblemen were daunted by her power even while attracted by her beauty. She would have asked Silverwind to dance with her - he seemed to know all the dances - but the local ladies had been vying for his attention all evening. Finally Jason made his way over to her and gave her a chance to see the fun side of the dance floor.

Oceanvine was a quick study and found that the actual dance steps were not so different from those she was already acquainted with, although they were used in different combinations and tempos. With Jason's guidance she managed to glide through the popular dances of the court with only a fraction of the clumsiness she felt and by the second repetition of movements, only she noticed her missteps.

Silverwind watched her and Jason from across the floor and felt a mild pang of jealousy that he would never admit to his pretty young partner. The two of them made a handsome couple and they moved together naturally. Silverwind feared she would choose to stay with Jason, never realizing that in spite of Jason's obvious feeling for the blond mage, he would never ask her and she would never accept if he did.

Candle and Cerdic had been trying to stay off the dance floor - there were far more interesting things for them besides dancing - but Galiena would have none of that and quickly found partners for them both. In spite of his age, Cerdic was an old hand, but dancing of any sort was a new experience to Candle. Girls were just becoming a subject of interest to them both, but shyness had held them back. When Galiena pushed them into action, however, both felt as though they had been pushed into a wide bay in a boat without benefit of oars or sails. Candle tried to bluff his way through a dance by keeping one eye on what Cerdic was doing but failed miserably. He was about to flee for the comfort of a dark corner when the small brunette he had been paired off with asked him if he was really the wizard's apprentice and was it really as wonderful as she had been told and could he cast spells yet. That broke the ice and they both sneaked off to find a quieter corner where they could be alone.

The random flow of one dance brought Silverwind and his current dance partner - a pretty redhead - next to Jason and Oceanvine. To the wizard's surprise, Jason excused himself from Oceanvine and cut in on Silverwind in order to dance with the redhead whom he addressed only as "cousin." Silverwind and Oceanvine looked uncomfortably at each other, stranded as they were in the middle of the floor.

"Well," the wizard said at last, "shall we?" Oceanvine nodded almost embarrassedly, but slipped neatly into his embrace. Once they started dancing together, however, there was none of the hesitation they had shown just a moment earlier and their calmly self-assured movements began to attract appreciative attention. Lost in a world all their own, neither of them noticed that most of the other dancers had stopped to watch them. Even Candle in the far corner was distracted from his appreciative audience and the floating coin that had captivated her attention dropped neglectedly to the floor.

Silverwind and Oceanvine swirled their way back and forth around the floor without truly noticing the commotion they caused, so drawn to each other's eyes they were. Dance is not truly a spectator sport and the ring of watchers eventually dissolved into a complex pattern of moving bodies that continued to respect the space around the two mages.

"It seems strange that it's finally all over," Oceanvine murmured to Silverwind as they danced.

"Adventures are like that," he replied softly. "They just sort of keep on going until they end. After that, you just go home and enjoy normal life for a while until the next great adventure comes your way."

"You make it sound like normality is preferable. This was my first," she said, telling him nothing he didn't already know, "and it was exciting, wonderful."

"They're like that sometimes," Silverwind admitted, "but for the most part adventures are only good and wonderful things in the past tense. Besides, we have a lot to do back in Renton and we'll have Candle with us now too. Don't think that won't be an adventure all by itself. I'll need to put him in the local school; he has a lot of education to catch up on and he's a mischievous scamp. I guarantee it won't be boring."

"But I've always wanted to travel. See the world."

"You may if you want," Silverwind replied more casually than he felt. "It is your life after all. If this is anything like when Windchime and I started out together, the word of our availability will spread and we'll find more excuses to travel than we could handle in a lifetime. In a year or two, quiet boring Rentonis going to be every bit the haven to you that it is to me."

"I'd like to go back to Renton with you and Candle," she admitted, "but can we go by way of Randona?"

"Randona? Why?"

"I've decided that you're right. After this adventure I can see that I am ready for my master's exams and, even more to the point, the legal right to use the higher spells that rank will allow me. They would have come in handy the other night."

"You mean you didn't use unauthorized spells?" Silverwind acted surprised. "You have grown up, Vine. You wouldn't have hesitated when we first met, and don't think I don't know about what happened in Medda."

"I never told you about that."

"You didn't have to. Several faculty members warned me about you when I agreed to let you work with me."

"And you still let me?"

"Of course. I liked what that said about your independent spirit. You should know by now that I would never have been able to work for long with most of your class-mates, nor would they have been able to deal with my irreverent attitude."

Oceanvine laughed lightly at the thought. He was right; magicians were far too serious a lot. "Then we can go home by way of Randona?" she pressed.

"If you like. Are you sure you wouldn't like to get your degree at Merinne or Querna?"

"I'll sleep on it," she promised.

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