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Men of the Earth

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Note

I guess it's only natural for an author to like some of his writings more than others. I'll admit I'm not my own best critic, but I liked this one on a number of levels.

This was the first time I ever sat down and said, "I'm going to write a sequel." As an unpublished author writing the sequel to a book I hadn't sold didn't really make a lot of sense, but I had already written several other novels that were out for various publishers' consideration so it seemed a good time to take a few months and see what challenges were inherent in such a project. It turned out not to be as hard as I had expected, although I ended up re-reading the first book, "World of Water" twice; once for the plot and the second time with a pen in hand to take notes on the finer details that had really been thrown in as I went along.

I like the way the characters developed. This worked out amazingly well. There were certain tensions in the first book that get resolved this time around and others that come out won't be resolved until the third book, "Island of Fire," which in turn sets the series up for the finale of the series, "Gods of the Air." By the way, as I write this "Island of Fire" is finished and will probably be posted later this year.

Most of all, I like the way this particular story stands out from the rest of the series. It's hard to describe, really, but perhaps the difference is that the core of this story is a murder mystery in a fantasy setting while the other stories are more fantasy adventure. Maybe it's something else. I'll leave that to the reader.

Strangely, when I originally planned this series, this was the book I looked forward to writing the least. It deals with the Granomen who are sometimes called trolls. Like the humans of the world of Maiyim, I let the word "troll" warp my thinking. Even though I never planned on the Granomen having any more than superficially trollish qualities, I didn't feel particularly warm toward them. Fortunately, that changed too as I got to know them as they are a fine and noble people.

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/>

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Wesport, Mass.

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## Prologue

Kathea looked up at the cold winter sky. Clouds were rapidly rolling in, obscuring those stars capable of overcoming the collected lumens of the yellow, gas-fire street lights.

It had been a bitterly cold night, especially for one dressed as scantily as she was. That was just one of the hazards of her profession, and the least of them at that. Several girls she knew, not friends exactly, but people she saw from time to time on the streets, had gone missing in recent weeks. None had been found.

Kathea was no great beauty, even by the standards of Granomen, but she used her robust proportions and her clear milk-white skin in a manner that most Granomish males found alluring. In spite of the bitter cold she wore a skin-tight shirt and shorts in the Orentan style considered obscene throughout the Granom Archipelago. No decent Granomish lady would ever wear them, but they were almost standard for prostitutes here.

She shivered as the first few flakes of snow flew past her, driven by the stiff, biting breeze. She'd been huddled in the doorway of a jewelry shop since just after the owner had closed up for the night; he'd have had her arrested if she tried that earlier. There weren't many out tonight and the thought crossed her mind, not for the first time, that she might as well have stayed home, but this neighborhood smelled better.

The snow became more intense and Kathea finally gave in to her urge to wear the heavy woolen cloak she kept on the ground behind her. She picked up the ragged garment and shook the snow out of its dark green folds before tossing it over her immodestly bare shoulders.

She looked up and down the street, but the snow was so thick that she had trouble seeing the next gas light. There could be a dozen potential customers, johns, walking by just across the street and she would never see them. She doubted they were there, however. She hadn't seen anyone in well over an hour.

She thought once more of going back to the cramped one-room flat she reluctantly called home, but decided to wait just a little longer. It was not all that much warmer there. The snow tapered off half an hour later, although the winds continued to blow it around into drifts over a foot deep.

Kathea finally gave up her street-side vigil when she heard the deep cutting tone that emanated from the singing tower of the University at Querna. The MidnightBell .

The bells of the University marked and divided the day into eight equal parts. Once every three hours a distinctive set of bells was rung, announcing the time to everyone for miles around. At noon, the singing tower would treat the townsfolk to an hour-long concert. At midnight, however, only the very largest bell was allowed to ring and its deep, almost subsonic, note rolled across the capital city of Granom and into the surrounding countryside only to be reflected by the surrounding hills.

On a clear night the sound of the Midnight Bell seemed to last forever, but on that night the clouds and scattered snow squalls absorbed the sound and muffled it long before it could reach the hills.

Kathea held her cloak tightly as she stepped out of the doorway. She crossed the cobblestone street to the slate-paved sidewalk on the other side and then turned left. She tried to walk quickly, but the snow offered only a treacherous footing, keeping her to a purposefully moderate pace. She was several blocks away when she realized that she was being followed.

Glancing back over her shoulder, she saw a tall, well-built man. He wore a dark wide-brimmed hat with a fashionably bright red band and a dark gray cloak of finely woven wool. It was difficult to tell, but her practiced eye told her that this was a man of means, able to pay top price for quality.

She stopped when she reached the next street light and leaned up against the pole suggestively. She didn't need to say anything as he approached. If he couldn't figure out what she was doing, she'd only have trouble collecting from him.

The man stopped to look at Kathea and she was cooler than the winter winds that whipped around them as she returned his gaze brazenly. Her initial appraisal proved accurate. His attire was first quality and he filled it out with the characteristic heavy bone structure and musculature. All in all a fine model of a Granomen man.

"How much?" he asked simply. She mentioned a price twice her normal rates and was only slightly surprised when he nodded and said, "Your name?"

"Kathea, sir," she replied huskily

"Come with me."

She followed him to his town house on the next block. The man is not just money, she noted silently, but old money. Tons of it!

An odd smell assaulted her wide nose as she entered the house. It was not an unfamiliar smell, but she couldn't place it and decided that it must be the maid's day off. The man removed his hat and cape and hung them in a small closet by the door, indicating that he expected her to do likewise. His once black, curly hair was streaked with gray, but was nevertheless full and neatly cropped and his hands had been professionally manicured. Kathea wondered if he had ever done an honest day's work.

Without saying a word, he picked up an oil lamp and led her down some stairs into the basement. Kathea thought that was odd, but she had done it in stranger places. There was a door at the bottom of the stairs and the man had to unlock it before ushering her into the room beyond.

The walls of the room were unfinished and the rough stones of the foundation were exposed all around except where two long shelves were mounted above a battered work counter with several drawers to hold tools. There was no place to sit in the room, but there was a large wooden table in the center and she leaned against it suggestively. He smiled and turned to close and lock the door behind them.

While his back was to her she took a moment to scan one of the long shelves. One shelf was empty, but there was a row of glass jars neatly arranged on the other. The jars seemed to be filled with something pinkish and semi-solid but surrounded by a dark red or brown liquid, and each jar was neatly labeled.

"Take a closer look if you wish," she heard the man's pleasant baritone tell her. Her natural instinct was to shrug a negative answer and get down to business, get paid and get out of here, but she felt strangely compelled to take a look at the jars. She chalked it up to curiosity.

There were eight jars in all and each one bore a white paper label with writing on it. She quickly realized that only seven of the jars had anything in them and the eighth was empty and had a blank label. The man picked up the empty jar and started writing on the label as Kathea read the others.

The first one said, "#1 - Debira," and the second said, "#2 - Ivona." A dreadful suspicion formed in Kathea's mind. She had known a girl named Ivona, one of the missing girls. "#3 - Anci of Talinca." That was a noblewoman's name. "#4 - Ryza." She had known a Ryza too and the name on the next one as well. "#5 - Ireni, #6 - Khermine, #7 - Varya." Varya! She had seen Varya just last night.

The man put the empty jar back on the shelf. Kathea did not want to read the label, she wanted to run for her life, but something forced her to look at the jar anyway.

The label said "#8 - Kathea."

"No!" she gasped, still unable to move. She looked at the man and saw that his eyes had begun to glow a deep blood red. "You! You're the killer!" He smiled, an expression utterly devoid of humor. "No!" she screamed, still unable to move.

"Ah!" the man sighed with a note of melancholy. "Such a beautiful sound. Please continue, you won't annoy the neighbors. I sound-proofed this room personally." Kathea screamed again.

The man listened for a few minutes and when she finally quieted down instructed her, "Walk to the table and lie down."

Kathea gasped in disbelief when her body turned and walked to the table of its own accord. She sat down on the edge of the table, swung her legs up and then stretched out on the table. She screamed again.

"Why can't I move?" she asked a minute later.

"I do not wish you to move," he replied calmly, with his eyes closed, "and you do wish to please me, don't you?"

Kathea felt strange, as though her mind was being turned off. Suddenly she only wanted to please this man who held her captive. "Oh yes," she replied dreamily. "How may I serve you?"

The man looked at her, almost sadly. "I want your heart."

Kathea misunderstood. "I love you," she murmured convincingly although a small part of her deep down inside had begun to scream again.

"Yes," the man replied emotionlessly, "I'm sure you do."

Three weeks later, Kathea's discarded body was found in a ditch along the Great Road several miles south of the city.

## PART I - THENILDAR OCEAN

### One

"She served them up, she served them down, she served them up with wine," Silverwind the Wizard sang lustily as the wagon crested the hill overlooking the port town of Tarnsa, North Horalia. "But still she drank the clear spring water to keep her color fine."

Oceanvine, his assistant, rolled her eyes upward in exasperation as she drove the wagon. The clothing she wore, extremely tight-fitting short pants of cream-colored linen and a silken halter top emblazoned with a brightly colored floral print, was only considered decent attire in the equatorial Bellinen Archipelago, but with her long blond hair, clear blue eyes, and breath-takingly beautiful face, it was garb that most men were willing to let her get away with.

Silverwind had been singing off and on since they had left Castle North. It got on her nerves at times, but at least he wasn't drunk. The Gods alone knew what he might do if he was. Over the past three years of their association she had become accustomed to his singing, but she had absolutely no tolerance for drunkenness. It was just that this was the first time she had heard him sing without the assistance of alcohol.

"I must get up, she must sit down, she must sit in my place," Silverwind launched into the second verse. "Or else torn by wild horses and be thrown over..."

"Oh, knock it off already!" a boy's voice interrupted him from the back on the wagon. The boy, Candle, was twelve years old, short and thin. He was dressed in one of the finest sets of clothing he had ever owned - a blue raw silk tunic with knotwork embroidery, a pair of grey trousers that actually fit as though they had been made for him, and a pair of real shoes. He was also Silverwind's apprentice of several weeks. His magical abilities as yet were minimal, but Silverwind and Oceanvine agreed that he showed great potential. They disagreed, however, over how likely he was to fulfill that potential. Most apprentices were well brought-up sons and daughters of middle and upper class families. On rare occasions, poor students of proven high moral character were also accepted. Candle, on the other hand, was a street urchin, an orphan who had run away from the orphanage/workhouse he had been raised in and who had worked for a time as a thief for one of Tarnsa's criminal ringleaders, Daddy Fox. Silverwind was confident that the boy could overcome his upbringing, but Oceanvine, while willing to admit it was possible, preferred to wait and see.

Silverwind abruptly stopped singing and turned around to face Candle. The boy, sitting in the back with their luggage, took one look at the hurt expression on his master's face and immediately regretted his harsh words. Silverwind was more than just his employer. In the few short weeks since they had met, he had also been the closest thing Candle had ever had to a father, while Oceanvine was the closest thing to a... sister; an obnoxious older sister who seemed to know everything and was always right. Still, even Oceanvine had shown him more kindness than he'd ever known. They were his family now. He'd never had a family and it took some getting used to.

"I'm sorry," Candle said contritely. He had stopped wondering whether his sudden changes of heart were genuine or side effects of the spell that was bond between Silverwind and himself. It didn't matter. He knew that if he concentrated he could overcome the restraints of the spell, but he had entered apprenticeship willingly and really did want to be a good boy so he could learn more magic. "Keep singing. I'll shut up."

"No, I guess not," Silverwind sighed dramatically. "Instead maybe we have time for today's lesson before we get into town," Candle felt the blood drain from his face. His daily lessons varied from ridiculously simple to hopelessly complex. After his outburst, Candle expected today's would be a killer. "You remember your multiplication tables, of course?"

"Which ones?" Candle asked.

"Recite all of them." Candle did so, starting with the twos and working up to the fifteens. "Very good," Silverwind commended him when he was done. "Now let me see your journal."

When Silverwind and Oceanvine started teaching Candle how to read and write he was given a small notebook. The first half of it was filled with the practice letters Candle was required to draw until he was proficient, but after that he was supposed to keep the book as a diary and write something down every day. Writing was like a challenging new game at first, but after a while it had become a major chore and Candle started skipping days. In fact he had only made one entry since leaving Castle North.

"That's all?" Silverwind asked, arching an eyebrow.

"I've had nothing to write about," Candle complained. "We've been traveling. Am I supposed to write that I saw a lot of trees and grass and farmers' fields?"

"You could describe them in detail," the wizard suggested.

"They're green," Candle replied.

"And you could say how you feel about them."

"They're green," the apprentice repeated. Oceanvine chuckled.

"That's enough from you," Silverwind told her sourly. She brushed a stray lock of hair out of her eyes and chuckled again as she handed Silverwind the reins.

"Candle," she said, turning around to face him, "there are thousands of ways to say that, however. You can compare the green of the grass to that of the trees. They aren't exactly the same color, are they?" Candle shook his head and bit back a sullen comment he wanted to make. "And it's late summer, very few of those fields are still green. The grain is a ripe golden yellow and Jason may have been right about the largest cash crop in the duchy being tobacco, but I haven't seen any along this road. More to the point, however, is how you feel about what you've seen. Don't just say 'they're green,' write down about how bored all that greenery makes you, how you ache to see something different, how you burn to be able to run about and maybe talk to someone your own age. That's the sort of thing you should be putting in your journal."

"Thank you, Vine," Silverwind told her warmly, handing her back the reins.

"Oceanvine," she corrected him quietly but firmly. After having finally shed herself of her detested given name, Elinor, the young mage had very little tolerance for anyone taking liberties with her chosen mage name.

"Whatever," Silverwind replied off-handedly. "Now, Candle, let's see what you did write." Silverwind scanned the page.

We left castle this morning. Everyone was there to see us leave. Cerdic was there. We said bye then left. It was hot today. Nothing else happened.

"Everything seems to be spelled correctly," Silverwind conceded. Actually he was quite impressed, considering the fact that Candle had only been working on reading and writing for three weeks. The lad's memory must be nearly perfect, he thought to himself, even his speech patterns have improved, although he backslides every so often, but aloud he continued, "Is that really all that happened?"

"All that mattered," came the reply.

"You never wrote about the demon or your part in his defeat," Silverwind pointed out. Candle felt himself blanch again. Up until now Silverwind had not asked him what he had been doing there, when he should have stayed behind in the castle. Now, almost a fortnight later, he hoped that matter of his disobedience had been forgotten. The wizard had merely been waiting for Candle to explain on his own.

Candle took a deep breath and began. "Well, Cerdic thought we would be safe enough as long as we stayed far enough behind the duke's soldiers." Cerdic was one of the heirs to the Duchy of North Horalia, a boy of Candle's age.

"Cerdic thought that, did he? What did you think?" Silverwind asked.

"I wasn't so sure," Candle admitted after a long pause, "but he convinced me that I might be able to help if things got rough."

"Oh? What did he think you could do?" the wizard asked mildly.

"We weren't really sure, but we did help, didn't we?"

"Yes, you did," Silverwind admitted. Candle had magically thrown a stone at the demon that had been behind the mysterious deaths of the duke's own deer. The stone, a piece of common milky quartz, was a very special one. Silverwind had given it to Candle to practice levitation on. The first time he succeeded, the pebble had hit a wall with such force that it had split in two. At Candle's request, Oceanvine had magically fused the two pieces back together and in so doing imparted a small amount of magical potential to the stone. When it hit the demon's chest, the stone burst and released that potential, tearing a hole in the demon's defenses, which Silverwind was quick to take advantage of. It was very much a team effort.

"However," Silverwind continued, "you did one thing very wrong."

"I know," Candle replied, ashamed. "I disobeyed you."

"Yes, you did, but that wasn't what I had in mind. You didn't think for yourself and that's far worse than doing something that I told you not to."

"You don't mind that I disobeyed?"

"I do mind," Silverwind told him quickly, "but I find the fact that you let your friend do your thinking for you far more alarming. Candle, you're a very intelligent young man, I would never have accepted you as my apprentice if you weren't, so from now on I don't ever want to hear that you did something just because someone else told you to."

"Not even you or Oceanvine?" Candle asked, confused.

That was a tough question and Silverwind paused before answering it. "No," he decided at last, "not even us."

"Uh oh!" Oceanvine said sarcastically, "There goes the last peace either of us will ever see."

Silverwind ignored her. "Of course the difference is that we won't be trying to mislead you. If we tell you to do something, it's because we believe it's the right thing to do, so if you do disobey us, you had better have a good explanation for your behavior afterwards. Do you understand?"

"I can do something you tell me not to if I think you're wrong," Candle concluded.

"Close. You'd better be sure we're wrong and you're right and even then you'll probably still find yourself in trouble."

"Hold it," Candle replied, putting his hand up in a restraining gesture. "You don't want me to listen to anyone but you, right?"

"Wrong," Silverwind told him. "I want you to listen to everyone, but I don't want you to obey anyone blindly. The binding spell between us will keep either of us from betraying the other. You understand that,



don't you?" Candle nodded. "All right, so you can assume that any order I give you should be obeyed."

Candle nodded earnestly again and asked, "There's no spell between me and Oceanvine, how do I know she won't betray me?"

"Because I'm too nice a person," Oceanvine told him, "and if you don't do what I say, I'll turn you into a dishrag."

"Vine! This is not a good time to exercise your sense of humor," Silverwind said warningly. "Candle, Oceanvine is my partner and your friend and if that isn't enough then my first order is to obey her the same way you would me."

Candle thought about that for a moment and then nodded his head before replying, "But I should ignore anyone else?"

"That all depends," Silverwind replied cautiously.

"On what?"

"On who it is and what he or she says," Silverwind paused to think what he should say next.

"I'll bet you're sorry you started this," Oceanvine remarked. Silverwind gave her another sour look, but she ignored it and spoke to Candle instead. "Candle, all he is saying is that he wants you to think things out before you go leaping into danger."

"But what's this about obeying and disobeying?" Candle asked.

"Oh, I think you know who you can and can't trust," she replied confidently. "You wouldn't listen to Adelulf's orders, would you?" Adelulf was one of several competing crime bosses in Northerton, the city that stood at the foot of Castle North.

"Not on ya life!" Candle snapped far more harshly than he meant. Oceanvine took no offense and flashed him a quick smile before turning back to keeping her eye on the road. They were still headed downhill and it was important not to let the cart get out of control.

"Honestly, Silverwind, I don't know why you always complicate things so." Oceanvine shook her head theatrically.

"Thank you so much," the wizard replied dryly. "Candle, do you understand what I've been trying to say?"

"I think so," the boy replied. He remembered something the master of the workhouse had told the boys repeatedly. He'd never really understood it before but it seemed to apply now. "I'm responsible for my own actions, right?"

"Exactly," Silverwind agreed, wondering how Candle had pulled that conclusion out of all the verbiage that had been thrown at him. Smiling, he turned to face front.

"What about today's lesson?" Candle asked in spite of himself.

"I think you just learned it," Silverwind replied, "but I want you to write in your journal more often. You

can start now."

Candle searched around in his travel bag, a new luxury to him, and found a pencil. Then he opened up the notebook and started jotting down several paragraphs about his most recent lesson.

"Silverwind," Oceanvine began with uncharacteristic nervousness, "I've finally made a decision about my master's exams. Tempting as it may be to think about going to either the University at Merinne or the one in Querna, I think it would be best to go to Randona, assuming your offer to go that far out of our way still stands."

"Of course it still stands," he assured her. "In fact, I was about to ask you about it. We need to know before we can book passage on a ship."

"Right," she agreed distractedly. "I mean it would be great to go to Bellinen and visit with my old roomie, Airblossom, but..." she trailed off.

"Nervous, Vine? You've no reason to be worried. You'll fly through your exams, maybe literally depending on who's on your committee." That comment, designed to provoke a response, failed to make the pretty blond do so much as blink. Silverwind tried again, "And on the off chance that you don't make it, Candle and I promise to see that your ashes are spread over Kern," Oceanvine's birth place. Candle, hearing his name, looked up. "Or would you rather some other place." Still no response. "Of course, if you really don't care, we can chop you up and sell you for bait." Oceanvine was still silent, so he reached over and gently shook her arm.

"Hmm?" Oceanvine finally responded. "Oh, Randona will be just fine, don't you think?" Her voice had her more normal confident sound again.

Silverwind was worried about her apparent black-out and surreptitiously cast a diagnosis spell while he spoke. "Well, the Granomen are a bit clannish and they have some notions concerning a woman's place that you would find rather, uh, primitive. Merinne is closer than Quirna and the Orenta would probably welcome you with open arms; if nothing else they'd admire your taste in clothing, but you're probably right about going to Randona. It's closer and you'll probably know most if not all the members of your examining committee." His spell showed negative results, Oceanvine was just preoccupied, not sick nor bewitched. He relaxed.

"That settles it then," she replied. "We sail for Randona." They smiled at each other. "Oh, by the way, Silverwind," she added with insincere sweetness, "I will remember what you said about ashes and bait." The wizard's smile slipped just a bit.

## Two

The wagon rolled down the gravel-covered streets of Tarnsa between mismatched one and two-storied buildings. The town evidenced no sign of urban planning. Main streets followed centuries-old paths and the side streets broke off at odd intervals and often at odd angles. Since the majority of the town's activity centered around the waterfront, there was no town square, although there was an area that had been set aside for the grazing of animals, a town commons, just to the south of the center area in what had at one time been the extreme outskirts.

"Are you sure this is the way to Fulco's?" Oceanvine asked.

"Of course it is," Silverwind replied with a confident laugh. "I'm very good with directions."

"Right!" she replied, excess sarcasm making puddles on the floor of the wagon. "You have trouble finding your way around your own house. I'm fairly certain we should have turned left at the last fork."

"You're both wrong," Candle said, closing his journal and putting both it and the pencil away. "If we're going to Fulco's, we should have turned left at the first intersection after the town limit marker. Then right at the next fork on to Harbor Road and then left on Chandlers Way . Third door on the right." Both adults turned to stare at him. "I used to live here, you know," Candle explained.

Oceanvine and Silverwind looked at each other for several long seconds. As one they shrugged and laughed at their own foolishness.

"All right, Candle," Silverwind told the lad. "What's our best route to Fulco's from here? Do we have to turn back?"

"Nah, just take the third left up ahead. That's Old Mill, it'll eventually empty out on Water Street, then take a left on Harbor and a right on Chandlers," Candle replied smugly. It felt good to know something they didn't.

He felt so good, in fact, that he didn't notice a pair of familiar faces watching him from the edge of the street; two faces that belonged to boys with whom he once shared a common employer. They watched carefully as the wagon rolled past and only spoke after it was out of sight.

"Cor, Rosty, do ya know who that is?" one boy, slightly taller than the other with tangled black hair, asked. He wore a pair of dark brown loose-fitting breeches that must have been recently acquired since he hadn't worn any holes in the knees. His tunic, on the other hand, had more area covered by multicolored patches than by its original cream-colored fabric and there was little of the original hemline left.

"Nah, Rocker," Rosty replied, brushing a long dirty red curl of hair out of his eyes. Rosty's clothes were similar to Walker 's, save that his were mostly grey. "That ain't Candle. No way! He bugged weeks ago. Candle might be small, but he ain't stupid. He wouldn't come back."

"I tell ya," Rocker insisted, "that's him. Don't know where he picked up the spiff 'parel, dressed like a lord he is, but that's him."

"C'mon!" Rosty scoffed.

"Don't believe me then, but I'm gonna tail 'em, see where they're goin'. Daddy Fox's gonna wanna know. Comin'?"

Rosty thought about it. If it really was Candle and he didn't go along with Rocker, then he'd be low man for a week. That many beatings would leave him prey to the others, which would lead to still more beatings, maybe worse. On the other hand if the kid in the wagon wasn't Candle, Daddy Fox didn't need to hear about it.

"Let's go," Rosty said at last.

Keeping up with the cart was no great effort for the two boys. They knew every back alley and empty lot in town and whenever their quarry made a turn, they were able to take a short cut and catch up again.

Soon the wagon stopped in front of a small shop with a grimy, yellowed glass window on which were emblazoned the faded words, "Fulco of Tarnsa, Provisioner." Silverwind and Oceanvine hopped deftly out and tied the horses' reins to a conveniently placed hitching post. Then they walked toward the front door of Fulco's.

"Coming, Candle?" the wizard called loud enough to be heard clearly by Rocker and Rosty. That was all they had to hear. The two boys turned and ran pell-mell back up Chandelers Way. Candle caught sight of their retreating backs out of the corner of his eye, but when he turned to look at them they had already disappeared.

"What about our stuff?" Candle asked, remembering what a bonanza the luggage would have been to him.

"It'll be all right," Silverwind replied, smiling.

"But someone might steal it," the boy countered.

"It's a good point," Oceanvine agreed, wondering, not for the first time how Silverwind could be so naively trusting of human nature. "I'll handle it."

"Feel free," Silverwind shrugged. "Nothing exotic though."

"Simple repulsion should do the job," she replied. "Out, Candle. Otherwise you'll disrupt the ward." The boy jumped off the back of the wagon and Oceanvine closed her eyes for a moment. "That should do it."

"What did you do?" Candle asked interestedly.

"I set a protective ward up around the wagon. Simply put, anyone who gets too close will feel sick until he moves away again. The closer he gets, the sicker he will feel."

"If he gets inside, would he die?" Candle asked.

"No," the pretty young mage replied, "but he might wish he did. I doubt anyone but an accomplished mage could get that far without passing out."

"Can you teach me how to do that?"

"Your abilities aren't quite developed enough to set and maintain a ward," Silverwind told him as gently as he could, "but maybe in a year or two if you work very hard you may be able to maintain a low-level ward." Candle nodded, his disappointment showing openly. "Getting bored with levitation so soon?"

"Soon? I mean, I have been," Candle corrected himself, "at it for weeks!"

"That long?" the wizard chuckled. "How are you doing at manipulating multiple objects?"

"I can handle two stones at once," the boy asserted.

"That's true," Silverwind allowed. "Can you pick a lock by magic?"

"I can do that without magic!" Candle laughed.

"When you can do it with magic, I'll teach you how to make fire," Silverwind promised.

"Really?" Silverwind nodded. "But I don't have a lock to work on," Candle complained.

"We can get one here," Silverwind told him, holding the door open. "Shall we?"

The stained wooden floor boards creaked under their weight as they entered the shop of Fulco of Tarnsa. Oceanvine paused just inside the door to breathe in the unique aroma of the shop, a spicy mixture of breads, meats and vegetables all wrapped up in the sweet tantalizing scents of cinnamon and cloves. It was not quite the same smell she experienced on her last visit here, but she hadn't expected it to be. Inventory was always in a state of flux, but that was just part of the charm. There was always at least one shop like Fulco's in any town and the better ones were Oceanvine's favorite places. Let other girls go shopping for clothes and jewelry. Give her a well-stocked general store any day!

Candle knew this store too although this was the first time he had ever stepped inside. Fulco, known among the townsfolk for the wide variety of goods in his inventory, culled from the finest available on Maiyim, was also known among the street children as one of the terrors of the town - a monster in human guise. No one tried to steal from him more than once. He might look fat, but he was quick and capable of smacking a potential thief almost before he could touch the potential booty.

Stories were told among Daddy Fox's boys about how one of their number once sneaked into Fulco's basement larder and was never seen again. Candle privately doubted such stories, but he took their message to heart; don't mess with Fulco!

Fulco looked up as the trio entered. He smiled as he shoved himself off the high stool he was perched on and met Silverwind halfway.

"Welcome, wizard, journeywoman!" he greeted them, remembering Oceanvine's preferred title. "How may I serve the Duke's own heroes?" Silverwind cleared his throat while taking in the salutation. Obviously the news had traveled fast. Before he could respond, however, Fulco caught sight of Candle. "You, boy! Keep your hands off the merchandise. I don't put up wi..."

"Candle is my apprentice, Master Fulco," Silverwind informed the merchant smoothly, causing the man to make an abrupt about-face in attitude.

"My apologies, m'lord," he replied sincerely. "Please forgive me, but I thought he was one of the young thieves that live off the streets here. I see now that he is dressed far too well to be..."

"You weren't completely wrong, Master Fulco," the wizard told him. "Candle used to be a thief here in Tarnsa. Perhaps you remembered his face."

"You apprenticed a thief?" Fulco asked in wonder as the shop door opened and closed again, but he was so surprised, that he didn't even notice.

"I apprenticed a novice mage," Silverwind corrected him. "His behavior has been beyond reproach since then. Well, mostly anyway."

"Although," a familiar voice drawled from the doorway, "I'll bet the University will never be the same by the time he graduates."

"Geraint!" Both Silverwind and Oceanvine greeted the man at the same time. Geraint was a large man with salt-and-pepper hair, and a matching beard. The smile on his face was only slightly outshined by the sparkle in his eyes.

"Lucky guess!" Geraint laughed. He stepped forward with a brown cloth sack in hand and hugged both Silverwind and Oceanvine before turning toward Fulco. Silverwind and Geraint had been partners years earlier before they faced the demon Arithan on the Isle of Fire. They defeated the demon, but at a great cost. Both mages needed to find their own ways to deal with the demon's dying curse; strong haunting visions and pain that related directly to the use of higher magics. They hadn't seen each other again until just a few weeks earlier.

"Geraint, you old scoundrel!" Fulco laughed. "Have you got that Ponaran paperfruit you promised me last time? It ought to be in season."

"It is indeed, Fulco," Geraint replied with a hearty laugh, "but the shipment had just arrived and I didn't have the time before my tide to sort it all out properly; I know you only want the best. It should be here in a day or three, whenever the next ship arrives."

"I pay your prices because of the special handling, you know," Fulco replied suspiciously. "Paperfruit is delicate cargo."

"No need to worry, my friend," Geraint assured him. "I recently hired two journeyman mages fresh out of University. They're more than capable of giving you that special handling and I may even be able to deliver more often."

"You don't want to flood the market," Fulco warned.

"Then I'll expand my services. Here try this." Geraint reached into the sack and pulled out a large flat wheel of cheese. "Real Sonatrie soft cheese from Ellisto," he explained.

"You're kidding!" Fulco exclaimed in disbelief. He reached out to touch the center of the wheel to feel for ripeness. It felt cool to the touch and was still fairly firm. "You aren't putting me on, are you? Ellistan Sonatrie should be too far gone to be edible by now, and this isn't even fully ripe yet."

"Yes, Sonatrie does tend to turn very quickly if it isn't eaten," Geraint admitted, "but any decent mage can slow down the process long enough for safe transport. Go ahead, taste it."

Fulco pulled out a knife and a loaf of bread and served a thin wedge of the cheese on a slab of bread to each person before helping himself.

"I usually prefer mine fully ripe," he admitted at last, "but this is excellent; far superior to the domestic. Nobody will ever believe it's the real thing, though."

"I expected that," Geraint replied, reaching into the sack again, "and had a copy of the bill of sale and certification made. Each wheel will come with one. Connoisseurs will know the difference if your competitors try to foist off the domestic stuff as imported in any case."

"My customers will anyway," Fulco agreed, "I carry the domestic cheese too. How much?" Geraint

named a price. "That much? I'd have to charge over three times as much as I do for domestic!" They haggled for a while. Silverwind and Oceanvine glanced at each other, realizing that the two businessmen might be at it for a long time, and started for the door.

"Stick around," Geraint told them before they could turn the handle. "You're the reason I'm here. I'm in a hurry, Fulco. Here's my final offer." He wrote a number down on a slip of paper.

Fulco looked at it and smiled. "Yes, I think I could handle it for that price, if you'll throw in this wheel as part of the deal." Geraint shrugged and stuck his hand out. Fulco accepted it and the deal was made. "How many wheels can you provide?"

"I can bring them in once each month. Just let me know how many you want from one delivery to the next. Tell you what, see how well this wheel sells and then place an order with my man when he arrives with the paperfruit." Fulco nodded and Geraint turned toward Silverwind. "Remember the deal we made in Keesport?" he asked. The wizard nodded. He'd decided that he needed someone to forward his mail. "Well, here's your first delivery." Geraint handed over a large oil cloth envelope. It had been tied shut by the attached cords and then the cords themselves were sealed together within a small hollow lead slug into the face of which the royal arms of Granom had been impressed.

Oceanvine curiously looked over Silverwind's shoulder to get a better view of the envelope. She had never seen a letter from a king before and wondered idly if His Majesty had written it personally or if it had been penned by some trusted royal functionary and signed along with several dozen others without the king ever truly being aware of the contents.

"You could have opened it," the wizard commented. "It's addressed to both of us."

"I did notice that," Geraint agreed amiably, "but it most likely pertains to a business I'm no longer in. The second name on the address should probably be Oceanvine, not Windchime."

Silverwind glanced at the address again. He was startled and embarrassed to realize that he had not noticed that the address specified Geraint by his long-discarded mage name. Old habits, he thought to himself regretfully.

"Well," Candle prompted him, "you gonna open it or not?"

Silverwind slid around to shoot a quick look at his apprentice and in doing so he observed that everyone in the room was waiting for him. Nodding, he turned his attention to the seal. As effortlessly as he might shrug his shoulders, he cast a spell and the compressed lead roundel bulged slightly in the center and slipped off the pieces of string and fell clatteringly to the floor.

While Silverwind untied the knot Candle picked up the seal. It looked sort of like a coin with an oblong-shaped hole running through it from edge to edge. He saw some numbers impressed into the reverse side and wanted to ask about them. The others, however, were more interested in the contents of the envelope so he dropped it into a pocket in his trousers and listened as Silverwind read the letter.

"Unto our loyal subjects, the Most Honorable Wizard Silverwind, Marquess of Sentendir and Master Windchime, Knight of the Silver Stay, does His Royal Majesty Ksaveras IX, Lord of all Granom, Duke of Quirnlia, and Beloved of Gran send most courteous greetings and salutations."

Candle thought that sounded quite splendid and was confused when Geraint commented sarcastically, "Nothing especially exciting there."

"Marquess?" Oceanvine asked suspiciously, "Knight?"

"We did a service for the king some years ago. It's a long story, but he found it cheaper to grant us titles than to pay us in cash."

"A knighthood maybe," Oceanvine objected, "but a Marquess stands in the second rank of the peerage."

"What's your point?" Silverwind countered. "The title sounds grand enough, I suppose, but Sentendir is an uninhabited island in northeast Granom, so I get no revenues from my rank. For that matter, you have the right to be called Lady Oceanvine while in court if you choose. It's only a courtesy title, I'll admit, since your degree only carries a grant of arms, but it's worth as much as any I have."

"But why did you never tell me?" she asked insistently. Candle wondered why the matter didn't seem as important to him as it did to Oceanvine. He'd been surprised to learn that Jason was heir to the Duchy of North Horalia, but the young ex-thief had rapidly become used to living in a castle. Somehow seeing how comfortable Silverwind was around nobility, he reasoned, it wasn't surprising that he had some high title himself.

"What difference would it have made?" the wizard countered Oceanvine's objection. "Would you have gone around all day calling me 'my lord?' Not hardly! Besides, it was so long ago, I'd practically forgotten it. Now let's finish the letter."

"All Granomen know of your astounding prowess in the magical arts..." Silverwind continued reading aloud, then in an aside, "They ought to, those he hasn't told personally have been reading that trash Ysemay wrote."

"Does her stuff sell well in Granom?" Geraint asked.

"Probably," Silverwind replied wryly. "Trolls are as gullible as anyone."

"I'm more concerned with all the flattery," Oceanvine pointed out. "Any letter that starts out like that has got to be leading up to something."

"Not necessarily," Silverwind contradicted. "Kings always write this way. I think it goes with the crown; all that extra weight on their heads or something."

"All right," she challenged him, "prove me wrong."

The wizard shrugged and looked back at the letter, "Let's see. He continues on with the sweet talk for another couple of paragraphs. Oh oh. I guess you were right, Vine. 'Therefore we summon you both to appear before us in the Wurra Palace on a matter of the gravest import. Travel with all due haste for the well-being of our realm may be at stake.'

"That doesn't bode well, now does it?" Silverwind asked at last. His question was answered in silence.



"Does this mean we're not going right home?" Candle asked, finally breaking the silence. He noticed that Fulco had managed to politely make himself busy on the other side of the shop. The man wasn't really out of earshot, but it gave them the illusion of privacy.

"I'm not," Silverwind replied, "but there's no reason why you can't go with Oceanvine to Randona and then to Renton."

"Whoa!" Oceanvine protested. "He's your apprentice. Besides, I'll be taking my master's exams and will have to leave him on his own for Emmine only knows how long."

"Candle's a big boy, Vine. He can certainly take care of himself for a day or so if necessary. Just introduce him to the University's library and the gymnasium and he'll be more than busy."

Oceanvine's and Candle's protests were abruptly cut off by Geraint, who said, "They're both coming with us."

Candle immediately perked up. The idea of sailing to the kingdom of the trolls appealed to him. He'd seen Granomen before; there were a few here in town and the Duke of North Horalia had several on his staff, but they kept mostly to themselves except when drunk, and then Candle knew enough to stay away from them.

"I'd rather Oceanvine didn't have to put off her master's exams," Silverwind countered.

"Let her take them in Querna," Geraint suggested.

Oceanvine's reaction was to cock her head slightly to one side to ponder the idea. It took a bit of consideration to abruptly change her plans, but hadn't Silverwind also taken his master's at Querna? Yes, she liked the idea, realizing immediately that, illogically, it meant she would have to take her wizard's through Merinne and be only the second mage in history to earn a degree in all three universities. Silverwind was the first.

"I like it," she agreed enthusiastically.

"I don't," Silverwind replied flatly.

"Why not?"

He didn't have a good answer; it was just a gut feeling and while he paused to wonder why he objected, Geraint took the matter out of his hands, "Doesn't matter whether you like it or not. If Kseveras wants two mages, you're going to need her. You know that."

Silverwind closed his left hand thoughtfully around his chin, loosely encompassing his neatly trimmed salt and pepper beard. "You're right," he admitted after a moment. "Let's conclude our business here and then we can look for a ship headed for Granom."

"In Tarnsa?" Fulco asked, dropping the pretense of privacy. "Ocean-going ships don't dock in this port. There's no room and the harbor is too shallow."

"Never?" Silverwind asked.

"Hardly ever. That's why my inventory is so unique here. If the big ships came here, the foreign stuff would be easy to get. The only ships of the outer seas that come here are the smaller ones, and even then it's usually just to escape a bad storm. The inner seas are no place to ride out a storm if you have a choice. What else can I do for you?"

Silverwind proceeded to sell the horse and wagon they had ridden into town on, taking some of the price out in a few supplies and a pair of locks to keep his promise to Candle. He also chose a water-tight, cedar-lined wooden chest for Candle to keep his belongings in. The canvas pack he'd been given in Castle North was fine for overland travel, but on the outer seas everything got wet sooner or later unless kept in a sea chest.

"How did you get here?" Silverwind asked Geraint later as they sat in the tap room of a nearby inn.

"Hmm? Oh, on theSkate," the former mage replied, draining the remaining ale from his third mug of the evening. "Didn't I mention that?"

"No," Oceanvine told him quickly, slamming a heavy glass mug of hard cider down on the rough wooden table, "you didn't. You mean Jocey is in port and you didn't tell us? Why are we wasting time here?" Some of the cider splashed out and caught Candle just under his eye. He squawked a protest and moved to the other side of the table next to Silverwind, before taking another sip of his drink, a mixture of fruit juices.

"There's no hurry," Geraint told her as she started to get to her feet. "She'll be in port another two days at least. I left just as they were unloading her cargo and the crew will want shore leave, so she won't be able to leave right away." He paused to beckon to a barmaid. "We're also looking to pick up some tobacco for the trip back. That might take some time, but it'll be worth it to keep her from dead-heading. Anyone else want another?" he asked when their waitress arrived.

"Dinner might be a better idea," Oceanvine replied. Geraint nodded agreement and they ordered food to go along with the next round. "Why not take theSkate to Granom?" she asked, with a hopeful glint in her eye. "Jocey told me she could sail the oceans well enough."

"Jocey would know," Geraint allowed, "but do you have any idea of how expensive it is to operate a ship, even a small brigantine like theSkate?"

"No," Silverwind drawled with a crooked smile, "but I'll bet you do by now in ghastly detail."

"You can say that again," Geraint shook his head. "You know, Elewys and I thought we were getting the better part of the deal when Jocey offered to sell us theSkate in exchange for one third of our business. Now I'm not so sure."

"You think you got cheated?"

"Not at all. Before closing the deal we had theSkate independently appraised. Her material value is twice as much as Jocey got from the deal even counting the unpaid portion of the mortgage, but what we hadn't accounted for was the maintenance costs. Jocey never let anything slide, that's why the ship was so valuable, and she insisted on making the maintenance schedule part of the contract."

"Have you been losing money?" Silverwind asked. more than a little surprised.

Geraint shrugged and answered, "Well, no, but we haven't increased our profits as much as expected."

"So you figured wrong, but you're still making more now than before," Silverwind concluded.

Geraint shrugged. "The worries are greater now," he admitted as the waitress arrived with their meal and another round of drinks. "The best way to stay in the black," he continued after a hearty draft of ale, "is by keeping the Skate close to a regular route. In any case the smaller ships like the Skate cannot safely sail to Granom except by way of Bellinen."

"That's going the long way, isn't it? I mean it's practically a circumnavigation of the globe."

"True," Geraint agreed, "It would also take the better part of the year to make the voyage, assuming you could find a ship going all the way. More likely, you'd have to change ships three or four times. I've done it. No, the only way we'll get to Querna by the end of the summer is by sailing direct."

"But if we can't sail on the Skate," Oceanvine asked, "and the big ocean-going ships aren't in Tarnsa, how are we going to book passage to Granom?"

"An old Granomish saying; 'You can't get there from here,'" Geraint replied.

"Then we'll have to go somewhere else," Oceanvine replied tartly. "How about Keesport?"

"Keesport is one of the busiest in Emmine, second only to Randona, and we'd be sure to find a ship going our way," Geraint agreed hesitantly, "but it's several days in the wrong direction."

"I've been thinking about this since we left Fulco's," Silverwind announced, "and I think that Kanadu is our best bet. Geraint, why not take the Skate there? Most ships in northeast Emmine put in there on their way to and from the outer seas."

"I don't know," Geraint replied uncertainly. "Kanadu is a rough place. All those Orenta and Granomen mixing together or rather not mixing at all. I'd hate to get caught up in some interracial incident."

"Do you have a better proposal?"

"What about Northport?" the ex-mage suggested.

"It's on the other side of the island," Silverwind replied, "at least a week away if the weather is with us and I don't recall that it's much more than a glorified fishing town."

"It's larger than Tarnsa," Geraint pointed out, "and the harbor has a good deep channel. The larger ships do put in there occasionally."

"Occasionally?" Oceanvine asked. "That has an uncomfortable ring of irregularity."

"It's not a routine stop for most ships," he admitted, "but we probably wouldn't have to wait more than a week or so."

"Turnover time in Kanadu probably wouldn't be more than a day or two," Silverwind pointed out. "Besides, we've been on Kanu before without trouble. What's your real concern?" Geraint merely shrugged sheepishly but inadvertently glanced at Candle. The boy was quietly eating a peach, nectar running down his chin, dripping onto his tunic. "Hmm," Silverwind considered Geraint's tacit point while handing a napkin to his apprentice. "No," he decided. "The boy can take care of himself if we have to

leave him alone."

"You sure?"

"Absolutely," the wizard told his former partner firmly. He suddenly realized that Candle had not spoken a word, unless directly addressed, since they had left Fulco's. This was not characteristic behavior for the apprentice mage who was usually a hyperactive bundle of questions. "Something wrong, Candle?"

Candle kept one eye on the half-open door as he quickly glanced up and answered, "Don't know."

"Then why are you watching the door so intently?"

"Thought I saw someone I knew."

"When?" Silverwind asked.

"Before I met you," Candle replied distractedly.

The wizard had assumed that and tried to rephrase the question, "No, I mean when did you see him?"

"Just before Fulco's. Two of the boys I used to work with, and then I think I saw another one following us here."

"You're not sure?" Oceanvine asked. Candle blinked and turned to face her sleepily, but didn't say anything. "Something's wrong here," she remarked.

Silverwind closely examined the boy, using the same diagnostic spell he had on Oceanvine. "There's magic at work here, but I've never encountered this spell before. Windchime?"

Geraint, realizing how serious this might be, decided to overlook the use of his former mage name. He closed his eyes and latched into Silverwind's spell. It was a powerful bit of magic and Geraint could feel the nightmares at the periphery of his consciousness. They had been there since the incident on the Isle of Fire, always waiting for the chance to strike. They were the reason he had put his life as a mage behind him.

How did Silverwind manage to keep going? he wondered. Then he slammed an imaginary door in the face of the nightmares that threatened him and turned his mind to the problem at hand. Under the influence of the spell, his eyes saw the world by a different light. Silverwind seemed to glow golden yellow. It was a color of comfortable familiarity to Geraint, one he had once been quite used to. Two tendrils of Silverwind's light stretched out toward Candle. One of them, Geraint noticed, was the string of the apprenticeship spell between the wizard and his apprentice. He noted in passing that the spell seemed to have been stretched to the limit several times and the string had formed the magical equivalent of calluses. Geraint smiled briefly. In a matter of weeks the string had built up the equivalent of over a year's worth of calluses.

He turned his attention to the other string, the diagnostic spell. That string was a different, lighter color, denoting a much higher energy level than the apprenticeship spell. Geraint ran his consciousness, which seemed like a dark orange glow to his magic-enhanced vision, down the length of the string, reading the results Silverwind had already obtained. He was halfway down the string when he was abruptly overtaken by a golden beam of intense energy.

"Vine!" Geraint heard Silverwind admonish the blond mage sharply. "Look if you want, but let Windchime work. This is his specialty."

"Sorry," Oceanvine replied contritely and slacked off a bit from her hold on the diagnostic string.

For Geraint it had been as though she had run straight through him, nearly knocking him over. Now his perception was that she stood to one side with only the lightest touch on the magic string. He finished examining Silverwind's results and then looked directly at the spell affecting the young apprentice.

He spent a little time studying the apprenticeship spell. Silverwind had used an interesting variant on the standard spell; nothing particularly earth-shaking, but it bound Silverwind as strongly as it did Candle. It was an idealized model of such a spell, but most masters preferred to minimize such bonds. Then he turned his mind toward Candle himself.

The boy's aura had merged so well with the apprenticeship spell that Geraint had trouble telling where one ended and the other began. Then he noticed that the aura itself was tainted. In medical terms, it was fighting off an infection, an analogy that was both accurate and apt. Geraint looked for a source of the infection and found a very dim, pulsating blue string trailing loosely in from the door. Geraint only needed a few seconds to recognize the spell. He'd seen it all too often.

"Compulsion spell," he reported with a hint of disgust, "and a very dirty one at that."

"Thought as much," Silverwind agreed grimly. "Any relation to the Hook?"

"It is the Hook," Geraint replied flatly.

Oceanvine gasped. "I thought the Hook took a long time to establish."

"Over a week, yes," Geraint agreed. "This is just the first phase. Whoever is casting the spell is at his limit, however. The initial spell is a relatively high energy spell, but whoever is casting this is just barely maintaining his link. We can cut the string easily with no fear of harming the boy, but first I think we should follow the string back to the bastard who's casting the spell."

"Creative mayhem?" Silverwind asked mildly.

"Something a little more terminal," Geraint replied bleakly.

"Oh, then let me handle it."

"No!" Oceanvine said suddenly, her eyes still closed. "Allow me."

Even with his eyes open, Geraint was able to see what happened next. Oceanvine began to glow visibly, attracting the attention of the others in the taproom. Suddenly a fireball formed next to Candle and then immediately flashed away and out the door. A moment later there was a brief scream that was abruptly choked off, replaced by a horrid sizzling, burning sound. Geraint and Silverwind ran to the door, but by the time they arrived the only visible sign of Oceanvine's magic was a cloud of smokey steam and a small pile of white ashes across the street.

"That wasn't very subtle, Oceanvine," Geraint told her disapprovingly.

"I'm not very subtle either," Oceanvine replied matter-of-factly. "I also wasn't particularly interested in

giving the bastard a fighting chance." Geraint stared at her. A few weeks ago, Oceanvine had never even heard of the Hook. He said as much. "Elewys told me what it was like when she was Hooked. I won't let anyone suffer that sort of perversion, not if I can help it."

"Candle?" Silverwind called softly.

The boy looked up. "What happened?"

"Nothing that you need to be concerned about," the wizard assured him. Candle noticed that he had a half eaten meal in front of him, and decided to finish it. The others had finished eating, but Geraint signalled the waitress for another round.

"You sure?" Oceanvine asked. "I find it hard to believe anyone would have tried such a thing on someone at random."

"Not unless he was completely alone," Silverwind agreed. "Hmm, I think you fried our friend too quickly. I'd like to know why he was casting a spell on Candle."

"Daddy Fox," Candle said simply, putting a hunk of bread back down on his plate.

"Excuse me?"

"The man I used to work for," Candle explained. "I stayed there about a month. A lot of boys worked for him. He taught us how to pick pockets and locks. We had to give him all the money and stuff we stole."

"What did he give you?" Oceanvine asked. "Food?"

"Nah. We had to feed ourselves too, but he gave us a safe place to sleep, if we brought him enough."

"And if you didn't?" she pressed. Silverwind listened quietly from across the table. This was more than Candle had told them about his brief career as a thief.

"Low man was beaten," Candle replied. "Hard."

"Were you ever low man?"

"Too often," Candle told her bitterly.

"Sounds like a lousy deal to me," Oceanvine opined. "Why'd you stay?"

"I didn't."

"I mean why did you stay as long as you did?"

"Where else did I have to go?" Candle countered Oceanvine's query. "If I tried to strike out on my own, Daddy Fox would have had me turned in, put back in the work house, if the other boys didn't just kill me for the fun of it."

"No!"

"Well, probably not," Candle admitted. "I was a runaway from the workhouse, so Daddy Fox coulda collected a reward for turnin' me in. He'd of taken it out of the hide of anyone who actually killed me."

"But you did leave eventually," Geraint pointed out.

"Yeah. I couldn't take it any more, so I left town."

"We found him ransacking our supplies the first night out of Tarnsa," Silverwind commented.

"So naturally you apprenticed him," Geraint concluded. Silverwind grinned his response. "Wait a minute! What does this Daddy Fox have to do with the crispy critter across the street? Was he the mage?"

"Nah!" Candle replied quickly. "He don't know magic, but if there was a crooked magician in town, he'd know him."

"That makes sense," Oceanvine commented.

"Well, we'll be leaving Tarnsa soon," Silverwind commented. "No doubt we'll be leaving this Daddy Fox behind as well."

"I think it might be best if we sleep aboard the Skate for the duration of our stay," Geraint suggested with just the hint of a drunken slur in his voice.

Silverwind and Oceanvine agreed instantly, but Candle privately wondered whether they were still being watched.

Four

"Ahoy, Madoc!" Geraint called out as the party approached the end of the long wharf where the brigantine Skate was moored.

"Ahoy yourself," the large, black-haired first mate replied jovially, motioning that they should come aboard. "Didn't expect to see you back so soon. I see you found the wizard already. Fast work. No wonder you're the boss. Welcome back!" he greeted Oceanvine and Silverwind. "Who's this?" he indicated Candle. Silverwind introduced his apprentice.

"Madoc," Geraint asked after Madoc had greeted the boy, "is Jocey aboard?"

"Skipper's ashore, trying to get that cargo of tobacco you wanted. Should be back soon, though."

"Good. I plan to talk her into a small side trip before you return to Keesport."

"You have to talk her into it?" Oceanvine asked. "I though you and Elewys were majority owners."

"We are, Elewys owns one third and I own one third. The point, however, is that Jocey owns a third as well. She's an equal partner and I don't have Elewys here to swing the vote, so I'll have to appeal to her business sense. In the meantime, Madoc, we'll all be staying on board."

"We have a little room," Madoc replied, "but someone's gonna have to double up. This is primarily a cargo ship after all."

"Candle can bunk with me," Silverwind replied.

"Good enough. You know the way, or do you want a native guide to your cabins?"

"I think we can manage," Geraint shrugged. "Of course, there's not much to do until our luggage arrives."

"I'll see that it's put in your cabins," Madoc assured them. "So, where is it that you're going next."

"Me?" Geraint asked, grinning. "Silverwind and I have been summoned to Querna. Seems the Granomish king wants to see us."

"Querna? It'd take forever to get there in the Skate. Jocey would never agree to take her across the Nildar. I'm no businessman," Madoc continued thoughtfully, "but it seems to me that you would have to pick up something bloody valuable to make that trip worthwhile."

"See?" Geraint said to his companions. "Actually we just need to get to Kanaduin. We can book passage on a Granomish ship there."

"Trolls aren't known for their sailing ability," Madoc frowned.

"You're prejudiced, my friend," Silverwind laughed. "It's true that many Granomen prefer not to go to sea, but those that do are often excellent mariners. They'd have to be to sail the Nildar."

"Besides," Geraint added, "most Granomish ships are at least half-manned by humans."

"What's this about Granomish ships?" A deep female voice with a trace of a sea rasp asked from the gangplank. Captain Jocey stepped confidently onto the smooth holystoned deck planks of her ship while the others called out greetings. She seemed small, especially compared to her huge first mate, but Jocey was wiry rather than slim with well-developed muscles honed from a lifetime at sea. "What's the matter?" she continued as she and Oceanvine hugged. They had formed a fast friendship during their last voyage together. "The Skate not ship enough for you anymore?" Her wide grin announced that she spoke in jest only.

"We need to get to Querna, fastest," Geraint explained.

"Kanaduin?" Jocey asked, leading them into her cabin. Madoc stayed on deck. It was his watch. Geraint nodded. "Rough place, but we've been there before. I imagine you lot can take care of yourselves. What about the tobacco? We'll be loading up tomorrow."

"Fast work," Geraint commented. "How much did you pay?" Jocey mentioned a number. "Not too bad," he admitted, "although I was hoping for a little better."

"Small crop this year. Very little high-quality leaf available, and you did insist on only the best. Now have you figured out how we're going to realize an equally high profit if we have to sail by way of Kana?"

"Easy. We'll sell some of it there. The Orenta will pay more than the folks in Keesport."



"Don't we have orders to fill?"

"Only for about half the cargo. We'll sell the other half then pick up something else to sell when we get back."

"Okay. You had me worried for a moment, especially after all those lectures about sailing with empty holds. Anything in particular we want in Kanaduin? Anyone want a drink?"

Geraint shrugged. "We'll play it by ear and yes."

Jocey had just opened her small wooden liquor cabinet when Madoc knocked at the cabin door.

"There's some men on deck, Skipper. They wanta talk to your guests."

"Send them in," Jocey shrugged.

"I don't think so," Madoc disagreed. "I'd hate to have to order someone to clean up afterwards."

Candle looked out a port hole and announced, "Daddy Fox and some friends."

"Hired muscle, it looks like," Oceanvine said as she looked out over Candle's shoulder. Six very tough, scruffy-looking men stood around a rail-thin caricature of a man. His dirty, wrinkled tunic hung loosely on him, hiding some of his thinness. His face was long, sharp, and bearded and his black hair hung in long greasy strings.

"That too," the boy agreed.

"Let's go see what they want," Silverwind decided.

"They want me," Candle replied.

"Probably," the wizard agreed, "but I don't give up apprentices that easily. Vine, set up a repulsion ward near the top of the ramp, just for safety sake. Nothing too vehement, mind." She nodded and settled down to cast the spell while the others left the cabin.

"Well, bosco?" Jocey asked challengingly from the deck a few moments, "what do you want?" Madoc began to quietly signal to various crew members who were on deck. Most of the crew had gone ashore after the hold had been emptied; only a few hands had been left on duty.

"My son," Fox grated in a voice with all the smoothness of broken glass. He pointed an almost skeletal finger at Candle.

Jocey paused uncertainly. She had been so obsessed with business talk that she hadn't taken much interest in the young apprentice. For all she knew he might have been this man's son.

"Your son?" Silverwind countered sarcastically. "I doubt that." He turned to Candle and asked softly, "He isn't, is he?"

"No, sir!" Candle exclaimed hastily. "He ain't nobody's father!"

"Good enough for me. Sir," he addressed Fox again. "The boy, whether or not he is related to you, is my

apprentice and under my protection. I'm sure you will rejoice that he has assured himself of a useful trade in the world."

"Ah," Fox replied, trying another tactic. "Then as his father I deserve recompense for the loss of the lad's work. You did apprentice him without my consent after all." Silverwind saw through the ply. He knew Fox figured that they would never actually pay for a boy like Candle and that he would soon be in Fox's hands again.

"If you really were the boy's father, which you would have to prove," Geraint cut in suddenly, "you would have some rights to the boy." Fox considered that for a moment while Geraint continued, "You did bring proof, didn't you? Produce it or be gone."

"I did not think such documents would be necessary," Fox replied. He could have documents made that said anything he wanted, but he hadn't thought he would need them. "For that matter who are you who claim to be some master craftsman? How do I know you don't intend to work the boy to death?" Fair questions since that was, indeed, what he planned to do when he got the boy back under his thumb.

"My identity," Silverwind replied, "is none of your business until you prove your claim." Fox, never the master of his emotions, began to shake with rage.

"Right," Jocey agreed. "Now move off, bosco, or I'll call the harbor police."

A meeting with the law was something Fox was not prepared to endure. It was true that he, or rather the man he paid protection to, had a few tame cops who could be trusted to see any situation his way, but the chances of getting enough of them here right now were slim. If Fox were a more rational man he might not have made his next move. At least he might have noticed the sailors Madoc had signalled, but rationality was not one of his more obvious characteristics.

"Get the boy," Fox commanded the thugs around him. The men started menacingly up the gangplank, but paused when they saw it would be a fair fight. "Get him!" Fox repeated.

The six thugs continued on up the ramp, but before they could go more than half way, they suddenly doubled over in agony. Two started retching violently and one fell off the ramp and into the water between the brigantine and the wharf. Silverwind grinned. It was more than he had asked for, but in hindsight he decided that Oceanvine had done well.

"You ought to choose less delicate allies, Fox," the wizard taunted. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed that the pretty blond, having done her job, had joined them on deck.

Oceanvine glanced casually over the ship's gunwales to see what had happened to the man who had fallen into the brine. She noted that he was able to swim and was cautiously making his way to the end of the ship before a stray wave could crush him against the wharf. She considered doing something about that, but then shrugged with a crooked grin on her face as though to say, "Oh well."

The rest of the men stumbled their way back onto the wharf only to face a livid Daddy Fox.

"What are you doing?" Fox screamed at them. "Get the boy!" Three of the men turned around and started back up the ramp and were immediately hit by the same agonizing stomach cramps they had experienced the first time. Something clicked in Fox's mind. "Witchcraft!" he screamed. "Black magic!" Witchcraft on Maiyim was defined as any spell more complex than a common spell cast by an unregistered mage or his apprentice. Black magic involved the worship of the evil god Aritos or any of his

demons.

"Interesting charges," Silverwind noted calmly to Oceanvine.

"I'd love to see him try to prove them," she replied with a smirk.

"You have your mage stone with you?" Silverwind asked.

Oceanvine pulled a small, rectangular solid of crystal-clear quartz out of her belt purse. Extremely high-order magic had been used to etch the seal of the University at Randona superimposed by her mage name inside the stone. At her touch the image began to glow a brilliant ruby red. It was enchanted to glow only when she touched it. It took at least two wizards working in concert to produce such an item and was widely regarded as an infallible form of identification.

"I never go anywhere without it," she grinned.

Silverwind returned her grin, reached into a pocket, and drew out a similar object. The image was the seal of the Merinne University, not Randona, and it glowed the gold color of wizardry. He wondered whether Geraint still carried the stone he received the day he was confirmed as a master. The seal inside it glowed emerald green.

Daddy Fox, meanwhile, was threatening to have them all arrested. His normally pale face had become bright red as he became more excited.

"He's bluffing," Candle told Silverwind. "I seen him go into a panic whenever a patrol came too near the 'Den'. That's what he calls his place. He bloody near fainted dead away one time when a constable knocked on the door." Candle's disclosure did not surprise Silverwind; he had expected as much. Silverwind took a deep breath and then, using a recently learned technique, he simply walked through Oceanvine's ward as though there was nothing there.

"Well then," he told Fox, "let's go."

Fox abruptly stopped his monologue and stared at the wizard. "What?" he asked.

"I said, 'Let's go.'"

"Uh, where?"

"The town constable's post, I imagine," Silverwind replied easily, "or whatever you call it here. Let's go. I'm ready. You can level whatever charges you like and eventually we'll meet you in court."

"Court?" Fox croaked.

"Court. You know - magistrates, lawyers, plaintiffs, defendants, civil and criminal suits. Fun stuff like that. I'm sure the judge will be more than happy to settle this for us, don't you think?"

Daddy Fox might have been stunned by Silverwind's latest tactic, but not to the point of complete senselessness.

"I'm sure that won't be necessary, sir," he replied haltingly. It was obvious that these people wanted to keep Candle with them. Maybe he could make something from this after all. They didn't flinch from the

idea of paying money. "We're both men of the world, don't ya know. I'm sure we can come to some sort of agreement without bringing in any, uh, outside parties." Silverwind raised a suspicious eyebrow, but said nothing, leaving Fox to ramble on. "I really do want the boy back, but if you've got your heart set on having him with you, well perhaps then we can agree on a small fee."

"Sure. How much did you have in mind."

Ah! Fox thought silently How much can I take him for ? Aloud, he said, "I think a hundred gold crowns would be fair and adequate."

"Hardly," Silverwind replied. "I honestly couldn't consider less than a thousand."

"A thousand?" Fox gasped. Who was this guy? Some foolish noble, no doubt, with more money than sense. "You got it, me lord. A thousand it is!" He stuck out his hand to seal the deal.

"Fine," Silverwind smiled. Instead of accepting the proffered hand he stuck his own out palm-upwards. "Pay up!"

"Huh?" Fox grunted, the blood draining from his face. There was something very wrong with this picture.

"I said, 'Pay up!' Apprenticeships cost money, you know. I have to feed and clothe him, and in a few years sponsor him to the University. Surely you don't think that a few hours of chores on his part will pay for all that. Frankly, I'm glad you turned up. I was beginning to think I'd have to pay his university tuition, but as his father, of course, that will fall to you."

"His father? Did I say I was his father?" Daddy Fox countered, his tongue practically tripping over itself in order to get the words out. "Let me take another look at th' boy. No, I see now that I was mistaken. Never seen that boy. Uh uh, not me. Sorry to have troubled you. I'll be off now. Yes, me lord, I'll be going. Ta!" Fox turned on one of the thugs with him and smacked him viciously across the face. "You moron!" he screamed at the cringing mass of muscle. "I told you that wasn't him."

"But, boss, you said..."

"Never mind what I said!" Fox snapped. He continued his harangue until they were at the far end of the wharf, but not so far that Silverwind could tell when Fox abruptly stopped his insincere monologue.

"That should be the last we see of that lot," Geraint commented dryly.

"I certainly hope so," Silverwind agreed with a smile.

"Just in case," Jocey added, "I'll make certain we have double guards posted tonight."

Five

"It's indecent!" Candle declared heatedly.

"Tanning is considered quite fashionable all across the Bellinen Archipelago," Oceanvine replied

serenely. She was wearing her favorite two-piece, Bellinen-style bathing suit and lay stretched out on a thick blanket in a quiet section of the foredeck of the Skate. The brigantine had left Tarnsa just before dawn on the morning tide two days earlier and was now well under way, headed northward through the Quarna Strait.

"It ain't proper," Candle insisted, "lyin' around naked and in plain view." The ship rocked gently in the moderate quartering wind and the boy, unused to the motion, clung tightly to one of the stays. The uneasiness made him irritable and after Captain Jocey threatened to let him swim all the way to Kanaduin, he decided that Oceanvine was the safest target of his aggravation.

"I don't hear anyone else complaining," Oceanvine pointed out, although she was not unaware of the surreptitious glances and, in some cases, outright stares from most of the crew, "and watch your grammar, Candle."

"All right," he muttered, "but it still ain't, is not right."

"And while you're at it, how about telling what you know about the Treaty of Carlifa?"

Candle groaned. He knew better by now than to ask whether or not he really had to. If there was one immutable law he had to live by with Silverwind and Oceanvine it was that once his daily lessons began, they would continue regardless of his protests. He stalled for time by exaggeratedly watching and listening to a passing bell buoy. Oceanvine seemed to think they were romantic or something. She called them the "Voice of the Inner Seas," but she saw through Candle's ploy immediately.

"That was between the elves and the trolls, right?" he asked uncertainly when she cleared her throat meaningfully. He was ambivalent about learning history. It made for interesting enough stories, but what possible use could such stories be to him? He was going to be a mage, not a story teller.

"The proper terms," Oceanvine corrected him, "are Orenta and Granomen."

"Silverwind calls them elves and trolls."

"Silverwind's a wizard; he can get away with it, and even he wouldn't do it to their faces."

"I heard him call Wizard Meadow an elf to his face several times."

"That's different," Oceanvine replied, turning herself over in order to tan her back, "Silverwind and Meadow have known and loathed each other cordially for years. The only reason Meadow didn't call Silverwind aschachter is that Meadow is too polite to stoop to name calling."

"What's a shaktah?" Candle struggled over the harsh sounding and unfamiliar word.

"Just something the Orenta call us when we refer to them as elves," Oceanvine informed him without bothering to translate the obscenity; the literal meaning would have sounded silly even if she had. "Now tell me about that treaty."

"A long time ago," Candle began.

"How long?"

Candle shook his head. "A long time. Before I was born."

"As far as we can tell," Oceanvine informed him, "you are twelve years old. Historically speaking that isn't a long time. It was eighty-seven years ago. Go on."

"Eighty-seven," Candle repeated dutifully. "The Orenta and Granomen met on the island of, of... Sinik?"

"Sinid."

"Whatever, and when they got there they agreed not to fight."

"That's it?" Oceanvine asked when it became obvious that Candle thought he had answered the question. "Is that really all you think there was to it?"

"Wasn't it?" he asked innocently.

"What about four centuries of prolonged animosity that encompassed two-thirds of the entire world? The Great War of 2136 through 2161 in which millions of Orenta and Granomen died?"

"I thought you wanted to know about the treaty," he countered antagonistically.

Oceanvine bit back an acidic reply and closed her eyes for a moment. When that failed to relax her, she sat up and tried again, as though casting high-order magic.

"Candle," she said at last, "the events leading up to the meeting on Sinid are every bit as important as the signing itself." She paused, seeing a look of confusion on Candle's face. He normally retained everything he was told and only occasionally had to be told something twice. Just what had he been writing down the day before when Silverwind told him about Carlifa? "Let me see your journal."

Candle hesitated. Oceanvine had never asked to see his journal before, but he handed her the notebook. It was getting very full and there were only a few empty pages left. It had also become worn and ragged around the edges from the constant handling. She turned back the tattered, sweat-stained cover and quickly thumbed through the pages, pausing briefly only to note the gradual development of the boy's writing skills. His vocabulary was limited as yet and he had a tendency to slip back into the poor speech habits he had displayed when they first met him, but he did seem capable of expressing himself.

He also had, she noticed, a tendency to slip small drawings in the margins and sometimes in the main body of the text when he thought about it in advance. His drawings were not mere doodles, however. They were illustrations, not at all crude, and meant to be a part of his notes. Finally, she reached the last page and found that he had drawn portraits of Silverwind and herself.

The boy showed some rough but genuine talent, she felt. Silverwind's smiling face seemed more noble than it truly was, almost god-like. With a few pen strokes Candle had managed to capture a hint of the wizard's power. Then she took a close look at her own likeness.

Am I really that hard? she wondered at the sobering experience of seeing herself through another's eyes. Instead of the easy smile that graced the wizard's face, she had been drawn with a most serious expression, almost a scowl. There was a touch of uncompromising ice in her eyes and the pen strokes seemed to suggest storm clouds around her.

"Very interesting," she admitted softly, "you're very good at this, but you really should have been taking notes. Try to remember that in the future." She handed him the notebook back and stretched out on the

deck again.

"What about the Treaty of Carlifa?" Candle asked a minute later in spite of himself.

"Hmm? Okay, tell me about it."

"I asked first," Candle countered boyishly, reminding Oceanvine just how young he really was.

"You did, huh? Very well," she sighed. "Because of the violent and nearly unpredictable currents in the Sea of Aritos, there was very little contact between the Bellinen and Granom Archipelagos until about one thousand years ago when the first ocean-going ships were built by human shipwrights."

"But there was some contact between archipelagos?" Candle asked.

"Some," Oceanvine agreed. "There was more association between Emmine and Bellinen because of the chain islands that stretch across the intervening distance between us. In fact the only documentable meetings between Orenta and Granomen occurred when fishing boats sailed too far out to sea and got caught in storms, but even then the records show that there was a mutual animosity between those two civilizations. Shipwrecked sailors were usually packed up and sent on their way more as a matter of getting rid of them than of any desire to help them.

"Finally, humans built the first ocean-worthy longships and later caravels and the way was open for world-wide trade. Those first explorers must have been exceedingly brave, desperate, or foolish, and many lives and ships were lost during the early exploration of the three oceans, but we owe much to those explorers who opened up the world to us." She noticed that Candle had tightened his grip on the line he held and was looking around nervously. She decided not to tell the lad about her own encounters with pirates and sea monsters and instead added, "Of course ocean voyages are much safer in these more modern days. The ships are much bigger."

When that did nothing to relieve the former thief, she continued, "Once there were ships capable of navigating the Aritos, there was also regular contact between all three of Maiyim's civilizations. Fortunately, the Emmine government and humans in general have been able to deal with the denizens of both Bellinen and Granom; the Granomen don't find humans automatically objectionable as they do the Orenta and the Orenta genuinely like us, or so Airblossom says."

"Who's Airblossom?"

"She was my roomie at the University," Oceanvine explained. "She's from Tinse, one of the islands in Bellinen."

"She's an elf?"

"An Orente," Oceanvine corrected him firmly, "and a very dear friend of mine."

"Oh," Candle said without any real feeling. He was more interested in finishing today's lesson. "What about the treaty?"

"While contact brought new friendships and profitable trade agreements between men and Orenta and men and Granomen, it only served to aggravate the natural antagonisms between the Orenta and Granomen."

"Natural?" Candle questioned, "you mean like the opposite poles of a magnet?" Silverwind had discussed magnetism with the boy the previous week. Now that had interested him for he was certain that magnetism was a form of magic although the wizard denied it.

"Well, maybe I misused the term," she admitted. "Actually it's a rather hotly debated question among scholars. Some feel that the mutual antipathy between Orenta and Granomen is indeed natural, that they were born that way and some say that it is caused by economic conflicts between them, but most feel that it is a socio-cultural trait."

"A what?"

"I mean that they don't get along with each other because their customs, values, and beliefs are not mutually compatible."

"I think they just don't like each other," Candle opined. Oceanvine shrugged. Maybe he was right.

"Regardless of the reasons," she continued, "a condition of war existed between Bellinen and Granom for several centuries. Most battles were little more than raids on coastal towns, although there were large-scale battles. Mages, for the most part, tried to keep themselves aloof from the war, but there were some notable exceptions especially among journeymen and masters, and both the King of Granom and Senate of Emmine required the teaching of offensive magic at their respective Universities. You'll have to learn all this in detail eventually, not only for the history, but to understand the dangers of destructive magic.

"Finally, in 2161, during the Battle of Sinid, the Wizard Crossreed, a human who had been hired as a war consultant by Warlord Damowā of Bellinen, looked upon the carnage of that last great battle. According to his memoirs he became violently ill when he saw what he was doing. He met in secret with his counterpart, the granomish Master Swageblock and together they agreed to suspend all magical activities associated with warfare. Without their mages to back them up both Damowā and King Ksaveras VII were forced to withdraw their troops. Swageblock was assassinated that night, possibly at his king's command. Crossreed, however, survived a similar attempt on his life and used his magic to bring both the king and warlord together in a small, one-room building in a rundown section of Carlifa, leagues away from either of their armies."

"How did he do that?" Candle asked, suddenly interested.

"Translocationary magic," she replied, "at least that's what Crossreed called it. He never explained exactly how he did it, although the theory is well known. One of my teachers felt that it required far more power than most mages are capable of mustering."

"Silverwind could do it, couldn't he?" Candle asked, a touch of hero-worship in his voice.

"It's possible," she replied. "Just between you and me, if there's anyone in the world who can duplicate Crossreed's feat it's Silverwind, but we'll probably never know."

"Why not?"

"Because unless it becomes vitally necessary he won't try. It's very dangerous to attempt a high-order spell without intense research or instruction. The results can be unpredictable."

"I thought magic was done by thinking about what you want to do and then using the power to do it."



"It is, although you simplify the process, but you have to understand how things are done before you do them. Making something hot or cold isn't just a matter of thinking about fire or ice, you have to understand what happens when something changes temperature. Candle!" she exclaimed suddenly. "Stop trying to change the subject."

"Who me?"

Oceanvine narrowed her clear blue eyes as she sat up once more to glare at the apprentice. A long moment passed before she returned to her lecture.

"Never mind how Crossreed cast the Translocation spell, the fact is that he did it. He also locked the two enemies up together in that building until they came to terms with each other. It took them three weeks just to decide that Crossreed was serious about keeping them there and another three weeks to agree to the terms of the treaty during which time both armies sat nervously across the battlefield from each other.

"Crossreed popped in on them from time to time, mostly to keep fighting from breaking out again, but by then both armies were sorely tired of fighting and without a general to goad them on, they were just as happy not to fight.

"Finally King Ksaveras VII and Damowä reappeared with the signed treaty and both armies went home. Do you know the terms of the treaty?" she asked Candle. The sound of another navigational buoy could be heard approaching as she waited for his answer.

"Stand by to shake out reefs! Stand by to apply studding sails!" they heard Captain Jocey's voice call out from the bridge, pronouncing the last phrase, "stunsils." The brigantine began a slow turn.

"Uh, first that they agreed not to fight anymore," Candle replied uncertainly. If nothing else it seemed reasonable. His mind was more on the activity above him, where four crewmen had stationed themselves across the topgallant and upper topsail booms on the foremast.

When the Skate was nearly perpendicular to the wind and the square foresail and lower topsail began to luff, Jocey shouted another pair of commands, "Shake out reefs! Up studding sails!"

"No. They never actually agreed to halt hostilities, but they did agree to withdraw both armies from Sinid peacefully. Further, they agreed to recognize each other's right to exist and to establish embassies in each other's capital cities. Finally they agreed not to outlaw the goods and services to and from each other's archipelago, but provided for reasonable taxes and licensing fees for their importation."

"That's it? That's what's kept the peace for eighty-six years?"

"Eighty-seven. Yes. Once they started talking, they stopped fighting. That isn't to say there haven't been incidents and relations are far from cordial, but they have been at peace and will most likely remain at peace for the foreseeable future."

"Make sail!" the command sounded after the studding sails had been applied. With all her canvas out, the Skate was prepared to fully exploit the moderate afternoon breeze. She turned back toward her previous course and increased speed and was soon cutting through the salt water at a velocity several knots higher than before.

Oceanvine returned to her sunbathing efforts and Candle found himself watching a single gull as it circled effortlessly over head on its stiff wings. Something bothered him about the story Oceanvine had told him. It wasn't finished, he thought.

"Oceanvine?" he asked.

"Hmm?"

"Elves and tr, I mean Orenta and Granomen. How do they get along now?"

"At a distance, usually," she replied. "There are a few Orenta living in Granom aside from the ambassador and his staff and likewise with Granomen in Bellinen. Mostly merchants and tradesmen, I understand, trying to make enough money to retire early by selling goods and services otherwise unavailable. I suppose that they are tolerated, which goes to show how far we have come, but..."

"But?" Candle prompted her.

"We've still got a long way to go," she replied sadly. "There are still twice as many alien Orenta and Granomen living in Emmine than in Granom and Bellinen combined and Emtos help the poor Orente who inadvertently stumbles into a Granomish bar." She smiled at a memory. "Airblossom and I tried that once."

"Why?" To Candle that sounded like the apex of stupidity. Even he knew enough to stay out of places where he wasn't wanted.

"We both belong to One Maiyim," she replied. Candle did not have to ask; the question was displayed prominently across his face. "One Maiyim," Oceanvine explained, "is a movement dedicated to uniting the peoples of the world in a single peaceful and prosperous whole. Our name was taken because we believe that only together can all the peoples of Maiyim achieve the true greatness that the gods intended for us. We're also very concerned about ecological changes brought about by the actions of people. The gods created Maiyim as it is for a purpose and it's our duty to keep it that way."

"But the gods also want us to use their gifts and that often involves changing the world," Silverwind said, surprising both of his associates. They hadn't been aware of his approach. "For that matter, Maiyim itself is a gift from the gods. How do you justify that?"

"Well, you caught me," Oceanvine admitted. "I was simplifying for Candle's sake."

"Oh, I think he's capable of understanding that the gods want us to use their gifts properly and with honor, without destroying them. Besides even the members of One Maiyim argue constantly over what is proper and improper use."

"We agree on the growing smog problem," she pointed out.

"Breathing smoke continuously does seem to be harmful," Silverwind agreed, "although that doesn't stop tobacco smokers. There are quite a few doctors who claim that the relaxing effects of tobacco smoke are quite beneficial."

"I notice you don't smoke," she pointed out.

"You think I should?"

"You have enough vices already," Oceanvine replied tartly.

"Ship off the starboard bow!" a voice shouted from the crow's nest above.

"Never a dull voyage," Silverwind mused as they turned to see the approaching vessel.

Six

The approaching ship was a topsail schooner; a two-master about the same size as the Skate whose rigging combined a strange-looking mix of triangular and square sails. The mainmast employed the same sort of triangular, schooner-rigged sails that the Skate did on her mainmast. The difference between the two ships occurred in the rigging on the foremast. Where four large rectangular pieces of canvas graced the booms and spars of the Skate's foremast, only the top half of the unknown ship's foremast was square-rigged, the lower section was schooner-rigged.

As they watched, a bright yellow and red flag was hoisted up the mainmast of the schooner.

"What's that for?" Candle asked.

"It's a signal flag," Silverwind explained. "They want to stop and talk for a bit. See? Jocey just raised her own parlay colors. I guess we get to talk to some elves."

"Orenta?" Candle asked. "How can you tell?"

"I might be wrong but that figurehead on the prow looks decidedly Orentan," the wizard replied, "although I don't doubt that the ship itself was made here in Emmine. There's not a shipyard in Bellinen worthy of the name and the trolls' ships don't look like that."

"Stand by to heave to!" went out the command. This time it was Madoc's deep voice that boomed out across the decks. Soon both ships had struck all their sails save for their jibs which they used to propel themselves slowly forward. Finally the jibs too were dropped and the two ships came to a halt within shouting distance in the deep waters of the Quarna Strait.

"Ahoy, the Skate !" a clear tenor called out across the intervening distance.

"Ahoy right back at ya, Direford !" Jocey called back. The other ship's name was City of Direford, named after one of Bellinen's international ports. "What news?"

"Mind if I come a visitin'?" the Direford's captain asked. It was a fair request. At this range they'd both run out of voice in a few minutes.

"You need to ask, Shiwā?" Jocey countered. "Come on over!"

A boat was lowered from the Direford into the choppy waters of the strait. Candle watched as it rode the two-foot swells until it was in the calmer waters to lee of the Skate. The two oarsmen were human and wore the same sort of drab clothing that the crewmen of the Skate did, but there were two Orenta in

the boat as well.

Like most of their kind they were tall, over six feet, and slim. Candle doubted that either of them would weigh in at better than one hundred seventy pounds. Their hair was kept short enough on top and on the sides so that their slightly pointed ears could be clearly seen, but in back it had been allowed to grow about eight inches long. It was a common style for seamen. What really set them apart from the oarsmen, however, was their clothing. Their shirts and trousers were boldly emblazoned with the same sort of vivid floral prints that Candle had seen the Wizard Meadow wear on his robes. They reminded him of the immodest clothing that Oceanvine sometimes wore.

Candle noticed that Oceanvine must have gone back to her cabin when he saw her climb back on deck, having changed into a typically Orentan set of shirt and shorts that were only slightly less revealing than the bathing suit she had been wearing. She joined Silverwind by the starboard gunwale where he had wandered while the visitors approached.

"What brings you to these waters, Shiwä?" Jocey asked jovially as she helped the Orentan ship's master on board. He was carrying a large wicker basket. "I thought you never left Bellinen. I see you managed to keep Maobawä with you."

"Why should I give up the best first mate and navigator on any sea?" Shiwä replied, matching his tones to Jocey's.

"You mean the second best," Jocey shot back.

"Oh?" Shiwä looked at Madoc appraisingly. "Are you practicing magic these days, Madoc?" Madoc laughed and shook his head. He knew well enough to stay out of the cross-fire. "And you're still a lousy hostess, Jocey," Shiwä continued. "I've been here for a whole minute and you've yet to offer me a drink."

"Madoc," Jocey said flatly, gesturing toward the salt water, "see if the gentleman would like a drink."

"Just as well I brought my own," Shiwä sighed dramatically. With a slight bow, he opened the basket and pulled a magnum-sized, burlap-wrapped bottle out from a bed of straw and presented it to the captain of the Skate.

"Spelled cizer?" Jocey asked hopefully.

"Direct, or almost, from Nentre itself," Shiwä proclaimed with a crooked smile. "Credit where it's due; I may hate the damned trolls, but they do know how to make a good slosh. Carried this bottle and a half a hold-full of its kin all the way from Granom. Know where I might get a good price for it?"

"Let's crack this bottle," Jocey suggested, leading her guests to the captain's cabin, "and if it's as good as I remember, my partners and I might be interested."

"You? Transferring cargo at sea is tricky at best and your holds aren't any larger than mine. For that matter," he commented, looking over the gunwales at the Skate's waterline, "you're not exactly deadheading."

"Well, you'll have to deliver to our warehouse in Keesport."

"You have a warehouse?" Shiwä was visibly impressed.

"Of course," Jocey shrugged, and then stopped and turned in her tracks. "Oh, you haven't met my passengers yet. Captain Shiwä, Maobawä, I present the Wizard Silverwind, his partner Oceanvine, and his apprentice Candle."

Shiwä's eyes widened with surprise. They were mages so Jocey was transporting them free, but oh, the prices she could charge just because she could truthfully say she had sailed with the great Silverwind. Shiwä felt a slight stab of jealousy for his old drinking buddy.

"My lord," he bowed deferentially to the wizard, "I've heard a lot about you."

"Most of it's probably untrue," Silverwind laughed gently and offered his hand. "Nice to meet you." The others exchanged greetings while Jocey ushered them the rest of the way to her cabin.

"Candle," she requested when they reached the cabin door, "would you go fetch Geraint? He ought to be here if we're going to discuss business."

"You called this spelled cizer?" Oceanvine asked Shiwä interestedly as Jocey began to expertly crack off the wax seal.

"Mm hm," Shiwä nodded. "The trolls of Nentre have their own school of magic, a very specialized one that only teaches one spell and only to sworn Cizer Guild members. I'm no mage and even Maobawä here can't tell me how it's done, but they cast a spell that guarantees that the cizer is perfectly chilled when you open the bottle."

"Sounds simple enough," Oceanvine shrugged, "although I would've never thought of it."

"Simple?" Maobawä asked incredulously. Aside from a few greetings it was the first time the shy Orente had spoken since boarding. "I've never been able to duplicate the spell and Merinne knows I've tried."

"Well, I don't know how they do it, but if I were trying to duplicate the results, I think I would set up a refrigeration spell on the contents of the bottle linked to a trigger spell all set off by the action of opening the bottle." Her words were accentuated by the satisfying pop that erupted as Jocey finally removed a wire cage that had secured the cork. After bouncing sharply off the ceiling the cork dropped to the floor and rolled under Jocey's dark wooden liquor cabinet.

"You make it sound so easy," Maobawä commented, "but I've never known anyone outside of Nentre to use such a cooling spell."

"Silverwind's the expert there," Oceanvine replied. "It was his spell."

"Actually it was Windchime's idea that got me started," Silverwind added.

"But you invented the actual spell," Geraint countered, standing in the doorway. "Company, cousin?" he asked Jocey. She handled the introductions once more and after a few minutes they settled down to business. "Yes, I think we can find a market for this, but to tell the truth we're answering a royal summons and I haven't got the time to dicker with you properly. Why don't you continue on into Keesport and go to my office. Elewys, my wife, has both Jocey's and my authority to make all deals during our absences."

"That sounds fine," Shiwä admitted, "but I'd hate to go all the way and then find that your wife doesn't want to deal."

"Good point. Tell you what; I'll give you a note agreeing to buy a minimum of one tenth of your cargo of this cizer at whatever price at or below what you've quoted. Elewys will honor it and probably buy the entire lot while she's at it. By the way do you have a cargo lined up after Keesport?" Shiwä shook his head. "We might have something for you there too, depending on where you're heading."

"We're heading wherever there's a profit."

"Good! Then we'll definitely have a cargo or two for you, more if we like your performance." Shiwä smiled his response, unable to believe his good luck. With an outward cargo assured he could sell the cizer for less than he might normally. They shook hands and Geraint continued, "Now that we've helped with your excellent cargo, maybe you can help us."

"If I'm able," Shiwä hedged.

Geraint laughed at Shiwä's reaction, recognizing it as one he might have in a similar situation. "Nothing expensive," he assured the elf. "I'm just looking for a bit of news. On your way into Emmine, did you stop off at Kanaduïn?"

"Kanaduïn?" the Orente captain repeated. "No, after linking the Chain, we stocked up at Tamd on Chastigon. While there I heard that there was a merchant in Tarnsa who might be interested in the Cizer." Geraint nodded, realizing that Fulco was probably that merchant. He made a mental note to tell Jocey that after their guests left. "Then we met you."

"Oh well. I was hoping you could tell us what ships were in port. Any news from Bellinen?"

"The usual political squabbles in the Senate," Shiwä shrugged. "President Bellinowä looks like he's about to be up against a vote of no confidence and the Conservative Party is gaining popularity with the usual empty promises. Nothing any sensible man would want to get involved in. You stopped by the University a few months back when we were in Merinne," he said turning to Maobawä. "Anything new the mages might want to know?"

"Other than the master's exams are getting tougher every year and I seem to be doomed to remain a journeyman?" Maobawä replied. "No, not really. Oh, I heard there was some sort of problem with the deer in Horalia that Wizard Meadow was called in to handle."

"We just came from there," Candle volunteered.

"It's all taken care of now," Silverwind added quickly with a firm glance at his apprentice that the boy correctly interpreted at a command to silence. There was no need to scare people with the fact that a demon had almost gotten loose in the world. "Meadow should be halfway back to Bellinen by now. Any news filtering in from Granom?"

Both Orenta shrugged. "Nothing I've heard," Shiwä said, "but then they don't talk to us any more than we talk to them."

They talked on for another hour or so before Shiwä decided it was time to get underway again. The visit over, Jocey and Madoc returned to the bridge and within a few minutes, the Skate was once more under full sail.

## Seven

"I hate this place," Jocey griped as she personally piloted the Skate between a pair of barks on her way to the congested section of harbor customarily reserved for the smaller ships. "Worst damned harbor on Maiyim." Nearby, as invited guests on the bridge, were Silverwind, Geraint, and Candle. Oceanvine was sitting crossed-legged nearby with her eyes closed as she concentrated on a propulsion spell. At Silverwind's suggestion, Jocey had ordered all of the Skate's sails furled so the ship could enter port under magic as though she had a registered pilot on board.

"Nonsense!" Silverwind scoffed. "Doesn't even come close. You've obviously never been to Farmist on Quirnlia. To get there you have to sail over the reversing falls of the Bay of Rhosda, which, of course can only be done at certain times each day depending on the tides and through an extremely narrow channel, then once you reach the port, there's no river or bay to offer the harbor protection, just a single wharf. At least once a year a ship or two gets run aground there during a storm.

"For that matter," he continued, "Even Medda is tougher to get in and out of. Right, Vine?"

"Do you mind? I'm trying to concentrate here," she replied tartly without opening her eyes. "It's not like I've ever done this before you know." That had been Silverwind's other suggestion. Oceanvine had been so fascinated by this spell when she saw the pilot at Keesport use it, the wizard thought she might like to try it for herself. Of course, the pilot had used it with a small dory skiff and Oceanvine had the far more difficult task of providing propulsion to a brigantine so by now she realized that the wizard had set her up.

Maintaining the spell required her to balance the tremendous forces necessary to propel the two-masted ship without allowing them to crush the wooden hull like an empty shell. The task might have been harder had she also needed to coax the vessel in a given direction, but as she did not know the channel of Kanaduin harbor, her job was merely to provide forward momentum.

Jocey, Madoc, and the Skate's second mate worked as a team with Madoc perched on the bow watching the channel closely and the second mate amidships to relay his directions while Jocey manned the ship's wheel, trusting none but herself with the safety of her precious ship. Such a procedure was hardly necessary in most ports, but the Duin river had the unnerving habit of forming transitory sand bars with very little warning. Only a fool would take the risk of running his ship aground and losing weeks or months of business at best.

From where they stood, they could see the remains of two ships where they had sunk in the harbor. One of them was visible as the broken stubs of her masts barely protruded through the surface of the water. The other had no masts and had been broken in two by the relentless forces of rot and tide. The bow still rose as much as two feet above the harbor waves, but the rest had been reduced to a dark smudge below the surface.

"How many more wrecks do they have in this harbor?" Silverwind asked Geraint, steering him away from the immediate bridge area when Jocey glared at them for disturbing her concentration as she navigated the treacherous harbor.

"Who knows," Geraint shrugged. "They rot away after a bit. Last time I was here that one was still in one piece and a bit higher in the water. They tend to tow the hulks out of the main channels and put out markers for the ones that don't show. See those red and yellow striped buoys?"

"Why don't they clean them up?" Candle asked.

"Who're they?" Geraint countered. When Candle had no answer he continued. "There's no city council here, no mayor, no real government of any sort. Even the King doesn't claim this port as his own. Too much trouble I imagine."

"There's no one in charge?" Candle found the concept difficult to deal with.

"Well, there's a sort of mariners' association, an informal combination of the three Seaman's Guilds and the local merchants, set up to handle disputes and keep the port open. Other than that, though, there's no one really in charge here."

"What about thieves?" Candle asked.

"Theft is a rare crime in this town," Geraint replied with a humorless laugh. "Everyone is well-armed and the prevailing attitude is that a thief shouldn't be suffered to live. There are easier ways to make a dishonest living if that's your inclination."

"Such as?" Candle asked.

"Never you mind," Silverwind cut in suddenly. "I don't think the boy needs that sort of education just now, do you?" he asked Geraint. The former mage smiled and nodded.

It took well over three hours to thread their way through the crowded harbor and to find an open berth at which the Skate could dock.

"Whew!" Jocey exclaimed as her crew secured the heavy hempen mooring lines to the dock-side cleats and bollards. "I thought we'd never get in. Good thing you were here," she told Oceanvine, "the tide turned on us an hour ago."

"You're telling me?" the blond mage replied tiredly. "I was the one doing all the pushing. How the hell would you have managed this without magic?"

"With very short sails," Jocey told her, "tight maneuvering, and more luck than any mariner deserves. If necessary, we'd have had to set our anchor and wait for favorable tides and winds. How about a drink before you go ashore? I think I owe you."

"Maybe later," Oceanvine yawned. "Right now I need to sleep." Jocey nodded and Oceanvine stumbled back to her cabin.

"Did you see any likely ships for crossing the Nildar?" Silverwind asked the captain as he, Geraint, and Candle returned to the bridge.

"I saw several Granomish tubs on the way in," she replied. "The fat-looking ones, but I wouldn't recommend any of them. They roll too much in the open sea. Besides, it's impossible to tell if they're coming or going. I'll ask around if you like."

"Good idea," Geraint nodded. "I'll do the same too, while conducting our business."

"You might want to start with Danyll of Mek," Jocey suggested. "I've dealt with him before and he's better than most of the pirates in this port."



"I agree and I've dealt with him before too. He usually has some prime spices on hand. Top-notch cloves, pepper and highspice would sell high on Rallena this time of year."

"Port officials coming down the dock," Madoc announced quietly as he climbed the four steps to the bridge.

"Port officials?" Geraint asked. "Here?"

Jocey shot him a sour look. "Of course. You think these docks were put up for our convenience? There's not a port in the world that doesn't charge you for the privilege of using her harbor. We could have saved a bit by dropping anchor with some of the big ships," she waved her hand toward the outer harbor, "and if we're here more than a week I'll do just that, but if we're going to be off and on-loading cargo we need to be moored to a dock. For that matter a gangplank beats the hell out of rowing a skiff for a quarter hour or more just to get into town."

"But there's no government here. Who collects the port fees?"

"Who said there's no government? There's no mayor or royal governor anywhere on Kanu so a coalition of the dock owners and the mariner's association takes their place. They use the money to maintain the docks and other public works in town. What did you expect? A free ride? No such beast!"

"Evidently not," Geraint shrugged. "Oh well a lesson everyday. I will leave you to handle the port captain, or whatever, and go see what sort of deal I can make with Danyll. Want to come along, Silverwind?"

"Why not?" the wizard shrugged and started to follow his friend toward the dock.

"Me too!" Candle piped up.

"Not this time, lad," Silverwind told him gently.

"Why not?"

"Well, I didn't like the way Oceanvine looked when she went back to her cabin," Silverwind replied in the manner of someone making up an excuse on the fly. "Why don't you keep an eye on her and have a pot of tea ready for her in an hour or two when she wakes up? You know how she likes it."

Candle grimaced. There was a wholenew city out there to explore and he'd been stuck on board the Skate for days, but he couldn't think of a good argument in his favor so he nodded his head dejectedly and started off toward the cabins.

"While you're at it," Silverwind called a moment later from the dock, "you can work on your lessons."

Candle groaned for a moment before continuing on. Then he remembered that his master hadn't specified which lesson and he still hadn't opened one of the locks they'd picked up at Fulco's, not by magic anyway. He smiled at the opportunity to put aside his writing for a change and ran to the cabin he shared with Silverwind.

"You've been shoving those two together quite a bit lately," Geraint commented as he and Silverwind walked casually across the creaking, tar-stained planks of the dock.

"They've been sniping at each other off and on since they met," Silverwind replied. "Sometimes, however, they help each other in surprising ways. The relationship is not unlike some brothers and sisters I know. I'm hoping that by keeping them together the incipient bond that is forming will become stronger."

"That," Geraint nodded, "or they'll kill each other."

"There's always that possibility, but I tend to keep an eye on them especially when Oceanvine starts getting testy. I've never met such a fiery young spirit. You saw what she did to that mage in Tarnsa."

"Nothing but what he deserved," Geraint countered, stepping around a large keg.

"I agree, but how would you have handled him?"

"You mean with magic?"

"It's the only way we could have tracked him down quickly enough."

"I suppose," Geraint agreed thoughtfully. "I guess I might have used a standard confinement spell like we use sometimes to transport criminals. Then I'd have had a nice long question and answer session with the bastard before turning him over to the authorities."

"Same here," the wizard agreed as they stepped down off the dock, "but how did Oceanvine react?"

"Fried him in his tracks. Oh, I see what you mean."

"Exactly! She's one of the most gifted mages to come along in years. If she can learn to control that short temper of hers she may well beat my record for passing her wizard's exams. I think that Candle's constant prodding may give her that needed control."

"And Candle?"

"He needs family. People he can look up to and trust. People who will guide him and protect him as he grows up in a healthier environment than the back alleys of Tarnsa."

"He's more than a bit of a scamp," Geraint noted. Together they turned left at the next intersection and proceeded on.

"No argument," Silverwind laughed, "but he's young. I think he'll settle down as he becomes more secure in his new situation. He's really improved since I first met him. Maturity should help him along too."

"If you say so. What makes you think Oceanvine will accept him as family? Has she any brothers or sisters?"

"I think she has an older brother. That's why her family couldn't afford to pay for more than a few lessons for her from the town master, Sunbear I think his name is."

"In Medda?" Geraint asked. Silverwind nodded. "I met him a few years ago. Good man with a healing spell. Has a gentle manner. Oh!"

"What?"

"It was just after I started carting and shipping rare commodities. I remember he had an apprentice - a young girl named Elinor."

"That's Oceanvine."

"I'd have never recognized her. Her hair was much shorter then and her face was almost habitually smudged with soot from cleaning houses and fireplaces to pay for her lessons and her clothes were mostly rags. I think every penny she had went toward her lessons. Now that's determination!" He smiled wryly. "She's filled out nicely since then, hasn't she? That would have been about ten years ago." He paused to take in his surroundings. "Here we are - 'Danyll of Mek Imports'. Time for a little magic of an entirely different sort." Geraint rubbed his hands together in anticipation of the upcoming negotiation. Silverwind had the sudden realization that haggling was not just a business necessity for his old friend but held the same fascination that magic had for him.

Eight

"What was that gesture Danyll made with his hands just after you concluded the deal?" Silverwind asked as they returned to the harbor area.

"Gesture? What gesture?"

"He stared at the backs of his hands for a second or so then flipped them over and stared for another second before letting them drop to his sides."

"Oh, that," Geraint laughed. "It's sort of a compliment to my bargaining skills. Some merchants do that when their profit has been cut down to a mere fair percentage. He was making sure he still had all his fingers."

"I see," the wizard smiled. "What about this ship Danyll recommended."

"Isle of Marga? Granomish bark but of Emmine manufacture. I don't trust those troll-made tubs worth a damn; they're sturdy as hell but have a bad habit of rolling over in heavy seas."

"They rarely sink, though," Silverwind pointed out.

"Only because they've never completely understood the concept of ballast and keeping it contained. Their ships roll over and the few rocks they bother to toss into the holds roll out through the hatches. Two years ago I actually saw the hulk of the Queen of Gran floating keel skyward, barnacles and all, somewhere through the Chain on her way toward the Wenni. She supposedly went down a year before that and is probably still floating somewhere on one of the oceans."

"Unless she bumped into Ellisto or the Southern Chain," Silverwind commented dryly. "But how good a mariner is this Captain Yakaw of Kif?"

"Never heard of him, but he must be pretty good or Danyll wouldn't have recommended him. Last I

heard the master of the Marga was Captain Eudo, late of Mairsten. He was getting on though, probably retired. The owners of the Marga are Granomen, probably wanted one of their own as captain and I think Eudo's second mate was a troll, maybe this Yakaw is him. Hey! Look who's up. Hey there, Oceanvine! Candle!"

Silverwind looked ahead. Sure enough Oceanvine and Candle were approaching, smiling and waving. Candle was wearing the loose-fitting finely-made blue tunic with the embroidered trim and black trousers that Galiena of North Horalia had given him. Oceanvine had chosen a loose skirt of cream-colored silk that was longer than she usually wore, all the way down to just below her knees, an almost modest length. The skirt complemented the Orentan blouse she wore on top with its flowing triangular sleeves and the usual bold floral print.

"You're looking much better," Silverwind told his partner. "How're you feeling?"

"Hungry!" Oceanvine replied emphatically. "That propulsion spell took a lot out of me. Why didn't you warn me?"

"You'd have never believed me."

"Nonsense!" she scoffed.

"Have it your way," he shrugged. "Remember the first time you tried freezing water for the icebox?" Through her chagrined blush, she recalled how she had failed to dissipate the heat she removed from the water correctly, causing her clothing to char. Only Silverwind's quick intercession had kept her from incinerating herself for the sake of a block of ice. "We're working on passage to Granom," the wizard informed her, changing the subject. "Care to join us or are you too hungry?"

"I'm starved," she replied, "but I'd rather have a say about what ship we're booking passage on."

"Why? Have I ever failed to obtain quality passage for you?" Silverwind sounded hurt.

"You haven't had a chance so far," Oceanvine countered. "Last trip was arranged by Geraint. Come to think of it this one is too. Besides you've said on several occasions that only a fool would set sail without first inspecting the ship."

"Then come on," Geraint told them. "The Isle of Marga is moored to Homar's Wharf. That's a good quarter-mile away and it's starting to get late."

Homar's Wharf was a far more substantial structure than the raised wooden planks of the pier where the Skate had docked. Instead of a wooden bridge-like structure, Homar's Wharf had been built by driving many thick long poles into the harbor bottom and then filled in with rocks and dirt. Finally, the surface had been paved with gravel and tar so that the entire structure seemed like a road headed several hundred yards out to sea.

The ships at the wharf were stacked up two deep in places. Isle of Marga was moored to the Festa Star which, in turn was moored to the wharf. Compared to the bark Isle of Marga, the Skate seemed like a dinghy with sails. The Marga, was a huge three-master with six courses of sail that if laid out edge to edge would cover nearly an acre. She weighed nearly three thousand tons but could carry nearly twice her weight in cargo. There were only a few ships larger on any sea and she stood a proud testimony to the ship-builder's art.

"I don't understand," Oceanvine admitted. "The other docks we've passed haven't been this crowded. Why moor up two deep when there are berths on other wharfs?"

"Maybe this one's havin' a sale," Candle suggested.

"Not quite," Geraint corrected him. "Port costs and docking fees are agreed upon and enforced by the Port Coalition. Loading and unloading times, however, vary drastically and the shoremen of Homar's Wharf are the fastest in the port. That's very important when you pay by the hour."

They asked for and received permission to board and cross theFesta Star on their way to theIsle of Marga , but found themselves held up for several minutes when they reached the walkway that had been rigged up between the two ships as they waited for someone on board to notice them.

"Ahoy, theMarga !" Geraint called for the fifth time.

"Yeah, yeah," came the surly reply. "Wadda you want?" The voice turned out to be attached to the quintessential Granom. The top of his coarse black hair, neatly cropped in the sailor's cut, stood just over five feet nine inches off the deck, but his musculature combined with his thick grey skin gave the impression that he had been carved live from the side of a mountain and that his body somehow contained all the power of that mountain. His clothes were dark, ragged and tar-stained and Candle kept expecting the deck to shake with each step.

"Captain Yakaw?" Geraint asked pleasantly. He'd dealt with Granomish sailors often enough to know what to expect.

"Naw!" the sailor spat. "I'll get him." The heavy-set man plodded off amazingly silently, leaving the party still waiting on the deck of theFesta Star .

"Polite and friendly sort, isn't he?" Oceanvine opined.

"Actually," Silverwind replied, "I was thinking that we seem to be lucky on that point. Most Granomen would have just shouted for the captain or told us where to go, maybe both."

The sailor reappeared and grunted, "Come on," with a quick wave. Then he ducked back out of sight.

"Shall we?" Silverwind grinned and helped Oceanvine up onto the stout plank that served as a gangway to theMarga . They found the sailor waiting for them just beyond an open hatchway at the break of the poop deck.

"Watch yer step," the sailor cautioned them as they made their way down three steps to a slightly lower deck. and the large cabin in which Captain Yakaw made his home and office.

The captain was intimidatingly large, even for a Granom. As he stood to greet his visitors, they noted that he was almost six feet tall and at least three feet across at the shoulders. An incipient smile on his face, however, rapidly degenerated into a scowl when Oceanvine stepped into the room.

"A blond elf?" Captain Yakaw growled. "On my ship?"

"She's quite human," Silverwind replied, casually lifting Oceanvine's long blond hair back to reveal her very much rounded ears.

"And the term is Orente," Oceanvine told the captain firmly.

"Bah!" Yakaw replied harshly. "The Isle of Marga don't carry elves or elf-lovers!"

"Oh really?" Oceanvine countered dangerously. Yakaw, not knowing the lady before him ignored the flashing of her eyes that Candle had already learned was the cue for any intelligent man to run for cover.

"Control yourself, Oceanvine!" Silverwind admonished her.

"Magicians?" Yakaw asked, unimpressed. "A party of free-riders? Terrific. Find yourselves another ship." He sat back down and made a show of looking at one of two sheets of paper on his desk.

"Captain Yakaw," Geraint said, stepping forward, "I hate to pull rank on you, but yours is the only ship in port headed directly back to Granom."

"Life's hard."

"And about to get harder," Oceanvine muttered.

Geraint ignored both of them and continued, "And as you can see," he dropped the royal summons onto Yakaw's desk, "we really must sail with you, assuming you are a loyal subject of Ksaveras." Yakaw sneered as he picked up the sheet. The sneer relaxed off his face and his eyes widened as he read.

"You're Silverwind?" he asked quietly.

Geraint shook his head and pointed at the wizard who smiled and nodded his head as Yakaw's eyes slid over to focus on him.

"You are, of course, welcome on my ship, my lord," Yakaw told him deferentially. "The girl, however..." He let the statement hang.

"Is my associate," Silverwind filled in quickly and firmly, "and will continue to travel with me."

"Not in those obscene elvish rags!" Yakaw said vehemently. Then in a quieter voice, "Even if I allowed it, my crew would never stand for it. She'd be thrown overboard before we ever reached the Nildar."

"I'd like to see them try," Oceanvine commented nastily.

"Would you?" Yakaw replied calmly. "Tell me, girl, when would you sleep? You do need to sleep, do you not?"

"I can take care of myself," she told him darkly.

"Maybe," Yakaw allowed, "but you will wear decent clothing or you will not sail aboard this ship. My honor compels me to assist the Wizard Silverwind and Master Windchime to appear before the court, but I see nothing here that applies to a young woman who insists on dressing like a trollop."

Oceanvine took a deep breath, but before she could reply Silverwind spoke up. "My associate will comply with Granomish standards of decency for as long as she is aboard this ship."

"I'll wear what I like!" she told the wizard heatedly. Candle chuckled suddenly and was soon joined by

Geraint. Oceanvine turned on them but faltered when Candle pointed a finger at her. Looking down she noticed that while her blouse was still made of silk, the floral patterns, so fashionable among the denizens of the Bellinen Archipelago, were gone, replaced by a somber dark green with light green pinstripes. Her skirt, still a light cream, grew even as she watched until it reached her ankles. She spun back around and glared at Silverwind, but she found it hard to hold on to her anger in the face of the near miraculous magic that the wizard had just performed with seeming ease. "You will have to show me how you did that," she told him quietly.

"Later," he replied. Meanwhile Captain Yakaw was mumbling a quick prayer to Gran, although whether it was in thanks for having just witnessed the transformation or a plea for the god's holy protection was not clear. "Captain, will this be more acceptable?" Yakaw nodded mutely, not trusting himself to speak.

"Good!" Geraint exclaimed. "Now about the matter of payment."

"What payment?" Yakaw replied, "You're magicians. You ride free. Everyone knows that."

"Much as I'd like a free ride, sir, I am not a practicing mage and the boy here is only an apprentice."

"Oh." He thought for a moment and then mentioned a fee, "Ten gold crowns each." Candle whistled loudly. No wonder so few people ever traveled around the world.

"Five," Geraint countered, "for both."

"Eight each," came the reply, "And it's less than it will cost to feed you." They eventually settled on a fee of nine crowns for both Geraint and Candle. "Don't know what good it'll do though. We can't leave until I find a buyer for my cargo. We have a load waiting for the return trip but we can't begin to load it until the rest of the stuff still in my holds is moved out."

"Just out of curiosity, Captain," Geraint asked, trying to sound casual about it, "what sort of cargo are we talking about?"

"Hops, Master Windchime," Yakaw replied. "from Marga. They're used in brewing, you know."

"I know," Geraint replied, remembering one regular customer of his who preferred Marga hops, "and call me Geraint. How many bales do you have?"

"Only ten. About a third of my cargo space. I honestly don't understand it. Marga hops are the best on Maiyim, but these damned human brewers - no offense intended, sir - won't touch 'em. I suppose we could always dump them, but I honestly can't abide such waste."

"How much are you asking?"

Yakaw looked at Geraint, wondering how much the ex-mage knew about brewing and hops. "Five crowns a bale," he said in reasonable tones.

Geraint burst out laughing, "Not even the king would pay such prices. In fact, the last two bales I bought cost less than half a crown each."

"Ah," Yakaw replied, "but the hops this year were of especially high quality. They call this grade..."

"Premier Grand Sovereign?" Hm, such a grade only occurs once in ten years on the average and I do

recall hearing that this was such a year. I assume each bundle has the proper seals?"

"Of course. Would you care to inspect it?"

"Before I accept delivery." Geraint waved off the break in negotiations. "All right. I'll give you four crowns for the lot and a high price it is for a bunch of dried plants." They argued on for well over an hour until the sky outside had grown quite dark, but eventually they settled on a price that both felt was reasonable.

While they dickered, Silverwind, fairly certain that he knew where those bales would end up, looked forward to sampling the brew those hops would help produce. Oceanvine only looked forward to her much delayed dinner while Candle, bored by the whole procedure, fell asleep on the floor in the far corner of the cabin.

Nine

"This whole journey seems to be turning into one big business trip," Silverwind commented as they left the dock where the Isle of Marga was docked.

"I could easily go broke if I paid the asking price for everything, old friend," Geraint replied.

"Or anything, I'd wager," Oceanvine commented dryly.

"Well, I do have to make a living."

"The King of Granom is paying for this trip. Remember?"

"Hm? Oh yes, of course. It's a tough habit to break. Besides, why should I pass up a good opportunity?"

"Don't you trust Elewys?" Oceanvine asked pointedly, "or Jocey?"

"Of course I trust them," Geraint protested.

"Then why did you just buy enough desiccated plant clippings to fill half the holds in the Skate without letting Jocey know they were coming first?"

Geraint stopped abruptly on the moist cobblestones, almost losing his balance. "Uh," he muttered, "Oops?"

"Not good enough."

"Well, maybe I did get carried away," he admitted. "I'll apologize to Jocey."

"That's a start," she told him.

"Look, what business is it of yours?"



"None," she admitted easily, "but I'd hate to see you taking advantage of both Jocey and Elewys."

"All this haggling is also starting to slow us down, Geraint," Silverwind added.

"I sped things up by buying the hops," Geraint told them. "We could have been held up for two weeks or more if I hadn't."

"We'll never know," the wizard replied, "but we also spent nearly three hours at Danyll's while you two haggled over the difference of a quarter of a silver sovereign. During that time we might have come here and made the same deal for the hops that you just did."

"Besides," Candle added, "how will you know what you're going to need when we're in Granom."

"You too?" Geraint asked. "Oh well. If it really bothers you all so much I'll stop trying to make a deal every time we turn around, unnatural as that seems," he added in a lower voice, "at least until after attending the Granomish court."

"Good decision," Silverwind commended his friend, "especially since once we set sail, there won't be anyone to dicker with anyway."

"I thought you said this was a rough town," Oceanvine changed the subject. "The streets aren't as clean as in Keesport, I'll admit, and the natives don't appear to be the friendliest I've ever encountered, but it's after dark now and the place seems pretty quiet to me."

"Kanaduin is an unpredictable place," Silverwind explained. "As I've told you, there's no real government here, just a couple of councils try to fill the niche as best they can."

"Which seems to be fairly well."

"At the moment. The problem is, that with all the elves and trolls mingling together in this one place, it only takes a single misspoken word or a clumsy step to set off a major inter-species incident. If you look around, you'll notice a lot of buildings are showing signs of patchwork repairs."

"You make it sound like the town should be in a state of perpetual riot. It seems to me that this is an excellent example of how all the peoples of Maiyim can work together in peace and prosperity."

"Maybe," Silverwind agree cautiously, "but they really only do it by dividing the town into three sections, one for each race. The trolls stay out of the Orentan neighborhood and the elves stay out of the Granomish one. The human section and the harbor area are considered neutral territories, of course, at least by the elves and trolls."

"Hey!" Oceanvine exclaimed suddenly.

"A problem?" Silverwind asked as he started walking again, forcing the rest of the party to follow.

"My clothes," she amplified. "What did you do to my clothes? You know I hate dull greens."

"Oh?" Silverwind replied mildly, "What would you prefer? This?" The pretty young mage's garb was instantly transformed back to its original configuration, except that now the floral blouse quite literally glowed in the dark with enough luminosity to be visible in the pale yellow light of the street lamps.

"Not bad," she commented. Silverwind wasn't sure if she was serious or not. "You could do well as a fashion designer on Orent, but until this catches on I'd prefer something a little more stylish."

"Fix it yourself," Silverwind shrugged.

"You still haven't taught me how to do transformations of this order," she pointed out.

"Very true," he agreed amiably. Geraint and Candle chuckled.

"What's so funny?" she demanded.

"Nothing," Geraint replied, quickly straightening the smile from his face. "Nothing at all." Candle, however, had no such control over his emotions. He laughed, and when Oceanvine's expression grew even more serious, he laughed all the harder.

"Vine," Silverwind told her, "even I can't transform matter without going into the trance state."

"Unless you're drunk," Oceanvine replied acidly. It was true, though. Silverwind was one of a very few mages of any level capable of performing while drunk and for, some reason neither of them had ever been able to ascertain, had less difficulty with the very highest order spells than he did when sober, although with far less predictable results. As a consequence Oceanvine did her best to keep Silverwind from getting drunk. She was rarely successful when he was truly determined. "You mean this is an illusion?" she asked, suddenly realizing what he was getting at.

"Of course. In fact, it is a very low-order illusion complicated only by the fact that I had to cast it separately on each person present."

"But I could feel the full-length skirt brushing across my lower legs. You can't feel an illusion."

"Why not?" Candle asked, genuinely puzzled.

"Exactly," Silverwind agreed. "Why not?"

"But..." Oceanvine found that she didn't really have an argument in her favor.

"Illusions are not restricted to the eyes," Silverwind explained. "Any and all of the senses may be confounded, it's just a matter of being complete. You could have been completely naked, but nobody in that cabin, including yourself, would have noticed. For that matter, I could whip up the illusion of a grand banquet and you could eat it. Not only would it taste as marvelous as it looked but it would make you feel full and bloated if you ate too much. Further, I could serve you such a meal every time you were hungry and you'd find it immensely satisfying. The only problem is that while your mind would be fooled your body wouldn't and you'd rapidly starve to death."

"Master Dragontooth always maintained that tactile illusions were impossible," Oceanvine replied uncertainly.

"He would," Geraint snorted. "There has never a less imaginative person on the faculty at Randona, and stubborn! Even after Silverwind..."

"Ah hem!" the wizard interrupted his friend.

"What?" Candle asked insistently.

"Nothing," Silverwind told him.

"Nothing?" Geraint laughed, "you nearly got expelled."

"What did you do to Dragontooth?" Oceanvine pressed.

"I hurt his academic pride," Silverwind admitted, "in class."

"Huh?"

"It was quite simple. You know that old invisible shrinking box routine that mimes like to do?" Oceanvine nodded. "Well I set up the tactile illusion of a real one around him during a lab session one day. He's never been known for his sense of humor," Silverwind added.

"And the University wanted to suspend you for that?"

"No, but Dragontooth did," Geraint hooted. "The Dean wanted to give Silverwind his degree right then and there."

"I don't know about that," Silverwind demurred, "but I was put on probation for a semester after a very long lecture about the proper time and place to disprove a fallacy scientifically."

"And what was wrong with the place?" Geraint asked. "Isn't that what a lab is for?"

"As I remember the thrust of the lecture was more concerned with my sense of timing."

"In any case," Geraint continued with a wink to Oceanvine, "it was the last time anyone on the faculty used the word impossible while Silverwind was on campus."

"But why don't you use that spell more often?" Oceanvine asked. "It seems like there would be dozens of applications."

"What? the invisible shrinking box?" Silverwind asked innocently. "Well, I did use it on a mime once, but relented when he started to suffocate."

"I mean any use of a multi-sensory illusion," Oceanvine clarified.

"Well," Silverwind drawled, "to tell the truth that was the first time I ever tried it on so many people at once. Technically it's low order, but when you realize that I had to cast about sixteen of them at once the complexity goes up a bit. Over the years the only regular use of the spell has been when it's been my turn to cook."

"Whoa! Drop anchor a moment," Oceanvine replied angrily, hauling the wizard to a halt with a vicious tug on his arm. "Do you mean you've been serving me up imaginary meals for the last three years whenever it was your turn to cook?"

"Not quite, but in spite of my abilities as a mage, I have never mastered the art of cooking."

"I never noticed."

"Listen to him!" Geraint scoffed. "He can burn water. I've seen him do it."

"Anyway," Silverwind continued in spite of the interruption, "I've found that illusions cover my short-comings."

"What," Oceanvine asked suspiciously, "have you really been serving me?"

"The same things you thought you were eating, more or less."

"More or less?"

"Well, like I said, I'm not one of the world's great chefs."

"Raw? You gave me raw meat and vegetables? Terrific!"

"It wasn't all raw," Silverwind said defensively. "Some of it was cooked; chicken, most fish, rice and potatoes, but I figured that if it wouldn't make you sick, it really didn't make much of a difference whether it was cooked or not."

"That does it! That really and truly does it!" Oceanvine exclaimed furiously, stomping away from the rest of the party.

"What about dinner?" Silverwind called after her.

"Not if you're supplying it!" she retorted, disappearing around the next corner.

"This is not a safe town, Silverwind," Geraint commented seriously. "She shouldn't be out alone."

"Oceanvine can take care of herself," the wizard replied uncertainly, "and she'll come back after she's cooled off. Whenever that is."

"I wasn't worried about Oceanvine. The mood she's in, she'll fry anyone who even looks at her crossly. Maybe you should go after her."

"Not a good idea. We've had bad arguments before; she'd only keep avoiding me. Candle, maybe."

"Uh uh!" the boy protested, "I don't want to get fried."

"Vine won't hurt you, Candle," Silverwind assured him. At least I hope not, he thought silently. He put a few silver coins in Candle's hand. "Here's some money. Go catch up to her and see that she doesn't starve herself. She skips meals occasionally when she's angry with me and with a long voyage ahead this isn't the time to allow that. Make sure she gets some fresh fruit if nothing else. Okay?" Candle nodded. "Then go."

Candle ran off in the direction Oceanvine had last been seen. Dashing around the corner, however, he nearly tripped over the still fuming mage.

"Sent you after me did he?" she asked flatly.

"He's worried," Candle replied.

"I imagine."

"Wanna eat?"

"I'm not hungry anymore."

"I'm buying," the apprentice replied holding out the coins Silverwind had given him.

"My, my," Oceanvine replied softly with a slightly vicious smile. "He really is feeling guilty, isn't he? Tell me, Candle. Have you ever had sea-veal medallions in mustard sauce?" The young ex-thief shook his head. "I didn't think so. Let's go spend the wizard's money."

Ten

"Cast off all lines!" the bosun relayed the command from the bridge of the Isle of Marga. Oceanvine, never having sailed on a ship that wasn't captained by a human master, marvelled at the nearly identical manner in which this Granomish ship worked.

Candle's voice, however, cut through her reverie, "You're being childish, you know."

"Stay out of this, Candle. It's strictly between me and the wizard." Since the other night she had contemplated the incident almost constantly and each time she did, the dark hot coals of her anger were fanned by a fresh wind.

"Why, because he can't cook?"

"I will not tolerate betrayal!" That was the key. Somehow she felt betrayed by Silverwind's use of illusion spells.

"Betrayal?" Candle countered. He hadn't known the word two days ago, but by now he had heard it used often enough to give it a permanent home in his vocabulary. "All he did was improve the meals he served you. Would you have rather he didn't feed you at all? Or better yet, if he had let you eat the food as it really was?"

Oceanvine turned away from Candle to look back at the dock. The ship was backing slowly away from Homar's Wharf, but far faster than she might have if she were using the receding tide to carry her out into the main channel where she would find sufficient room to navigate. A quick glance at the bridge from the starboard gunwale told her why. Silverwind was standing with Geraint next to the captain, looking slightly distracted. It was nice to know that even he could not magically pilot a ship of this size without showing a conscious effort.

"Well?" Candle demanded.

"This is none of your business, Candle."

"The hell it isn't, Vine," Candle retorted heatedly. "It's your turn to teach me, but you're too busy worrying about insults that never happened."

Oceanvine's pretty gray eyes became stone-hard as she clamped her hands tightly around Candle's upper arms and dragged him forward until his nose was only an inch in front of hers.

"Don't you ever call me 'Vine'!" she hissed.

"Yes, miss," Candle replied softly, his voice tinged with a rare note of fear.

Oceanvine froze in horror for a moment at her loss of temper. She stepped back from Candle, holding him at arms length while he started looking for a way out.

"I - I'm sorry, Candle. I don't know what came over me. Look this problem really is between me and the wizard. I really shouldn't have taken it out on you. Uh, what am I supposed to be teaching you today?"

"I'm still having trouble opening this lock," Candle admitted, holding up the brass and steel mechanism. He still looked a bit wary, but he was starting to relax again. Oceanvine made a mental note to try being nicer to the lad for a while.

"Let's find a quiet place," she suggested, "and you can show me what you've managed so far."

The entire scene had been visible from the bridge from where Silverwind and Geraint kept an eye on the pair.

"That was close," Geraint commented.

"Mm," Silverwind agreed. "For a moment I thought I might have to step in."

"You stepped in it days ago," Geraint told him pointedly. "Don't you think it's time you cleaned that particular shoe?"

"She'll calm down eventually," Silverwind replied.

"Do you two think you can wait until we're under sail?" Captain Yakaw cut in acidly. "Damn! but you're the first pilot I've ever met who didn't tie himself into a pretzel and go into a trance when working."

"I'm better than most," Silverwind replied with a smile.

"Yeah? Well, I miss the silence. The way you two jabber on, a man can't hear himself belch. And watch that sandbar coming up on the port bow."

"I see it," Silverwind replied, "but even if we drift that way, your ship's keel isn't deep enough to run aground there, not for another hour or so."

"I don't know how the hell you can see it," Yakaw grumbled. "You haven't so much as glanced at the water since you came aboard."

"It's all part of the spell, captain. We'll be out beyond the last breakwater in an hour."

"Bah! Wizards, you can't trust them. I should have let the elf-lover handle this." He lapsed into silence and Geraint and Silverwind started talking again, although in much softer whispers.

"So what are you going to do about Oceanvine?" Geraint pressed.

"As I said, she'll calm down eventually."

"Yeah, right! Elewys might calm down eventually, but not that one. Oceanvine isn't going to calm down until you apologize. Even then she's probably going to make you regret it for a long time to come."

"I suppose I'll have to apologize then," the wizard muttered.

"It's not going to be as easy as saying, 'I'm sorry,' you know."

"No? What then?"

Geraint laughed at his old friend. "You never did get the hang of marriage did you?"

"I was married for five years," Silverwind said defensively.

"And how much cumulative time did you and Ysemay spend together? Two months?"

"Oh, it must have been more than that."

"I doubt it. I was there, remember? We wouldn't be home for two or three days before you'd be hot to take the next job. That's when we didn't take another assignment without getting home first, of course."

"She had her own diversions."

"She cheated on you?" Geraint asked. "I didn't know that."

"I didn't mean that. Oh she might have slept with other men; I wouldn't know. I wasn't there for her so I hope she had someone."

"She never remarried," Geraint noted, uncertain of what that might have been indicative of, if anything. "But, what other diversions?"

"Her writing, of course. In her own way she was as monomaniacal as I was. Even when we were both home she would spend every waking moment writing. I suppose the marriage never had a chance. Wait, are you saying that Oceanvine thinks of herself as my wife?"

"No, not even for a moment, but she is much closer to you than Ysemay ever was. She's your associate and your partner. When the two of you work together you make an excellent team; the best I ever saw." Geraint stopped before he could blurt out the obvious fact that Oceanvine was very much in love with the wizard. Obvious, that is, to everyone but Silverwind, but he was going to have to discover that for himself.

"So what do you suggest I do about Vine?"

"I don't know her well enough to say, but if Elewys were this angry with me, I'd probably start with breakfast in bed. Of course Elewys has never been this angry with me so I might be wrong."

"Vine would probably throw the meal back in my face," Silverwind replied.

"Probably," Geraint agreed. "You'll just have to find some other way to make peace." He clapped Silverwind gently on the shoulder and left the bridge.

An hour later, after the Isle of Marga was under sail, Silverwind knocked on Oceanvine's cabin door.

"Come in," she called out. Silverwind opened the door to find her sitting cross-legged on her bunk and staring at a small yellow melon. She looked up a moment later and said flatly, "Oh, it's you."

"I think we ought to talk," Silverwind said simply.

"Go ahead," she replied, turning back toward the melon. A moment later it seemed to turn into a grape.

"Not bad," the wizard commented.

"Really? Here, catch." She picked up the fruit, but her finger seemed to be clasping an object that was larger and heavier object than a grape, but smaller than the small melon he had first seen.

Silverwind caught the object clumsily and smiled at the grape's seeming ability to float above his hand. He cast a quick spell to break the illusion and found himself holding a dark red sourfruit.

"If you had tasted it, it would have tasted like a sourfruit too," Oceanvine told him. She pointed at her wastebasket where Silverwind saw several partially eaten sourfruit. The she reached over the far side of the bed and picked up a small net full of sourfruit. She picked one out, put it on the plate, and put the rest back down again. "All right," she asked exasperatedly, "how did you do it?"

"Well, first I ought to apologize for not telling you sooner."

"Yes, you should," she said coldly. Then a bit of the frost melted and she admitted, "but I over-reacted. At least that's what Candle tells me. You never did it maliciously, did you?"

"Of course not. But you're such a good cook, I didn't want to admit that I couldn't at least put a decent meal on the table."

"Well," she considered, "that would explain the deplorable lack of organization I found in your kitchen."

"Also," Silverwind continued, "you made it quite clear that you were not going to do all the cooking and cleaning. I did show you my house-cleaning spells, though," he pointed out.

"Yes, you did," she allowed. "It increased the amount of time we both had for research. Speaking of which..." She picked up the new sourfruit and raised her eyebrows meaningfully.

Silverwind smiled. He realized that his associate was still somewhat irked, but perhaps it was as much from the fact that she couldn't duplicate his magical stunt as from her initial feeling of betrayal. In time, he was certain, she would forgive his minor deception - it was not really worth holding onto forever, after all - but the first step would be to teach her the spell.

I wonder what I'll be eating, myself, in the future, he thought silently as he took a deep breath and sat down on a nearby chair. Aloud, he told her, "First of all you need to consider all the senses..." An hour



later she was beginning to get the hang of it and the tension between them had noticeably dissipated.

## Eleven

A shrill whistle cut through the air and the entire crew, saving those on duty at the helm or in the rigging, assembled on deck.

Oceanvine sat up from where she had been reading and sun-bathing. The illusory clothing, she discovered to her delight, did nothing to inhibit her ability to tan. The sailors thought it odd that she should want to stretch out on deck, but since the captain could find nothing immodest about her posture, he condoned her behavior. Candle sat nearby, writing in his journal.

Even as the crewmen rushed to form up at the foot of the ship's quarterdeck, Oceanvine saw the second mate, a tall, broad-shouldered man with light brown hair - one of the few humans on board - escort Silverwind and Geraint to the main deck.

"What's goin' on?" Candle asked.

"I don't know," she admitted. "Let's find out." Together, they moved closer to the stern where Captain Yakaw appeared ready to speak to his crew.

Yakaw looked down at the assembly and saw that the wizard and his party had joined his crew for this ceremony. He was not surprised that Silverwind and Geraint had come at his invitation. In the past few days the two had demonstrated a knowledge and respect for the customs of the sea, but he had intentionally not invited the woman and the boy. He hadn't cared whether they attended or not, but the fact that they had come anyway showed a certain amount of respect and, maybe, reverence. Perhaps he should revise his initial impression of them.

He allowed the expectant silence of the assembly to grow long. They could still hear the last bell buoy behind them. TheInnerSeas were well marked with thousands of markers, bells, and whistles. The more poetic seafarers called those noise-makers the "Voice of theInnerSeas ". That voice sang its song of life without pausing for breath. There was no place on any of the Inner Seas where one could not hear at least one of the bell or whistle buoys carefully placed to prevent mariners from falling prey to reefs, bars, rocks and other hazards.

TheOuterSeas had a far different voice. They pulsed with the winds and the tides, coursed through the blood of those creatures who made their home in the great salt waters, and played their song against the hulls of those ships brave enough to sail the three major oceans of Maiyim.

As the silence of the assembly stretched on for many long minutes the sound of a different buoy could be heard approaching. Its note was deeper than the bells and whistles Oceanvine had become accustomed to, but although she had never heard it, she knew full well from her childhood schooling that it was the sound of an ocean-gong - one of a group of special buoys that marked the archipelagos' borders. In essence, they signalled the edge of civilization. The people aboard theIsle of Marga would neither hear nor see another sign of land-bound life for over two thousand leagues besides the occasional desert island and, less likely, a passing ship.

Everyone remained silent until the ship came abreast of the gong. Even Candle, who hadn't the foggiest notion of what was going on, recognized the solemnity of the occasion.

Finally Captain Yakaw spoke. "Emtos and Emmine," he intoned, "divine king and queen, we now leave your protected waters to sail the deeps that accompanied the birth of your divine son, Nildar. We pray that we have done sufficient honor to you while among your lands and that you will grant us your protection when we return. Gran and Querna, beloved parents of the Granomen, we pray to you for your protection and guidance so that we may arrive safely in your chosen lands and waters." The brief prayer was sincere and while he spoke, individual members of the crew muttered their own prayers, although most merely nodded and whispered affirmations of the captain's prayer. There was no required response. Each was free to express his feelings in his own way. The prayers continued for another minute or two after the captain finished, gradually fading out as all aboard listened to the now receding gong.

Finally, when the gong could no longer be heard, the bosun's whistle sounded a long fluttering note that signified the end of the ceremony, but before the crewmen could leave another signal was sounded on a loud brass bell denoting the end of one watch and the start of another. Men climbed up and down the rigging while others returned to their cabins.

Officially the journey to Granom might have begun when the dock lines were cast off in Kanaduin harbor, but to the crew and passengers of the Isle of Marga they had only just now commenced the voyage.

Shipboard routine on the Nildar Ocean differed subtly from what it had been while within the boundaries of Emmine. It wasn't the activities, but the attitude of the sailors that differed. The dangers of the inner seas were not those of the ocean. The lookouts no longer worried about the ship running aground - it would be weeks before that was a danger again. The dangers now were mobile; storms mostly and, rarely, monsters or pirates. Of all these, only the occasional monster gave less than a few minutes warning.

With nothing else to do and nowhere to run when he got in trouble with one of the crew, Candle found his lessons becoming more interesting. What he didn't realize was that Silverwind, having been on long ocean voyages before, specifically designed those lessons to keep him interested for the better part of a day.

Unlike at Castle North, there were few distractions that a boy of his age could participate in. The sailors were a taciturn lot and preferred to occupy their off-duty hours with interminable games of dice. They had tolerated Candle's presence until he had started interrupting their games by asking questions. After that he had been not-so-gently persuaded to find other interests.

The only member of the crew, in fact, with whom Candle could make friends was the cook - a short, well-built Granom with vivid green eyes and a ready smile for the lad. His name was Innokenty, but everyone called him Kenya. Kenya was wider than the average Granom with both fat and muscle, giving him an even more brick-like appearance than most. He kept his galley well-organized and there was always a large pot of some sort of fish stew or chowder on hand.

Kenya always seemed to be busy, but somehow he always had time for whoever came to him. It was this open friendliness, so uncharacteristic of most of the Marga's crew, that attracted Candle to Kenya. Candle would ask questions about the food and cooking more to show a polite interest in his friend's activities than a desire to learn and Kenya always replied in such a way that made Candle feel that he was being treated as an equal rather than the only boy aboard. Kenya also taught Candle how to fish.

Fish was a staple food all across Maiyim and especially while at sea. Normally Kenya collected all he needed with a net, but he spent the odd hour with Candle, fishing with a pair of stout poles. Kenya seemed to have an intuitive sense of when to fish and often had to tell Candle sadly that now was not a good time. When challenged, Kenya would smile and they would make their way to the stern, poles in hand, but Kenya was always right. If he said there would be no fish, there were no fish. Eventually Candle learned to take Kenya's word for it.

"We have enough," Kenya told him one day after they'd been fishing for half an hour. "Let porpoises have rest."

"The what?" Candle asked.

"Porpoises, those big grey critters in water there."

Candle looked down into the water and noticed half of a dozen grey, fish-like animals swimming along side the Marga. They seemed to be cavorting, playing some elaborate game as they swam parallel to the ship, but Candle could see that they were only following the school of fish that Kenya's bait had attracted.

"I never seen those fish before," Candle said, staring at the unfamiliar beasts.

"Not fish," Kenya corrected him. "Porpoises. They mammals, like us. Breathe air, not water." He quietly picked up the bucket of fish they had caught and the two poles and returned to the galley, leaving Candle to watch the porpoises.

"Whatcha looking at, Candle?" Silverwind asked a few minutes later. Candle started. He had not been aware of the wizard's approach. "Sorry. I didn't mean to shock you. Oh, dolphins."

"Porpoises," Candle replied.

"Whatever," Silverwind shrugged. "Never seen them before, have you?"

"Uh uh. Kenya says they aren't fish, that they're mammals."

"That's right," Silverwind nodded. "They breath air and are warm-blooded and produce milk for their young and whatever else most mammals do."

"How do they breathe air when they're underwater?"

"They don't. Not underwater, anyway. See those holes on top of their heads?" Candle nodded and Silverwind explained how porpoises breathed. "So how are you doing with the lock?" Silverwind asked at last.

"Not so good," Candle replied. "It's very hard to work all five tumblers just right when you can't even see them."

"I know, but that's why I gave you the assignment. Sometimes you need to be able to manipulate something that you can't see. Master that and you'll have low-level levitation down solid." Candle seemed unconvinced. "Look. How do you know there are five tumblers in this lock? Why not four or six or some other number?"

"This type of lock always has five tumblers," Candle replied, "and even if I was wrong I've already opened it without magic, so I know for sure."

"And how did you open it without a key?" Silverwind prompted him.

"With my picks," Candle replied, reaching into his pocket for the lock and a small collection of thin metal tools.

"Show me." Candle shrugged, sat down on the deck, and went to work. The lock sprung open in under a minute. "Not bad," Silverwind commended him. "Now why is it so easy for you that way?"

"Cause I can feel my way around."

"Then you'll have to feel your way around with magic too."

"Huh?"

"Candle, your levitation so far has required only the use of directed force, but for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. If you concentrate, you will find that you can feel, maybe sense is a better word, whatever you manipulate. It's called feedback. Put the lock away and use your pebble again for a while."

Candle put away the lock and picks and pulled out a small milky quartz pebble. It wasn't the same one that Silverwind had first given him to practice with. That one had been destroyed along with the demon in North Horalia, but Candle had still needed something to practice with and before leaving the castle he had searched long and hard to find a similar one. This one didn't have the vein of crystal quartz running down its center like the other did, but then neither had that one until Oceanvine had repaired it for him. The new one, however, did have a light streak of rust along one side that sort of reminded him of the original.

"All right," Silverwind continued when the stone had been produced. "Now work with this one until you can feel it. When you can lift and move it with your eyes shut, it will be time for you to try the lock again." Then the wizard got up and left Candle to his new assignment.

The boy tried, unsuccessfully, several times to lift the stone with his eyes shut. Then he let out a tremendous sigh. Why did one lesson always lead to a much harder one?

## Twelve

Oceanvine was in a quandary. She had planned to present a thesis concerning her research with magical wards for her master's degree, and had been working on that thesis since shortly before they had left North Horalia. Everything had gone along fine until she got to the chapter about negating wards.

In the course of their investigations at Castle North, Silverwind had developed a surprisingly simple technique by which any mage above the apprentice level could slip through any combination of wards. Oceanvine and Wizard Meadow had constructed a truly tortuous maze of wards of varying intensities, shapes, and penalties for setting one off, but Silverwind had just walked through the whole mess as

though there was nothing there.

She was tempted to ignore the problem. After all, his discovery of a new technique didn't negate hers even if the technique itself sliced through all known wards as easily as a sword would through air. However, she couldn't write a chapter about ward negation, showing how her inventions were tougher to negate and then just admit that Silverwind's technique didn't notice the difference. She was also too good a scholar to give in to the temptation not to mention the wizard's discovery.

Damn! Oceanvine took a deep breath, held it, and then let it out slowly. It was one of the first relaxation techniques she learned when she had been Sunbear's apprentice. Over the years it had become a habit - something she did without being aware of it. Candle, however, working on his lock next to her on the section of foredeck that had become their place, was very aware of it.

"What's wrong?" he asked in halting Granomish. She looked up from her notebook and let the furrows smooth out of her pretty forehead. Belatedly she remembered that Silverwind had finally gotten around to teaching the boy the native tongue of the archipelago that was their destination.

"Oh, nothing," she replied automatically in the same tongue. She instantly realized that Candle not only knew better, but he still hadn't learned to accept a polite lie without comment, so before he could challenge her statement she went on. "The wizard just sank my thesis."

"Huh?" She repeated her statement in Emmish. "How?" he asked looking around to see if Silverwind had suddenly appeared on deck and if so what he had done to get Oceanvine vexed with him this time. It must be something bad. Oceanvine only called him "the wizard" in those tones when she was angry. Silverwind, however, was nowhere in sight.

"My thesis," she indicated the notebook, "is about a new set of improved wards. The only problem is that the wizard's invented a technique that allows the user to ignore them."

"Okay." Candle didn't really know what else to say. He had only the vaguest notion of what she was talking about in any case, so he asked, "What's a ward?"

Oceanvine silently admonished herself for having forgotten just how little the young apprentice knew. "Wards are a general class of magics," she told him, "which use magical energy in any number of ways. The most common sorts are repulsion wards; a simple curtain of energy that when interrupted causes the intruder to be repelled either physically or emotionally from what ever is being protected."

"Like you set on the cart and campsite every night on our way to Tarnsa?"

"Right, but that's only one type. Wards can be set up in any shape, with any potential energy, and set to trigger any sort of spell or to just be a physical wall on their own. They're very versatile. However, the one feature they all have in common is energy flow. Every ward, regardless of shape, has energy flowing through it in an orderly fashion. Here, I'll show you." She closed her eyes and a moment later a small square image, about a yard square, formed between them. Without opening her eyes she said, "This is just an illusory image, but think of it as a simple curtain ward." A moment later the image changed slightly. "Do you see the simulated energy flow?"

"Yeah," Candle replied. "It looks like there are waves running through it."

"In what direction?" she tested him.

"Top to bottom."

"Good. Here are a few other examples." The image changed to a series of vertical bars with the energy running upward, then she let the image of the bars show the energy spiraling downward. To that she added a series of horizontal bars interlaced with the vertical ones, and then, remembering one she had only done once before, she let an image of creeping ivy grow between the bars, wrapping around them in an almost random pattern. "Understand?"

"I think so," he replied. "Are walls all you can do with them?"

"Not at all," she replied, opening her eyes again and letting the illusion disappear. "There was a problem with theft at the University one semester - nothing valuable, mind you, but nobody likes to know that some stranger's been pawing through your things. It's make you feel violated. So I and several friends used wards shaped like bars across the doors of our closets and drawers. Why use the energy to put up a full curtain, when a simple thin bar will suffice? The only problem was that the thief was also a mage and he was able to deactivate most of our wards."

"Was the thief ever caught?"

"Oh my, yes!" Oceanvine laughed. "My room-mate and I got a bit more creative than most. We put the usual bar wards up on the outside, but also put another set on the inside and he didn't think to check those. After that, all we had to look for was someone with blinking red spots all over his body and bright green glowing eyes. Actually we had to find someone completely covered from head to toe with dark glasses on."

"What did you do to him?"

"We let him go."

"What?"

"We had to. It was one of the faculty members testing us."

"They can do that?" Candle asked.

"Only under certain circumstances. There are several classes that are taught without a classroom and in this case without any warning. This one was in creative use of common spells. Naturally Airblossom and I received top scores for our solutions. Then we were put on probation for giving the professor the wrong counter-spell."

"Why did you do that?"

"We had to admit that he had a right to test us that way, but we didn't have to like it, so instead of a counter, we reinforced the spell, making it spread to whatever clothing he was wearing as well. It took a month to wear off and we had to clean all the dishes in the school cafeteria the entire time, but it was worth it," she told him with smug satisfaction.

"Does the energy of a ward always flow in the same direction?" Candle asked. "I mean does it ever stop and go another way?"

"Good question," she commended him. "Yes it always goes in the same direction in a given ward. The

direction of the flow is a basic element of a ward. Change it and you change the basic nature of the ward."

"Oh."

"Anyway," she continued on, "the wizard worked out a way to walk right through a ward without affecting it and that wipes out any claim I have about the improved security of my inventions."

"Too bad you can't make the energy flow keep changing," Candle commented.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, if you kept changing the nature of the ward, maybe it would be harder to ignore it."

The concept immediately cast Oceanvine adrift on an ocean of thought and Candle, seeing that her attention was elsewhere, continued to work with the lock.

The lock continued to be his magical nemesis and he suspected that Silverwind had intentionally given him an assignment that was beyond him just to keep him busy. He was half right. The assignment was a bit more advanced than he should have been given, but Silverwind was testing his young pupil. To date Candle had digested everything thrown at him in record time and the wizard felt it was time to find out just how fast he could push the lad.

Candle returned the lock to his pocket and once more extracted his pebble. Somehow every lesson came back to this small chunk of milky quartz. He stared at the small pebble that had become his personal symbol of victory and traced, not for the first time, the rusty streak on its side with one finger.

Clasping it firmly in his right hand he closed his eyes and contemplated the stone. He was aware of every bulge and dimple in it, but only through the tactile sense in his hand and fingers. Still with his eyes closed, he reached out with the simple levitation spell he knew and cause the pebble to lift out of his hand until it floated at eye level. He cracked one eye open to confirm the fact that it was indeed where he thought it was and then snapped them shut once more. The spell worked fine when he knew where the pebble was, but if what Silverwind had told him was true, he should be able to feel the stone with some sort of magical feeling.

Then he reached out with his mind and tried to "feel" the bumps and dents he knew were in the stone. He tried to sense the cool, dry surface of the pebble and thought he might be getting somewhere when he started feeling cold himself.

"Stand by to shorten sail!" the command sounded.

Candle opened his eyes and noticed that dark black clouds had slipped across the sky until they blocked the sun's afternoon light. He shivered slightly as the cool ocean breeze swept across him. Then a stray gust of wind pushed the ship into the rapidly rising swells, sending a large splash of salt water across the deck, catching both Candle and Oceanvine.

"Ahhk!" Oceanvine gasped as the shock of water broke her own concentration. Then, noticing the change of weather she asked, "How long have I been out?"

"Don't know," Candle admitted.

"Doesn't matter," she replied matter-of-factly. "We'd better get below and into some dry clothes. I wouldn't have thought it would get this cold in the tropics," she added as they rushed toward the cabins.

They had just finished changing when the storm broke. Oceanvine correctly guessed that the captain had ordered that all sails be struck and the sea anchor - a large canvas funnel - be dropped when the bark suddenly turned almost all the way around, rocking and rolling back and forth in the high swells. Then the Marga stopped swinging and the motions of the ship stabilized as the line between it and the sea anchor became taut.

Oceanvine left her cabin and walked a couple doors down to a small day room where crewmen and passengers sometimes gathered when not otherwise occupied. Silverwind was already there, entertaining crewmen by magically throwing darts at a small knot in a rough plank that had the look of long use as a dart board. He wore a blindfold and sat with his back to the board. Every dart hit the knot as close to center as possible given the position of previously thrown darts. Further, he was swilling down large gulps of dark brown ale between each shot. Geraint stood by, taking all bets.

Candle was also present, but was looking a bit green. The air in the cabin was slightly stale and, looking around, she noted that the boy had company. Several of the seamen showed signs of incipient seasickness as well. That, she knew from previous voyages, was not unusual. Many sailors became affected by the motion of the sea, but those who lasted beyond their first trip learned to work through their sickness. Candle, on the other hand, was experiencing the problem for the first time.

"Come on out into the hallway, Candle," she said gently. "The air is fresher there and you'll feel better."

"Really?" he asked miserably.

"I think so," she hedged. "Besides, I know a simple spell you can use for motion sickness. That is, assuming you're feeling well enough to learn it."

Candle tried to smile, but when the bark suddenly lurched, he had to swallow hard to keep from losing control. "'Sworth a try," he mumbled and followed her out of the room, praying to any god who'd listen that he'd have better luck with this spell than he did with the lock.

## Thirteen

The captain's quick actions during the storm resulted in nothing more disastrous than a pair of broken stays, quickly repaired the next afternoon. Once more deep-sea routine was established and the bark *Isle of Marga* continued on its northerly course late the next day when the storm finally blew itself out.

Oceanvine, tired of her cabin after only one day of enforced confinement there, climbed up on deck that evening in time to see Captain Yakaw take sightings of stars with a quarter-round, heavy brass instrument called a sextant. She didn't want to bother the Granomish mariner, but her curiosity overcame her hesitation and she climbed the narrow ladder to the poop deck.

"G'deen, miss," the captain greeted her politely.

"Good evening, captain," she replied. "Are we on course?"



"Probably close enough," he shrugged. "I won't know until I check my tables."

"Do you mind if I watch?" she asked. "I've always wondered about deep-sea navigation."

"If you like," he replied blandly. "Just let me take a few more measurements and I'll explain what I'm doing." He looked through a small sight-hole, made an adjustment and then checked where the indicator arm fell on the instrument's scale. He wrote down the number at the end of a series of similar numbers in a little notebook on a small shelf at the stern. Then he repeated the process explaining to Oceanvine what he was doing. "I look through this sight at the half-silvered mirror at the other end."

"And you're looking at the reflection of a star?"

"No, it's only half-silvered, so I'm looking through the glass directly at a star. That bright one up there."

"Methischa," Oceanvine identified it by its Granomish name- the Eye of Methis.

"Right," Yakaw agreed. "Methischa is one the key navigational stars. Then I use this other mirror - the one on the swinging arm and adjust it until it reflects a star on the horizon. Because the fixed mirror is half-silvered, I can superimpose the images of the two stars on each other. Then all I have to do is read the angular difference between them and I'll know precisely how high off the horizon Methischa is. Here, you try it." He handed her the delicate instrument and continued talking. "On a night when visibility is limited, I'll settle for being able to make one measurement, but since it's such a good night I sighted five different stars off the east and west horizons."

"But that will only give you an accurate measurement of our longitude," she pointed out. "How do you measure our latitude."

"Same way, except off the South Pole Star, or if north of the equator on the Lesser Northern Twin. Then I measure its angle above the south or north horizon respectively."

After she finished with her sample sighting he took back the sextant and put it down gently on the shelf where the notebook lay with a few tools and an oil can, and reached over the stern rail of the ship and pulled a heavy hempen line up out of the sea. At the end of the line was a yard long device with fins on the end. The fins had been fouled with seaweed which Yakaw cleaned off before tossing the device back overboard.

"What was that?" Oceanvine asked.

"Ship's log," Yakaw replied.

"I thought the log was a sort of journal in which you recorded information regarding each voyage."

"That too," Yakaw replied. "Actually that device was the fly. This meter here that the line is attached to is the log. It measures the current speed of the ship based on how rapidly the fly rotates. I always make sure the fly hasn't gotten fouled first. See? According to this we're moving at ten and one-half knots." He diligently wrote that down in the notebook.

"Is that fast?"

"It's not bad considering that we're not running with the wind. We'll do better once we cross the equator

day after tomorrow and catch the Nildar Stream."

"The Nildar Stream?" Oceanvine asked.

"Aye. It's the great current that flows in from the Methis and then north of the east coast of Granom. The prevailing winds run with the Stream." He closed the notebook and carefully, almost reverently, picked up the sextant. "Now," he told her, "it's time to figure out where we are. Help carry the tools, would you?"

Oceanvine nodded and picked up the notebook, pen and ink, and a small hand-held compass that was also on the shelf. Together they climbed back down to the main deck and into the captain's office cabin.

"All right," Yakaw said after putting the sextant away. "Now we do the real work." He relieved Oceanvine of the items she had carried and then pulled a large, fat book out of a well-built, water-tight drawer in the desk. Oceanvine realized that all the drawers had been made water-tight and that anything the captain wanted to keep dry at sea were kept here. "I noted the time and our direction before you joined me," he explained. "The direction was important because I want to know where we're headed as well as which way to take my sightings. The time is even more critical. The measurements I take with the sextant have to be within a very tight time limit, since even a few minutes error could throw us off by hundreds of miles."

"That's why you take so many corroborative sightings," Oceanvine concluded.

"Exactly. Now I have to take these measurements and do my sums. Here, I'll show you." The process was basically simple if you knew which of the thousands of numbers in the navigational book he had pulled out to use, but Oceanvine was impressed nevertheless. "Hm," he said at last. "That storm pushed us further north than I thought. We should cross the equator sometime tomorrow afternoon."

"So we shortened the trip?"

"Maybe. For all either of us know we could get becalmed for a week or hit five more storms on the way. It's that time of year. We'll just have to wait and see." Oceanvine nodded and smiled. It felt good to have won over the captain. When she had first come on board he had been openly hostile-probably because of a bad first impression - but now, although he was still a little stiffly polite she felt he was trying to be friendly. He proved that to her with his next words. "Miss, may I give you a little friendly advice?"

"Of course," she replied, wondering what was coming next.

"I've noticed that you have a quick temper." Oceanvine blushed and nodded. Her temper had gotten her into trouble more than once and she still had to work hard sometimes to keep from losing it. "Well, have you ever been north of the equator?"

"No, captain," she replied. "This is my first trip out of Emmine."

He nodded. "Well, I don't want to spoil the surprise, but if something happens to you tomorrow afternoon, please try to remember it's being done out of friendship and acceptance and is not a personal attack."

"What is going to happen?" she asked suspiciously.

"Maybe nothing. Just remember to keep your sense of humor about you."

"Terrific," she muttered unenthusiastically.

She slept fitfully that night, waking often from disturbing dreams remembered only for the emotion they imparted. "Damn!" she muttered after waking the third time. "I hate surprises." Eventually she resorted to casting a tranquilizing spell on herself. It would do little to help her catch up on her sleep, but at least the next time she opened her eyes the night would be over.

She rose that morning feeling exhausted and got dressed in a modest outfit, not feeling up to maintaining the clothing illusions she usually used to mask her tanning activities.

"Sense of humor," she muttered darkly, scowling at the walls. "Ha. Ha."

"Any problems in there?" she heard Silverwind ask from the far side of the cabin door.

"No," she replied flatly, brushing a stray lock of her long blond hair away from her face. She opened the door and continued, "Everything's just peachy."

"Oh good," Silverwind replied just as emotionlessly. "You look like hell, by the way."

"Thank you. You're so sweet," Oceanvine replied acidly. "I live for such complements. Hey!" She felt her hair straightening itself, obviously under the influence of a spell casually cast by the wizard. Throwing her hands to her head, she tried to stop the process, but her hair continued to move as though under its own volition no matter how hard she tried to stop it. "I can comb my own hair, you know, even by magic!"

Silverwind smiled her vehemence away. "Well, now you don't have to. Come on up for breakfast, it's the last meal you'll get until we cross the line."

"Cross the line?"

"The equator, Vine. Some people ascribe a certain symbolic importance to crossing it for the first time. I'm surprised you haven't done the same. It's the sort of thing you tend to do." Oceanvine shrugged, unsuccessfully trying to hide her feelings about the impending event. Yakaw had implied something might happen.

Finally, her curiosity got the best of her and she asked. "What happens when we cross the equator?"

"You'll see," he replied mysteriously.

There was a tangible air of tension when she arrived on deck a minute later. The crew, who usually used meals as a social occasion with laughing and singing, were unusually quiet, and three young men kept looking up at the sky.

The tension continued to build as the morning passed and all hands stopped to watch when Yakaw ordered that one of the ship's four defensive cannons be loaded. That, too, was unusual since the guns, rarely necessary, were only loaded when trouble was expected. The lack of sleep finally got to Oceanvine around noontime and she returned to her cabin to take a nap with the warm equatorial breezes sweeping over her. She was asleep almost before she hit the hammock.

The next thing she knew, she was being forcibly dragged out of her cabin by two of the Granomish

sailors to the raucous cheers of their shipmates. Before she was fully awake, she found herself being swung twice and then tossed easily by the very strong Granomen up through the hatch on to the main deck. However, before she could fall to the deck another Granom caught and held her while another tied a blindfold over her eyes. All around her, sailors were laughing and singing and shouting crude jokes.

"Hey! Watch those hands!" she protested as she felt herself being lifted once more. She was about to lash out magically with an intensely destructive spell when the memory of the captain's voice echoed between her ears, "...keep your sense of humor about you." When she thought about it, the sounds around her did not sound particularly malicious, crude though the humor might be.

"Line them up!" she heard the bosun's voice boom out and she was carried several steps and then placed gently down on the deck while the shouts and joking continued all around her. A moment later somebody removed her blindfold.

She looked around her to see the laughing, singing sailors of the Isle of Marga surrounding her, Candle, and the three young men who had been so preoccupied with the sky that morning. She looked up and noted that in spite of the fresh breeze only one jib had been left unfurled and the bark moved lazily through the water. She saw Geraint and Silverwind standing calmly by on the foredeck and relaxed, knowing that they wouldn't have been so calm had she been in any danger.

Before she could ask what was happening, however, the ship's cannon boomed, rocking the vessel and sending the eight-pound ball sailing out over the Nildar to splash hundreds of yards down range. The roar of the cannon was nearly matched by that of the crew as they cheered this obvious signal that they were now passing precisely over the equator.

"Novices of the ocean," the bosun announced in his deep and booming voice, "accept now these tokens of this your first crossing of the line!" A crewman reached out and placed a small pewter medallion on a tough rawhide thong around Oceanvine's neck even as the same was done for Candle and the three novice sailors. She had only a moment to inspect the medallion and discover that it had been cast with the likeness of Saint Ivas, the Granomish patron of travellers and on the back the name of the Isle of Marga and the date had been stamped.

Then before she could react, Oceanvine and her companions were abruptly lifted and thrown overboard to the joyful laughter of the crew. They started singing again - a raucous drinking song - and at least half the crew joined the initiates in their swim. In spite of herself, Oceanvine had to laugh and enjoy herself. Yakaw had been right. This had happened to her because her presence was accepted by the crew. If they hadn't felt that way, they would not have included her in this good-natured abuse.

The men were polite and gentle toward her once more as they helped her back on board. With the ritual concluded, the deference they had shown her reasserted itself, but she thought she detected a slightly friendlier attitude after that.

Captain Yakaw allowed the celebration to continue for another hour before ordering all hands back on board so the ship could continue on toward her destination. The ship moved on as though nothing unusual had happened, but Kenya's meal that evening was a feast by anyone's definition, using not only fresh fish caught that morning, but large quantities of the salt-cured meats and fresh vegetables they had carried in the galley hold since Kanaduin.

Oceanvine, completely relaxed for the first time in months, slept very well that night indeed.

## Fourteen

Ocean voyages are usually long and tedious experiences that are only occasionally punctuated by memorable events. Four weeks into the voyage, however had only left Candle the memories of leaving Kanaduin, seeing the porpoises, five storms although none of them were severe enough to cause damage after that first, the ceremony when they "crossed the line," and endless days of studying and fishing.

For Oceanvine it was much the same, except that instead of fishing, she spent most evenings learning the fine art of navigation from Captain Yakaw.

Most of the time for both of them was spent studying. By this time the small stretch on the forecastle deck they used had become universally acknowledged as their territory where no one, even on duty, trespassed without at least a friendly greeting as they walked by or climbed the rigging over their heads. With only four passengers, two of whom were technically working their way across, the crew rarely made the distinction.

Both Candle and Oceanvine had a magical problem to solve. The solution to Candle's lock continued to elude him even after Oceanvine provided a few hints and even, on one dark afternoon in her cabin, showed him how it was done. As a result his enthusiasm for it waxed and waned several times. He had even considered, in his frustration, throwing the device overboard, but somehow Silverwind always knew just when to come over and give him something else to think about.

In this enforced environment of education, Candle learned fast, and his writing improved enormously. So much so, that on flipping back through some of the earlier pages of his journal, even he was amazed with his progress. He had managed to master basic arithmetic early on and was now stumbling his way through elementary geometry and algebra. There was very little structure to his lesson plan, however.

Silverwind just taught the boy whatever sprang to mind next. Sometimes Candle found his lessons ridiculously easy and at others hopelessly complex. He was still having trouble with the conditional subjunctive mood in Granomish speech. Silverwind made a mental note to himself to pick up several text books; basic chemistry and biology for starters. By the time this trip is over he probably won't need any geography lessons or sociology either for that matter, at least not on the grade school level.

Oceanvine's studies, however, revolved around a rather more rarified sphere. It was true that when she stood for her oral and written exams the committee could ask her questions concerning any topic at all although they were supposed to concentrate on a student's specialty. In Oceanvine's case, after over three years of research with Silverwind, it could be reasonably argued that she was very much a generalist and that could bring some questions in from some very odd vectors especially in the written exams. Her orals, she knew, would center on her thesis.

It was that thesis that was tripping her up. She spent at least half of each day working on wards that would resist Silverwind's technique, so far to no avail.

Candle was fishing with Kenya one morning, while Oceanvine worked on new wards on the forecastle deck. The sky was a vivid blue with only a few thin clouds skirting the eastern horizon. There was only a light breeze and the ship was hardly moving even though it was under full sail. In the resulting heat Oceanvine wished that she had been daring enough to wear nothing but a swim suit under the illusory clothes for even the loose-fitting silk blouse and shorts were uncomfortable. Distracted by the heat she

looked around and saw Silverwind talking to the first mate at the stern.

Damn!she thought to herself.*He looks so comfortable. Why, he isn't even sweating!* Then she laughed out loud. Of course! He was using the same heat-transfer spell on himself that they both used to produce ice in the summer.*No*, she corrected herself,*not on himself. He'dsuffer from hypothermia. What then, the air?* That wouldn't work either she decided since the air would just flow away with the next breeze. She tried the spell on her clothes, which helped, but she wasn't wearing enough real clothing to be really comfortable. "Oh well!" she sighed and went back to work.

She was experimenting with differently shaped wards and as a lark, she set one up composed of interlocking loops. It looked at though the energy was flowing every which way at once. She didn't have much hope that this would work any better than the other clever schemes she had devised, but she took a deep breath, concentrated on Silverwind's technique, and stepped through the curtain of curlicue energy loops.

Nothing happened and she dispersed the ward peevishly.

"Oceanvine ho!" the lookout shouted from the crow's nest near the top of the main mast. Oceanvine looked up, thinking the young Granom had called to her. "Oceanvine off the port bow!"

Suddenly his meaning slammed through her mind. The lookout wasn't referring to her but to her namesake. She turned toward the port bow and saw a large green smudge on the otherwise clear blue water. The smudge was at least a half an hour away in this light wind, but even now the crew members of the *Marga* were rushing to battle stations at the rapidly shouted commands from the bridge. Silverwind rushed from the stern and in less than a minute he was standing by Oceanvine's side. Candle arrived a few minutes later.

"Candle," Silverwind instructed the lad, "I want you to go below and make sure all the portholes are shut."

"Why me?" he asked. It was just starting to get interesting.

"Somebody has to do it," Silverwind shrugged.

"You're just trying to get rid of me," Candle complained.

"Interesting notion. Below, Candle. Now!" The boy grumbled some more, but he did it softly as he walked briskly toward the hatch.

"He'll be back," Oceanvine predicted. Silverwind nodded.

"Here ya go," the second mate said from behind them. They turned to see him offering them each an unlit torch.

"What's this?" Oceanvine asked.

"It's a torch, Vine," Silverwind replied dryly, "a bundle of tightly wrapped oily rags on a stick."

"Thank you," she told him, with a saccharine smile that failed to mask her acidic feelings, "so much."

"It's to burn the oceanvine, miss," the second mate told her. "Pick a spot that isn't already occupied and

whenever some tries to creep up the hull, you burn it."

"That's the traditional way of combatting the stuff, Vine," Silverwind informed her.

"That's Oceanvine!" she retorted.

"Aye, miss," the second mate replied with a nod before turning back to continue handing out torches. Silverwind chuckled at the mate's all too understandable confusion and Oceanvine fumed.

"That's why most of the hulls of ocean-going ships are painted black," the wizard continued. "It hides the burn marks."

"Isn't all that open fire about a ship rather dangerous?"

"It is," Silverwind affirmed, "But being eaten by a clump of mobile seaweed is worse. Of course the torches won't be necessary this time around."

"Why not?"

"Because we're here," he shrugged. "You do remember how to set a simple repulsion ward, don't you?" Oceanvine gave him a glare that spoke full encyclopaedias of data. "Good!" he replied. "Make it air and water-permeable, and don't forget to ward below the keel as well as above the highest mast. A patch of oceanvine that size probably extends five fathoms below the surface. I'll go let the captain know what we're up to."

He strode briskly toward the bridge leaving Oceanvine to wonder, "What's a fathom?" She knew it was a unit of measure, but although she lived on a world of water it was a nautical term that only sailors used on a day-to-day basis. She decided, however, that it didn't really matter as long as she warded the entire ship. She slipped to the deck gracefully and began her spell meditation.

"Nice work," Geraint told her a few minutes later, startling her out of her trance. "Watch it," he cautioned her, "you don't want to have to set it up again." She nodded and closed her eyes once more to make sure the ward was intact, assured that it was, she was able to let it run on its own. "Sorry," Geraint apologized. "I didn't mean to interrupt you. I thought you were finished and just resting."

"I was finished," Oceanvine admitted, "but I've been working with wards so much lately I couldn't help but analyze this one. I guess I was still too connected to the spell."

"Global wards are tough," Geraint remarked.

"Only if you need to reinforce the poles," Oceanvine replied, remembering anew that Geraint was an accomplished mage in his own right, "but I think I avoided the problem by spinning it on its side."

"I believe you're right," he agreed. "Now our only problem is waiting for the wind." Oceanvine looked up at the sails. There wasn't enough wind to fill them.

"Well at least we're still clear of the oceanvine," she commented.

"That won't last. Look."

She followed his gaze and saw that the omnivorous seaweed was now only one hundred yards away

and getting closer. Candle returned to the forecastle deck, squeezing his way past several sailors, and looked at the approaching mass.

"It's moving!" he observed.

"It does that," Geraint replied.

"How does it know where we are?"

"It hears us."

"That's impossible!" Candle denied.

"Oceanvine," its namesake explained, "can sense the vibrations caused by the sound of the ship's hull cutting through the water. The result is very much like what we call hearing."

"But how does it move?"

"It's kept floating by thousands of tiny air sacks. By rapidly transferring air between sacks in an organized manner, the individual tendrils are made to move. In essence it's swimming toward us."

"Why?"

"It's hungry?" Geraint suggested, smiling tightly.

"And it wants to eat us?" Candle asked, blanching noticeably.

"It doesn't much care what it eats actually. It'll devour anything that doesn't finish eating it first."

"How do we stop it?" Oceanvine explained about the ward she had set up. "I don't see nothing," he replied worriedly.

"You aren't quite up to that level yet," Oceanvine replied tolerantly, "but if you look, you'll notice that it is already forming a circular edge around us."

"It's growing up out of the water too!" he pointed out excitedly.

"Good thing I warded us completely," she replied. As they watched, the mobile seaweed rapidly encircled the *Isle of Marga* and, having done that seemed to be climbing up the side of the ward. "I wouldn't have thought it could do that," Oceanvine thought out loud. "There's nothing for it to hang on to."

"Just itself," Geraint replied detachedly. "How fascinating! It seems to be building a wall around us."

"Can it do that?" Candle asked.

"Evidently," Oceanvine told him uncertainly, masking her own surprise.

"So you knew this would happen?"

"It's all new to me. Actually, I've never seen oceanvine before. It only grows on the outer seas and this is my first time out of Emmine."



"Why did you name yourself Seaweed?" he asked with more than a hint of his usual bantering manner.

"That's Oceanvine!"

"Same thing," he laughed, quickly ducking behind Geraint.

"If you two don't mind, I think I'll join Silverwind on the Bridge. Oceanvine, try not to get so angry that you let the seaweed in." Then Geraint rushed off with followed closely by a low growl from Oceanvine's throat.

"How high do you think it's going to get?" Candle asked. The wall of oceanvine was now as high as the gunwales and still rising.

"I don't know," Oceanvine admitted. They waited and watched while the wall of green continued to grow. As she watched, the chaotic motions of the combined tendrils of the mobile, omnivorous weed planted an idea in Oceanvine's mind.

The crewmen were strangely silent, awestruck by the growing green menace that surrounded them, and odd sounds of moving foliage - not unlike that made by a thousand sponges being wrung out - could be clearly heard. However, those noises were not so loud as to block out the voices Geraint heard before he arrived on the bridge.

"So conjure us up a little wind," Captain Yakaw suggested. The sharp tone of his voice betrayed the fear he obviously felt.

"I'd love to," Silverwind replied evenly, "but no mortal has that kind of power."

"That ain't what I've heard," Yakaw disagreed. "You're supposed to be able to conjure up hurricanes and earthquakes."

"You've been reading too many penny dreadfuls, Captain," the wizard countered. "Earthquakes maybe. If I happen to be near a major fault line and if there's enough tension built up, I might be able to cause it to be released violently. Maybe. I've never tried it. A hurricane, however, or even a slight breeze is a far different problem. What do you propose I latch on to?"

"How would I know?" Yakaw scoffed. "I'm no wizard!"

"The problem," Geraint cut in as he came within comfortable conversation distance, "is that wind is air in motion. Air is very hard to hold on to. Try doing that with your hand."

"I'll settle for doing it with my sails," Yakaw retorted. "Seems pretty easy to me," he added.

"And I," Silverwind told him, "can catch the wind with an impermeable ward. I can even cause a minute breeze to stir by making that ward move, but in order to give you enough wind to fill your sails I'd need something several miles square. Even then it would be very gusty and a slight miscalculation would uproot your masts, assuming we weren't driven under altogether."

"Besides," Geraint added, looking over his shoulder at the now nearly complete green dome that encased them, "that wall is blocking off any wind we might kick up. Pretty determined, isn't it? I'd have never thought it would climb that high and over a repulsion ward."

"It is impressive," Silverwind replied with a smile.

"So what are you going to do about it?" Yakaw demanded.

"Good question," Geraint agreed.

"Burn it then," Yakaw told him. "I've seen you cast fire spells several times since we left port." It was true. Silverwind had been making a practice of entertaining the crew with fireworks on Emtsday evenings.

"I thought of that," the wizard admitted. "It does seem like the easy way out."

"And you hate taking the easy way out," Geraint finished with a laugh, "even when it's the best or even the only choice. Right?"

"I don't believe that there's never an alternative. You know that," Silverwind replied. "What bothers me is the possible ecological damage."

"One patch of oceanvine?" Geraint asked.

"There aren't that many in the world, maybe two dozen, maybe less. Everything has its place, you know. Oceanvine is a major marine scavenger. Destroy it and we'll have worse problems."

"Why destroy it?" Geraint asked. "Just cut a channel we can sail through. Even I can do that."

Silverwind gave his old friend a sheepish grin and admitted, "I didn't think of that. Somehow when I thought of a fire spell I just assumed you both meant I should burn the entire patch."

"I'd rather you did burn it all, and damn your 'worse problems'!" Yakaw exclaimed.

"There's another good reason why we shouldn't," Silverwind pointed out. "The radiant heat would set your ship ablaze as well." Yakaw gulped. "I suppose I should see if Oceanvine can modify her ward to burn this stuff."

"Why bother her?" Geraint asked. "A fire spell is no great feat of magic. If you can burn us free, I can keep us free while you use a propulsion spell to push the ship."

"Sounds good," Silverwind shrugged.

"I thought you couldn't do that." Yakaw said accusingly.

"No," Silverwind corrected him, "I said I couldn't push the wind. I can push the ship, or rather push against the water and so propel the ship. Water is far denser than air and easier to get a grip on."

"Then do it already! That seaweed might not be able to get in but the water dripping off of it can. Getting downright soggy in here!"

Silverwind shrugged and walked toward the bow with Geraint in close pursuit.

"A problem?" Geraint whispered between the salty raindrops when they were out of earshot.

"No. Just wondering how I'm going to make this look easy."

"You worry too much about that," Geraint told him seriously.

"I do have a reputation to maintain," Silverwind said with dignity. The two men looked each other in the eye for a moment and then burst out laughing. "Actually," he continued when he caught his breath, "it bothers Oceanvine when I seem to use magic without thinking about it."

"I can understand that. It always bothered me. However, this time I suggest we work without the games. Just burn it from the top down and let her ward keep out the ashes. I also suggest we start soon. It's getting dark in here," he concluded as they rejoined Oceanvine and Candle.

"Start what?" Oceanvine asked. "It's about time we did something. Did you know it was going to do this?" She looked around her in a state of near panic, but with a renewed sense of respect for the plant for which she had named herself.

"Calmly, Vine," Silverwind told her gently.

"Calmly yourself!" she retorted nervously. "I think the air is starting to get bad in here. The ward might be permeable, but is that stuff?"

Claustrophobic?he thought to himself.*Probably. Air's not bad yet. Fire might really panic her.* Then he closed his eyes and concentrated on the oceanvine that was just completing its coverage of the bubble-shaped ward.*Heat*, he thought,*boil the water right out of it! Yes, that's the way.*

A vast sizzling sound erupted from the top of the dark green dome and, after a moment, the dense mass of foliage began to shrink back, letting the sun back in.

"Getting a bit warm in here," Geraint noted, "and foggy."

"We'll lose the fog once we get moving," the wizard replied distractedly. "Heat is the answer, by the way. Don't burn it, just keep it too hot for comfort and this stuff will keep its distance." A few minutes later the voracious seaweed had retreated to sea-level amid the cheers of the crew, but the edge of the cleared water was just barely visible through the condensed water vapor.

"All right," Geraint said, making himself comfortable on the deck, "I'll keep up the heat, you move the ship."

"I'll need to do that from the stern," Silverwind told them. "Candle why don't you come with me? I'll show you what that levitation spell of yours can really do." They hurried away, rapidly disappearing in mist. "Propulsion," the wizard continued as they walked briskly to the aft end of the bark, "is the same as levitation, except that the force is apply laterally instead of vertically."

"What?" Candle asked.

"We'll be pushing sideways instead of up and down. Really, we must do something about your vocabulary." When they had reached the stern rail atop the poop deck, he continued, "Now I want you to concentrate on pushing the ship forward and on pushing the water behind us away. I'll be helping so don't try to do it all yourself."

"Okay," Candle replied sitting down comfortably on a bench. "Now?"

"It's as good a time as any." Silverwind started in immediately and was able to feel the difference when Candle joined in a few moments later. The wizard held off using his full power in order to gauge his apprentice's progress. *Not bad*, he thought, measurably impressed. *The boy's doing better than I thought*. Then, to keep Candle from straining himself, Silverwind put himself firmly into his work.

The bark moved slowly at first, barely showing any sign of motion for the first few minutes. Then it began to pick up speed until it was moving at an amazing speed of several knots. They soon left the initial cloud of steam in their wake but they maintained a tenuous connection to it by the continued boiling of water by Geraint's magical actions.

"Wizard!" the first mate called, rushing up to the mage and his apprentice. "The skipper says we're going too fast. We're straining the rigging with the wind filling the sails from the wrong side."

"I should have thought of that," Silverwind muttered. "Slack off, Candle. Tell the captain," he instructed the first officer, "to furl all sails. We won't need them until we're clear."

It took a while to accomplish that, but soon the *Isle of Marga* moved on amid a sea of green oceanvine, churning up vast clouds of steam. Silverwind looked up at the bare rigging, wondering if there might not be a nonmagical means to propel ships at this speed without sails. Then he chuckled at himself for the stray thought and reapplied himself to the task at hand.

By the time the sun set that evening and the wind picked up again, the patch of oceanvine was well beyond the horizon and the *Marga* proceeded, once more, under sail.

## Fifteen

"Still tired?" Oceanvine asked Candle a few mornings later when their daily routine had resumed. The boy nodded, looking out at the clear blue waves of the sea apathetically. "That's understandable. Look at it this way, you can now say you've accomplished your first major work of magic and did it much earlier than I ever did."

"But I'm so tired," Candle complained. "Like everything was drained out of me."

"That's sort of what happened," she confirmed. "You have to learn to not push yourself too hard."

"Isn't there some way to put some energy back into me?"

"Yes, but you don't have sufficient control or experience to try it yet. Most likely you'd accomplish nothing or, if you did, you'd as easily burn yourself out. It could have been worse. Poor Geraint has been having nightmares ever since. You're only tired." She took another look at the young apprentice and relented. "Is it really that bad?" Candle looked at her helplessly and she could see that he was using every bit of energy he had just to stay awake. "Maybe you should go back to sleep," she suggested.

"Kenya wants to go fishing," he protested.

"Kenya can go fishing on his own," she replied, but she relented at his look of disappointment. "I

shouldn't be doing this," she told him quietly, "without Silverwind's supervision until I have my master's, but..." She knelt beside the listless Candle and placed her delicately graceful hands on either side of his head and closed her eyes. The spell she cast transferred some of her own personal energy to him. "There, is that a little better?"

"Thank you, Oceanvine," he said quietly and sincerely.

"You're welcome, Candle. That's as much as I dare do. It'll get you through the day, but if you're smart you'll take a nap after you and Kenya finish. Okay?"

"Okay." Oceanvine returned to her work and Candle, his curiosity restored as well, asked, "What are you working on?"

"Hmm? Oh, a new twist on wards. It's an idea you gave me. Remember when you asked about making the energy flow oscillate?"

"You mean go back and forth?" he asked uncertainly.

"Right. I thought about that when I saw the way that oceanvine moved the other day."

"It twitched all over the place," he observed.

"Right. It's called chaotic motion. Well, I've been trying to figure out a way to make the energy flow chaotically in a ward."

"Is it working?"

"Not so far. Setting up new patterns takes some work. You have to understand completely what you're attempting to do and sometimes the cause doesn't seem to have much to do with the results."

"You want it to go in more than one way at once. Right?"

"That's right," she agreed.

"Can't you just cast two or more different wards in the same place."

"Oh, of course not!" she snapped hastily. "That would..." she trailed off for a moment, "That would set up an interference pattern, unless..."

"Unless what?"

"I'm not sure. There's an idea just beyond my reach. Let me work on this." He nodded and got up to look for his fishing buddy while Oceanvine started making rapid notes in her book. An hour later she was ready to try out a radically new spell.

Deciding that she had enough sun for one day and that this might take more out of her than she expected, she went to her cabin so if she needed to rest afterward she wouldn't have far to go.

A ward, she thought to herself. *Where? Across the door way, of course!* She sat down cross-legged on the floor and forced herself to relax. With a flash of inspiration, she contemplated the concept of two separate wards and took that mental image and thought about merging them, not only of setting them up

on top of each other, but of making them interdependent on each other's energy flow. When she knew exactly what she planned to do, she set the unique ward and then took a mental step back to study her handiwork.

It looked like a mess. Had she set a ward that flowed like this during her final exams at Randona, she would have flunked out for sure. It didn't flow at all. Instead it seemed to roil and bubble like a stew pot left over a hot fire. What surprised her most, however, was that the construct was stable. So much for established theory.

Wait a minute! she brought a halt to her musing. Worry about theory later. I still don't know whether this will work. So thinking, she took a deep breath to relax herself and attempted to negotiate the ward.

BONG!

A long gong-like note sounded. It was the alarm that was tripped when the ward detected her passage through the doorway. Her eyes snapped wide open and a pleased, tight, little smile crossed her face. A door opened across from her to reveal Geraint. He looked like misery incarnate with his hair uncombed and his face reflecting intense pain.

"How are you feeling?" she asked concernedly. She knew from Silverwind's similar experiences that he was suffering from both a lack of sleep and a hangover.

"A little better," he admitted. "At least I didn't dream this time." She nodded seriously and cast a mild spell on him that would ameliorate his hangover. "Thank you," he said gratefully. "I didn't dare cast such a spell myself."

"It'll only last half an hour or so," she warned him. "You'd better get something to eat and drink, especially drink, and I don't mean ale!"

"Yes, mother," he replied with a bit of his usual humor. "What's with the noise?" She explained what she had done. Then, partially to demonstrate, but mostly to test her invention again she turned around and tried passing through the ward.

BONG!

"That's twice!" she chortled.

"Interesting construction," Geraint commented. "How'd you do it?" She explained. "That must have been tough," he opined.

"Moderately so," she admitted, "but I think any Master could duplicate it, and maybe half the journeymen in the world. Oh well. Once more for good measure." Then she closed her eyes and really put herself into the negotiation spell.

BONG!

"What's going on down here?" Silverwind called as he rushed toward the sound of the unusual noise. "And where did you get the gong?" Oceanvine laughed mirthfully. She felt the sudden release of weeks of tension draining out of her now that she had, at last, the solution to a nagging problem.

"Silverwind," she said, struggling to control herself, but unable to keep a note of smugness out of her

voice, "there is a ward across that doorway. Let's see if you can walk through it without tripping the alarm." The wizard shrugged and casually stepped through the door.

BONG!

"Hah!" Oceanvine crowed with immense satisfaction.

"Looks like you've met your match," Geraint commented amusedly.

"You caught me once," Silverwind replied to the pretty blond. "Not twice." Taking a deep breath, he stepped very deliberately through the warded opening.

BONG!

Oceanvine laughed again and was joined by Geraint to the wizard's brow-furrowed annoyance. He closed his eyes to concentrate on the problem. Oceanvine allowed herself another smile. Silverwind rarely needed to close his eyes to concentrate on a spell; he was that good and his control was legendary. Then he visibly steeled himself and stepped back through the ward.

BONG!

"Maybe you forgot to relax," Geraint suggested. That was an important part of the key to magic; the mage had to both concentrate and relax at the same time. To suggest that to a wizard, however, was a deadly insult that only a very close friend could ever get away with.

"I did not forget!" Silverwind's voice grated at him.

"Then maybe, just maybe, she's come up with something totally new that even you can't circumvent."

"There's a key to every lock," the wizard insisted.

"Unless it's a combination lock," Geraint noted dryly. "You'll have to excuse me. Breakfast calls." He walked away and up to the main deck.

"What did you do?" Silverwind asked Oceanvine after a long pause. "It looks totally chaotic; like the energy flow is constantly changing direction." She explained in great detail. "Interesting," he commented when she was finished. "You know, I tried casting something like this back when I was a student, but I never thought of using interference patterns. Let me try it once more now that I know what I'm dealing with." She shrugged and he gave it one more try, setting off the loud gong once more. With a big smile, she dropped the ward, letting it dissolve even as she watched it with her mind's eye. Then she calmly walked into her cabin and sat down on the edge of her bed.

"Well?" she asked.

"I think," he admitted grudgingly, "that you have managed to come up with something totally new. Too bad you can't save it for your wizard's dissertation. Very few master's theses involve primary research, you know."

"That's probably years away," she replied. "Who knows what I'll come up with by then. I still have explain the theoretical basis for what happened here and defend it. I don't even know what to call it."

"Good point," he admitted. "Up until now, we differentiated wards by their effects, but I think you should base the difference here by the energy flow."

"That does seem to be the basic difference. How about calling old-style wards 'direct current'?"

"That's a good description," he agreed. "And you can call your invention a 'random current' ward."

"It isn't a truly random current," she pointed out, "although it does look like it. It's more like an alternating current. Does that sound reasonable?"

"As reasonable as anything. It doesn't actually matter too much, of course."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"None of your examiners will have any experience with your alternating current wards, so they won't be able to dispute you with their own theories. Just develop your theory as best you can and stand your ground when they attack. How much damage will this do to the parts of your thesis as you've already written it?"

"Not much. I think I can get by with a slight revision of the introduction. The chapters concerning the history of wards still stand. I can't change the past after all, so all I'll need are two new chapters about the theory and construction of alternating current wards and a discussion of their properties and uses. I'll need to write an entirely new set of conclusions, but the previous ones still apply to the low-power wards that were the center of the thesis previously."

"You're going to keep them in?"

"Why not?" she countered. "They're still improvements to ward technology that have never been published. All in all, I think I can finish the rough draft by the time we dock in Querna."

"Two weeks? That's not as much time as you think," Silverwind grinned. "You'd better get to work."

## INTERLOGUE

Gods are neither born omnipotent nor omniscient and especially not all-wise. Power, knowledge, and wisdom come only through experience. The Elder Gods became powerful, knowledgeable, and wise only after countless eons, so it was only natural that the Younger Gods needed to go through a period during which they, too, learned and grew into their heritage.

Young Methis was only five years old when She became aware that there was something basically wrong with the lives of the Granomen who had come into being the day She was born. At the time She lived with Gran and Querna, who She shared as parents with the thick-limbed Granomen, in a large cavern in a mountain on the island men would later name Querna. From that vantage point She could watch the small tribe of Granomen as they struggled to survive. She studied the problem, but although She was a goddess, there was still much for Her to learn, so one day She confronted Father Gran.



"Daddy," She asked Gran, "why must their lives be so hard?"

"Whose lives, my daughter?" Gran asked.

"My mortal brothers and sisters," She replied. "They spend every waking hour just searching for food. Their lives are no better than the birds and beasts that You created as well, Daddy."

"That is the way things are, darling," Gran replied. "Mother Querna and I gave them the gift of thought and therefore the power to create, but it is up to them to use it."

"But are they even aware of Your gift? What would I be like if You and Momma had not spent so much time guiding Me and teaching Me what I need to know?"

"You are a young goddess, my daughter," Gran replied, "Your siblings are mere mortals. It is only natural for Your mother and I to concentrate Our attention on You."

"But it isn't fair to Your other children," Methis insisted.

"Is life supposed to be fair, daughter?"

Methis thought about that. It was something that both her parents had said when She claimed something was not fair.

"Yes," She replied at last. "This time, at least, I think it should be fair."

Gran smiled at His only divine daughter. She and the other Younger Gods were maturing far more rapidly than had the Elder Gods. Already They had learned so much, but only now were they beginning to show some small glimmer of wisdom. In a thousand years, perhaps, She might reach Her full potential as a goddess, but there was much promise for Her already.

"And why is that?" He asked tolerantly.

"Because without guidance, they may never fulfill their potential."

"Then perhaps You should teach them," He suggested wryly.

"Oh, Daddy!" Methis protested. "You know I am too young to do that!"

"You are?" He asked playfully, causing the young goddess to laugh.

"What if I taught them something they are not yet ready for?"

"That might be harmful," Gran conceded, "I suppose You should be careful."

"Daddy!" Methis protested. "Even I know better than that! It has to come from You. Besides, the Granomen see Me as a child. They would never listen to a child. They would not even listen to Momma because She's female, but they hold You in great esteem. They would listen to You."

"And what would You have Me say to them, My child?"

"Just teach them, Daddy. Give them a glimpse of what they might aspire to."

Gran smiled again. He was very proud of His daughter, and He realized in His heart that She was right, so He went forth to talk to the Granomen.

Those first Granomen might have held Gran in esteem, but they also feared this powerful and mysterious being who dwelled on the mountain above. When they saw Gran approaching their crude village with Querna and Methis at his side, they ran unthinkingly into the surrounding forest to hide until Gran left.

Gran had tried to speak with His mortal children before and each time this same thing had happened. It was not His nature to force Himself on His mortal children as His brothers Emtos and Bellinen had.

"You see?" He asked Methis. "When they are ready to learn, they will stay."

"No, Daddy," She insisted. "They are too busy just trying to stay alive. They will never progress if You do not start the process. Besides, why should they trust Us? They don't know who We are or that We mean them no harm."

Gran and Querna nodded and They reached out to the Granomen with Their spirits. And the gentle, loving power of those spirits infused the people, and they overcame their fear of these strangers and returned to their homes to hear what Gran had to say to them.

"I am Gran," He announced in a deceptively soft voice. "These are My wife Querna and My daughter Methis and We are your Gods. You are the Men of the Earth. Yours is the ability to create through the industry of your hands and minds and We give you dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the beasts of the land."

This was just the beginning and the Granomen, after many long explanations, began to understand.

Eventually, before the Gods agreed to remove themselves from the affairs of mortals, Querna taught them the art of farming, so they would not need to spend their every waking moment hunting and gathering food. Gran taught them how to shape tools from wood, horn, and stone. Methis, however, gave them the greatest gift of all, teaching them how to use their minds creatively, so that they could invent their own improvements on the gifts of the Gods. Even in these modern times a virtuous Granom will offer a prayer to Methis before trying anything for the first time.

## PART II - Querna

### One

His Royal Majesty Ksaveras IX, Lord of all Granom, Duke of Quirnlia, and Beloved of Gran stood at one of four large observation windows on the top floor of the keep of the Wurra Palace, staring out through a pair of binoculars at the bleak view of the Crown City of Querna. Normally the north-facing window had an excellent view of the business section of the city, but the onset of an early spring blizzard obscured the harbor view most of the time with an opaque white curtain of snow.

The richly appointed room he stood in occupied the entire top floor of the keep and was tastefully decorated in warm tones that belied the weather outside. Fires blazed in two large fireplaces and kept the large room comfortably warm.

The king himself, however, was not so tastefully decorated. He had the thick, heavy look and bone-white skin tone typical of his species, but that by itself should not have kept him from looking regal. Ksaveras, with a few prematurely gray hairs starting to show in his dark brown beard and hair, had a tendency to slouch, and none of the expensive clothing his tailors made for him could completely camouflage his casual stance.

"Your Majesty?" a deep voice called softly behind him. Ksaveras recognized it as that of his seneschal.

"Yes, Earl Vilimas?" Ksaveras replied, neither putting down his binoculars nor turning to face the obese, white-haired, old Granom. "Have any new problems surfaced to occupy our mind for the duration of the storm?" There was a note in his voice that was almost hopeful. He could use a new problem, the old ones weighed too heavily on him at the moment.

"No, Your Majesty," Vilimas replied. "I was more concerned with your preoccupation with the window. You've spent every spare moment staring out this one for the past three weeks. Some members of the Court are becoming alarmed."

Ksaveras put down the glasses at last and looked briefly around the room. "I understand this palace used to be a rather cold and drafty place a century or two ago," he mused.

"My father remembered the days before the windows were glazed," the seneschal murmured in response.

"Thank Methis for glass," the king said reverently.

"Indeed," Vilimas agreed.

"He's still out there, you know," the king said turning back toward the window, "the killer. What are the journalists calling him?"

"The Cardiokiller, Majesty."

"Stupid name," Ksaveras spat. "I suppose they chose it for alliteration."

"It's sensational and it sells papers," Vilimas replied sadly.

"And panics the people."

"It seems to have lowered the crime rate," the seneschal pointed out.

"Except for murder," the king countered. "That seems to be up. Where the hell is he?"

"The Cardiokiller?"

"No, Silverwind! I sent for him months ago. How long does it take for one wizard to get here?"

"From the other side of Maiyim, Your Majesty?"

"I suppose."

"And we didn't even have a certain address for him. Had to send it by way of the University in Randona. There's no way to know if he ever got the message."

"Oh, Gods! I didn't need to hear that. Does Lord Natan have any progress to report?"

"I'm afraid not, Your Majesty."

"How many dead so far?"

"Eight bodies have been found," the seneschal reported in a flat, emotionless voice, but the king could see tears in the old man's eyes, "but there are at least twenty-one women unaccounted for. I suspect more of them will be found when the weather starts to warm up."

"Gran help us!" the king swore. He pulled the glasses back up to his eyes and stared out at what little he could see in the harbor. For a minute the visibility cleared just a little and he could see hazily out to the first breakwater. "Is there something moving out there?" he asked. "Ships should be riding this storm out at sea. Now who would be crazy enough to come into port in the face of a gale?"

"Only a ship's master with a good mage or two on board," Vilimas replied.

"Do you think it might be Silverwind?" Ksaveras asked hopefully even as his view of the harbor was once more occluded.

"Maybe. Maybe not. There are thousands of mages in the world, Your Majesty, and ships carry them all the time."

"Still, to come in against a storm like this, the captain must have one hell of a lot of confidence in both the mage on board and his own abilities."

"We can only wait and see, Majesty," the seneschal told his king.

"I can't wait," the king replied. "Send someone down to greet that ship and if Silverwind is on board to escort him directly to the palace!"

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"I hate this!" Captain Yakaw exclaimed. "I really hate this."

"It was your decision, Captain," Geraint pointed out mildly as he stood beside the captain on the bridge.

"Bloody hell!" the captain swore. "I can't even see the bow from here. How am I supposed to pilot my ship into a crowded harbor in the middle of a blizzard?"

"Just let Silverwind and Oceanvine do the work," Geraint shrugged. His job was to keep the captain as calm as possible. That wasn't easy to do with the ship moving through the storm-swept waves without the benefit of anyone at the wheel or any sort of anchor to keep the bow to the wind.

"From the bow? Now how the hell can anyone pilot a ship from the bow?" A large wave crashed over the ship, slowly draining through the scuppers. "They'll swamp us for sure," he said looking off to starboard where the next wave was coming from. "For all we know they were washed overboard two waves ago!" Another wave rolled in, rolling the ship along with it. There was a straining creak of lumber, the ship remained intact and upright.

"We'd be on the bottom now if they had," Geraint told him. "Besides they're lashed to the bow rails. You lashed them there yourself. And see? We're still coming about. We'll be riding with the wind in another minute or so."

"Then the waves will come at us from astern!" Yakaw pointed out excitedly.

"Then perhaps we should go someplace a little drier. Tell me, Captain. You have an enclosed bridge house. Why don't you ever use it?"

"Lousy visibility," Yakaw grumbled. "You can't really feel the sea from indoors." Geraint let that slide, although he knew that most captains did not have that prejudice. "But," Yakaw continued, looking at a twenty-foot swell approaching, "maybe we should move inside." They did so.

Meanwhile at the bow of the Isle of Marga, the conversation was incredibly less civil.

"Gods damn it, wizard!" Oceanvine shouted over the roar of the wind, snow, and sea. "We could have ridden this out at sea, but no! You had to volunteer to pilot us in. Damn it! I'm half-frozen and soaking wet, and I can't see two hundred yards!"

Silverwind laughed. "Neither can I," he shouted back, "and I'm just as wet. Exhilarating, isn't it?" Oceanvine's growl was lost in the wind. Once more she concentrated on the matter at hand. Keeping her mind on propelling the ship was difficult when you were engulfed in frigid sea-water every few minutes, but so far, she hadn't managed to slip too badly. "This will get easier in a minute," the wizard shouted. "We're almost past the breakwater." A minute later he was proven right as the great bark eased on into Querna's harbor.

"We'll probably be in big trouble with the harbor master," Oceanvine predicted when she no longer needed to overcome the sound of crashing waves. "Didn't you say they used pilots in this port?"

"It's an option if there's a master mage on board," Silverwind informed her. "I think we can untie ourselves now."

"Maybe you can," Oceanvine replied, "but it's all I can do to maintain my side of the spell and talk to you at the same time."

"It's all right," he told her. "I can handle this myself now. Why don't you go below and change into something dry. Maybe Kenya will have something hot to eat too."

"Are you sure?" she asked worriedly.

"Of course," he shouted back. "I can keep myself warm." She glance over at him and saw that he

seemed to be steaming.

Damn!she thought,and just when I thought I was keeping up to him. She untied herself from the rail and rushed below where Candle was waiting for her.

"You're wet," he observed the obvious.

"And cold," she added with an only slightly exaggerated shiver. "Candle, be a dear and go see ifKenya has any hot tea going in the day room."

"He doesn't 'cause nobody seems to be able to keep anything down," Candle told her. Oceanvine shivered more violently, this time without having to exaggerate what she was feeling.

"Then ask him to put some on, Candle. I'm half frozen!"

"Okay," Candle rushed off, totally unaware that he was compensating for the ever changing pitch of the deck, a far cry from the green-around-the-gills child who had started this trip.

Then Oceanvine closed her cabin door behind her and quickly stripped off the heavy woolen garments, leaving them in a sodden pile at her feet. She felt warmer already, but it wasn't enough so, stepping away from the wet garb she grabbed the blanket off her cot and wrapped it around herself tightly. Then, finally feeling mostly dry, although still cold, she cast a quick heat spell on the blanket to help warm herself still further.

"Come in, Candle," she called, when the boy knocked at the door a few minutes later. He entered with a small teapot and a heavy ceramic mug. "Thank you," she said gratefully as he set them down on a small nighttable and poured her first mug full.

"Any time," he replied, noticing, for the first time what she was wearing. His eyes slid around the cabin until he spotted the wet pile sitting in a running puddle of sea water. He glanced back at her and commented dryly, "Nice blanket."

"Never you mind that," she told him quite firmly. "Silverwind will be needing some dry clothing too as soon as he's finished bringing us into the dock. Why don't you go pick something out for him."

"Like what?" he asked.

"Something warm," she suggested. "When you've done that, get something warm for him to drink too."

"I don't think he likes tea very much," Candle opined.

"No, but he'll drink coffee. Oh, and haveKenya put a shot of rum in it." Candle looked at her strangely. "I don't really object to drinking," she explained, "just drinking excessively. Besides, right now that shot counts as medicine. I'll get dressed in a few minutes and come help you."

"That's okay," he told her on his way out, "I can handle it."

"Perhaps," she whispered with a yawn after he left, "but can I? Better stay awake until we figure out where we're staying for the night." She finished the first mug of tea and then poured herself another before selecting a long, dark green, woolen dress from her sea-chest.

Lying across the back of her desk chair, she noticed the light brown, button-front cloak that she had thoughtfully left behind when she and Silverwind decided to work up in the weather. She sent a quick prayer of thanks to all the gods for that. It was very cold outside and that cloak would be an essential. She started out of the room but nearly fell when she slipped on the trail of water still draining from her other clothes.

"Now what am I going to do about those?" she mused aloud.

She started to wring them out by hand, but another idea flashed through her mind. She sat down on the cot for a moment with her eyes closed to help block out the distracting noises of the wind and snow and of the hull of the bark cutting through the harbor brine. Then she cast the spell she had in mind and opened her eyes in time to watch it work. In a matter of seconds a selectively small field slid across the pile of clothing, squeezing every drop of water out and pushing the large puddle toward the door, where most of it sloshed outside under that door. She released the spell and suddenly felt very tired.

"I'll just rest for a minute, she thought as her eyes closed. The next thing she knew, Silverwind was shaking her awake.

"Good," he said approvingly as she opened her eyes. "I was hoping you'd take a quick nap." He wore a mid-length, dark blue coat of very densely woven wool over his customary tunic and trousers. From what little showed, Oceanvine noted that he was wearing one of his better sets of clothing and she wondered whether that was his choice or Candle's.

"Nap? How long have I been asleep?"

"I wouldn't know, but you came below about two and a half hours ago. Feeling better?"

"A bit," she said lifting herself into a sitting position. "Much," she amended immediately.

"Excellent! As soon as you're ready we can leave."

"What about the luggage?"

"Already up on the dock," the wizard replied, helping her to her feet, "being loaded on the wagon. How did you get those clothes so salty, by the way?"

"What wagon?" she asked, completely ignoring Silverwind's question. There was sharp shout just outside, followed by the crack of a whip.

"The one that's carrying our luggage away. I suppose we ought to catch up, although the carriage will wait as long as necessary."

"Carriage?"

"Yes," he answered with a big smile on his face. "Sort of a fancy, horse-drawn box with wheels. I'm sure you've seen them."

"I know what a carriage is, wizard, but what are you talking about?"

"We seem to have hitched a lift," he replied unhelpfully, leading her toward the door.

Two

"Look at that place!" Candle gasped for the third time, frozen in the gold-trimmed doorway of the glossy black carriage.

"That's pronounced 'palace,' Candle," Oceanvine said from behind. "Now would you mind stepping down so we can go inside and get warm?"

The Wurra Palace was an impressive edifice, even half obscured by the raging blizzard that had finally descended in full force. Granomish architecture, it seemed, was the visual antithesis of the architects themselves. Oceanvine, who had expected short, squat, massive buildings, was quite taken with the tall, graceful spires that graced much of Querna's business district, seeming to reach the very vaults of Heaven.

However, the crowning achievement of Granomish architecture had to be the Wurra Palace - an incredibly large structure of pink granite and smokey quartz that covered at least twenty acres. Oceanvine, knowing a little about geology, wondered where the builders had ever found so many large and perfect blocks of quartz. She learned later that they have been produced by magically fusing thousands of smaller crystals by the Granomish Wizard Dolomite. The main keep of the palace had twenty-five stories and projected even higher than the other towers of the palace, which by themselves dwarfed those of the business district.

Oceanvine's first view of the Wurra Palace had given her the impression of a tremendous box of a keep in the midst of a spider's web of arches and spires, but now that she was at the main entrance it was the sheer size of the palace, towering hundreds of feet above her head, that impressed her the most.

"In there?" Candle asked, still frozen in the doorway of the carriage.

"We don't seem to have much of a choice," she explained. "That is unless you plan to freeze to death, in which case I'll thank you to do that without me. Move, boy!"

Her exasperated shout finally got Candle's legs in motion and she quickly herded him to the massive bronze and glass doors that led to the keep's atrium - a relatively small room, only twenty feet on a side - where royal servants in red and gold livery waited for them.

She rushed through the door way before realizing that Candle had paused before entering. "Now what?" she asked the boy.

Candle stood to one side of the doorway with his hand on the doorpost, reciting the doorpost blessing Silverwind had taught him in North Horalia, "...and those within it." he concluded.

"That's an Emmine custom, Candle," she told him a moment later as he joined her. "They don't do it here in Granom."

"That's all right, my Lady," one of the servants told her. "Reverance for the gods is never inappropriate, no matter the form."



"Of course," she replied, nodding her head and wishing she had thought to perform the gesture.

The entire ground floor of the palace had been paved with marvelously intricate mosaics and the walls boasted hundreds of tapestries. Thousands of candles and lamps illuminated the interior with a soft, warm light that their eyes rapidly adjusted to. The servants relieved them of their damp cloaks and overcoats and then escorted the party deeper into the keep.

As they passed from the atrium into the front hall - a much larger room that stretched to the far wall of the keep and with a ceiling that cut through the next four floors up - they were met by Earl Vilimas.

"His Majesty would like to meet with you at your earliest convenience," he informed them after introducing himself, "although he will understand if you would prefer to rest after your long journey."

Oceanvine had recovered from her efforts on the Isle of Marga, but wanted the opportunity to change before being introduced to the king. She was a simple girl at heart, but she had a firm sense of the appropriate and the idea of wearing homespun to meet royalty seemed basically wrong.

However, before she could state her preference, Silverwind barged on ahead, saying, "Why wait? We'll present ourselves now and then rest before dinner."

"Very good, my lord," the seneschal replied. "He awaits you in the observation room on the top floor."

There was a large winding staircase at the far end of the hall and Candle despaired at the prospect of climbing all the way to top of the tall building, but Vilimas led them instead to a small room behind the stairs.

When they were all inside, the seneschal closed a heavy brass double gate and spoke into a funnel shaped tube, "Top floor, please." Then to both Candle's and Oceanvine's shock, the room began to move upward.

"What's happenin'?" Candle asked fearfully, shrinking back from the brass gate beyond which he could see a wall moving.

"It's a lift, Candle," the wizard explained. "Quite clever, actually. It all works by a system of carefully placed weights and counterweights. First time for you too, Vine?" She nodded and gulped, struggling to get used to the idea of moving rooms.

"If you like," Vilimas offered, "I can arrange for one of the engineers to show you how it works later. Many first-time visitors feel much more comfortable once they understand this machine."

"Thank you, your lordship," Oceanvine replied after taking several deep relaxing breaths. Candle, still a little wild around the eyes, noticed her relaxation exercises and emulated them, feeling better immediately.

"This will take several minutes," Vilimas continued. "We used to run it considerably faster, but too many of His Majesty's guests found it disconcerting."

"They fainted from the shock," Geraint translated with a chuckle.

"They did, indeed, Master Windchime," Vilimas agreed.

"Geraint," the ex-mage corrected him off-handedly. "I don't use the name 'Windchime' anymore. Frankly

I always enjoyed the trip at high speed. It was fun."

"I remember," Vilimas smiled. "The engineers were always complaining that they had to work twice as hard when you were in. I don't believe they know you're back."

"Let's surprise them," Geraint said conspiratorially.

"Maybe we could just leave them alone," Silverwind suggested.

"We could," Geraint agreed uncertainly. He sighed. "Oh well, it's not quite so exciting at this speed, is it, Candle?" The lad looked up at the sound of his voice, but his expression showed he hadn't been listening. "Never mind."

At last the ride was over and Vilimas escorted them into the observation room. King Ksaveras turned at the sound of the lift's arrival and rushed over from the far end of the.

"Silverwind! Thank Gran, you're here at last!," the king exclaimed as he half-ran to meet them. Taken by surprise, the party attempted to bow or curtsy at his approach. "Oh, save that nonsense for formal occasions," he told them carelessly, "or at least when there are witnesses. Please get up and come on in. I have a pair of nice warm fires here. Why don't we all sit down in front of one of them and talk."

"Your Majesty," Vilimas said disapprovingly.

"A problem, Earl?" the king asked.

"I have the honor to present the Most Honorable Wizard Silverwind, Marquess of Sentendir..."

"Marquess?" Candle whispered to Oceanvine. "He's noble?"

"I thought we went over all that in Tarnsa," she whispered her reply. "That was the first I'd heard of it too, you know."

"I forgot," he admitted.

"Sir Geraint, formerly Windchime, Knight of the Silver Stay," Vilimas continued on over Candle's and Oceanvine's discussion, "and... I'm sorry, but I didn't catch the names of the rest of your party, Lord Silverwind."

"My fault," Silverwind apologized. "Lady Oceanvine, Journeywoman mage although we hope she will have the opportunity to stand for her master's degree at the University while we're here in Querna." Oceanvine curtsied again in spite of His Majesty's protests. "And my apprentice, Candle," the wizard concluded.

"Glad to meet you all," Ksaveras replied with deliberate disregard for formality. "Now that that's taken care of, please have a seat. I'll have refreshments served." He ushered them over to the nearer fireplace. Vilimas bowed stiffly and left the room.

"Good man, Vilimas," the king noted absently. "I fear I shock him from time to time, but I'm still not used to being king. Every time someone calls me 'Your Majesty' I have to look over my shoulder to see if the old man's suddenly decided to rise from the dead and take back his crown." They all laughed politely at the king's joke. "He can have it if he wants it," Ksaveras continued. "I never wanted to be king, you

know that, Silverwind."

"We all expected your father to live much longer," Silverwind replied. "I'm sorry I missed the funeral and your coronation."

"That's all right, man. It was four years ago and you'd have likely been late, trying to make the trip from Emmine. As it is, I've been waiting for you for almost three months."

"Sorry. We weren't home when it arrived," Silverwind told him, "and it had to be forwarded. Several times I understand."

The king nodded. "It doesn't matter. You're here now."

"Indeed we are. So how may we be of service?"

"Are you certain you want to hear about that just now? You've had a long trip and all. I had thought to just chat and then we could discuss the matter in the morning."

"If you like," Silverwind nodded.

"Excuse me, Your Majesty," Geraint spoke up, "but could we discuss the matter, at least generally? I came at your summons as any loyal subject would, but if the matter involves magic, I may have to beg your leave to bow out. I gave up magic for the most part years ago."

"Really?" Ksaveras asked. Geraint nodded. "It does involve magic. Very much so. There have been a series of murders and missing women and Wizard Sandstone, my chief forensic magician, assures me that very high level magic that even he is unable to fathom has been involved."

"If a wizard is unable to handle the problem, then I fear I'll be of very little use. Oceanvine, however, should be more than capable of filling in for me."

"Then I release you, Sir Geraint. I do hope you will remain for a while in the palace as my guest, though."

"I'd be honored, of course," Geraint replied with a wink. "I have a little business to conduct while I'm here. It should keep me in town for a week at least."

"Good! Now why don't we put aside such cares until tomorrow," Ksaveras suggested. The lift gate opened and they turned to see a handsome Granomish lady in a heavy, multi-layered, velvet dress enter with two servants. "My wife," the king introduced the lady, "Petronelle, Queen of Granom and a whole line of titles that nobody but a herald would ever be crazy enough to keep track of." He smiled at his queen, but the expression on her face showed anything but approval so he forged ahead and completed the introductions while the servants set out coffee, tea, and an assortment of pastries.

"Thank you for coming so quickly, my Lord," Petronelle said to Silverwind.

"Quickly?" Ksaveras objected. "It's been months!"

"Dear, anyone who would insist on landing in the middle of that blizzard obviously rushed here with all possible speed."

The king nodded sheepishly. "It's just that I've been at wit's end since this whole situation began," He

explained to his guests.

"I'd rather have the news from Emmine," Petronelle changed the subject.

"I'm afraid Oceanvine and I haven't been in Randona in years, your Highness," Silverwind apologized.

"I have," Geraint cut in. "Let's see. Did you hear about the new crown prince?"

"No," Petronelle replied eagerly. "Tell me!"

"I haven't been a guest of Hacon's court recently, so I don't have all the details, but he was born two and a half months ago and seems to have all the requisite fingers and toes."

"His name, Sir Geraint?" the queen pressed.

"Hacon Ancel. Sorry, that's all I have. Most of the news lately seems to be revolving around Parliament and its increasing power. King Hacon recently proposed a House of Commons much to the consternations of the Lords, of course, and he wants a general election within three years. I suspect, however, that he'll eventually have to make it a decree rather than a proposal, since the Lords are a good two-thirds against any such changes.

"All in all, however, Hacon will go down in the books as a fairly popular king, although he isn't making any friends among the merchants who would like some restrictions on imports to the archipelago. His Majesty is firmly in favor of an unrestricted market, especially since that brings in more tax revenues.

"Let's see. There was a bumper crop of mangos all across Bellinen and paperfruit seems to be doing well. That's all I can think of off-hand," he concluded.

"Do you know the Countess of Narnda?" the queen asked. "The last we heard she was expecting by the end of the summer."

"That would be Countess Kystra?" Geraint asked. "I've never actually met the lady although Silverwind and I worked for her father once."

"The Duke of Amden?"

"That's him. I ran into him last time I was in Randona, but he never mentioned his daughter. He did tell me that his vineyards had an excellent year, however, and he expects the white wines to be drinkable by spring. The reds, he says, should be put down for five to ten years, though."

"I'll have to keep that in mind," Ksaveras replied. "I'd have to check with my steward, but I believe we have a few cases of Amden wines in the cellar. Wines make a pleasant change from ale, don't you think?"

They continued to talk about inconsequential matters for another hour until Earl Vilimas came to extract Ksaveras on a matter of official business. Silverwind and company excused themselves and followed one of the servants to their rooms in the Garden Wing of the palace.

Just before they got out of earshot, however, Oceanvine thought she heard the seneschal tell Ksaveras, "It's happened again, your Majesty."

### Three

Dinner that night was what Ksaveras referred to as a nice intimate affair, but in truth there were over two hundred guests present. A chubby herald in a heavy beaded tabard bearing the royal arms of Granom - a golden mountain with a crown resting on its peak all on a brilliant red field - met Silverwind and his party at the banquet hall door. The noise in the room as they entered abated abruptly as Silverwind's name was announced and all turned to see the world-famous wizard for themselves.

Oceanvine found herself feeling decidedly left out and more than a little jealous a few minutes after their arrival when many of the guests - most of them female - overcame their surprise and clustered around Silverwind, trying to talk to him. She took the opportunity to look around the banquet hall.

The hall, easily large enough to comfortably seat twice that number, had a high beamed ceiling. The walls were covered with a single, intricately constructed tapestry depicting the creation of Maiyim and the history of the Granomen. The work had been cleverly made with holes where the hall's doors and windows were placed and it went all the way around the room. The piece was world famous and Oceanvine recalled seeing paintings of selected portions while at the University including the two final, enigmatic panels that some experts claimed were prophecies of events yet to come. Oceanvine wanted to study the entire work closely, but decided that this was not the time. She could come back later when the hall was empty.

By the time the king and queen arrived, the wizard was amusing his admirers with one of his standard tavern tricks - shooting little fireballs into an empty wine bottle with his eyes closed. It was a scam, she knew. He couldn't miss the narrow mouth of the bottle unless he did it intentionally. That was the nature of the spell; closing his eyes only increased his concentration. His audience, however, wasn't aware of that and oohed and ahed and applauded as appropriate throughout his performance.

The arrival of their Majesties, however, signalled that it was time for all the guests to find their seats. Candle was at a loss in this rarified atmosphere. Not even his experiences at Castle North had prepared the former pickpocket for a royal banquet and he kept his eye nervously on Oceanvine for clues as to how to behave. What he didn't know, however, was that she was as out of her element here as he was and perhaps even more confused.

She noticed the boy watching her, however, and decided to bluff this out as best she could. Signalling for Candle to follow her, they made their way to a table that she hoped would be suitably modest. A pleasant, black-haired Granom of approximately her age stopped her, however, before they could be seated.

"Excuse me, Lady Oceanvine," he began, speaking in the Emmine dialect flawlessly. "but did you know that you and the wizard's apprentice are invited to dine at the high board this evening?"

"No, I didn't, uh..."

"Zakhar, my lady. Prince Zakhar, but my friends call me Zak," he introduced himself with a sparkle in his eyes and a charming smile.

"Pleased to meet you, your Highness," she replied.

"Zak," he corrected her almost before she had finished speaking.

"Zak. May I introduce Apprentice Candle?"

"Pleased to meet you, Candle," he greeted the boy politely. "Have you been studying with Lord Silverwind long?"

"A little over three months, Zak," Candle replied boldly. Zak's brow creased ever so slightly at the lad's use of his nickname, but the polite smile remained on his face. Candle, anxious to make a good impression, thought that he might have gone too far. After all, Zak had told Oceanvine - a very pretty lady - to call him that, not the lowly apprentice, but after a moment, Zak let a hearty laugh escape his mouth.

"I like this one," he told Oceanvine sincerely, clapping the boy lightly on his shoulder. "Come, I'll show you to your seats. As it happens, they're right next to mine."

They followed Prince Zakhar to a long table that was placed at the far end of the room beneath a large round window where they were seated to the far right side of the king. Silverwind and Geraint, on the other hand, sat directly next to King Ksaveras. They found that the tables were already set with platters full of cheese, warm, crusty loaves of bread, and large pitchers full of dark brown ale.

"Ale?" Oceanvine noted with some distaste.

"It's our national beverage," Zakhar explained. "nearly everyone drinks it, even the children."

"I'd prefer sweet cider, if possible." She tried to say that in reasonable and polite tones, but to her own ear it came out as unforgivably demanding.

Zak noted her embarrassment and quickly smoothed over it, saying "It's a little late in the season for a decent cider. No tart apples left in storage, don't you know. I think I heard, that a fresh shipment of lemons arrived from Bellinen last week. How about lemonade?"

"Thank you," she replied. "For Candle too."

"Surely not!" Zak protested as Candle listened on interestedly.

Oceanvine glanced at the boy. "Definitely," she replied firmly to his acute disappointment.

"As you wish," Zak shrugged.

The first remove was served presently and, as is usual at such affairs, a hundred conversations filled the room with a pulsating buzz that was almost as solid as the tables they took place at.

"Another problem, Lady Oceanvine?" Zak's voice cut through the conversational fog in her ears.

"Hmm? Oh, no. I guess not."

"You seemed a bit distracted."

"It's just that I don't think I've ever eaten in a such a noisy place that wasn't out of doors," she told him. "Oh, listen to me! Here I literally just got off the boat and I'm already complaining. Please forgive me,

your Highness."

"Yeah," Candle piped up. "She should have taken more of a nap after piloting the ship this morning."

"Candle!" she grated warningly at him.

"All day, maybe," Candle continued relentlessly.

"I will remember this, runt," she told him.

"I'm sure you will, Seaweed. " he stuck his tongue out at her for good measure.

"You piloted the ship, lady?" Zak intercepted her next remark.

"I assisted Silverwind," she admitted. "The job required the two of us to bring the Isle of Marga in through the storm. He probably did most of the work."

"That's not what he said," Candle told her. She turned to face him. "Silverwind said you were applying too much of your own power to the job so he had to slack off and just help with the guidance."

"When did he say that?" she asked.

"While you were passed out in your cabin."

"I was not passed out!" she told him heatedly. "I was sleeping."

"Whatever."

"What's it like to use magic, Lady Oceanvine." Zak asked suddenly, both trying satisfy his own curiosity and to stem a potentially embarrassing incident.

"Please," she replied sweetly. "If you're going to insist I call you Zak, the least you can do is stop choking on the 'Lady' in my name. Oceanvine is just fine."

"How about Vine?" he asked innocently.

"Uh oh!" Candle muttered. The pretty blond mage ignored him.

"I prefer Oceanvine if you don't mind."

"As you like," he shrugged. "Now tell me about magic. I've never had so much as a scrap of talent with it, not even some of the basic spells and exercises they teach children."

"Are you magic null?" she asked. Very rarely, less than once in a million, a person was born who not only was incapable of using magic, but whose very presence could dampen spells. It was never a controllable condition and only the most accomplished mage could overcome the effects brought on by the presence of a magically null person.

"No," Zak replied easily. "Just not particularly talented. I'm not too bad at gardening, though." She chuckled warmly when a wide grin appeared on his bone-white face. "Tell me about magic."

Oceanvine took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment to collect her thoughts. "It's..." she trailed off, her face reflecting the intense feeling of wonder that she often had when discussing magic philosophically.

"She'll wake up in a few minutes," Candle told Zak sourly.

"Oh! I am sorry," Oceanvine apologized to Zak even while sticking an elbow in the apprentice's ribs.

"That's all right. I think you just answered my question. So, you will be assisting the Wizard Silverwind?"

"I'm his partner," Oceanvine replied, "although I hope to stand for my master's degree at the University while we're here."

"Really?" Zak asked, openly surprised. "That ought to shake them up."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, to the best of my knowledge, they have never admitted a woman into any of the University's colleges, much less the Department of Magical Studies."

"Funny," Oceanvine replied, "the wizard never mentioned that."

"He tends to ignore those little details," Candle commented, "and then claims it's for educational reasons."

"Your lessons are different. You wouldn't want them to be too easy would you?"

"Why not?"

"You wouldn't learn anything."

"So how is this different?" Candle asked pointedly.

Oceanvine bit back her retort. It was all too possible that the wizard intended this as a lesson for her as well.

Instead she asked Zak, "Really? No woman has ever matriculated at the University at Querna?"

"Not to my knowledge. No."

"Well!" she responded a little too loudly, for a dozen curious pairs of eyes turned toward her to see what had caused the outburst. She flushed slightly but boldly continued on, "We'll just have to do something about that!"

-

Four

Silverwind dreamed.



His spirit floated aimlessly in a limitless black void. The mental image was familiar to him; it was the way many of his significant dreams began. Usually they turned to nightmare, but this time it seemed different - non-threatening. He let his mind drift. It was quite relaxing, actually.

Gradually, he became aware that a great event was imminent. The sense of an impending occurrence grew like the tension of a bow string drawn back a little too far. Then the event occurred.

The black void abruptly lightened ever so slightly. Instead of being black, now it was a dark charcoal gray. The grayness slowly brightened and contracted until it coalesced into seven humanoid shapes within the black void that seemed to be composed of the purest white light so bright that it hurt Silverwind's dream eyes to behold them. However, he continued to watch in spite of himself as they stood in a circle clasping hands. A moment later a small, dull gray sphere formed within their circle and they shrank in size ever so slightly.

Silverwind studied the construct and realized that it was Midbar - Maiyim's moon. If that was the case, then these seven luminous figures were the Elder Gods acting out the story of creation in his dream.

As he watched, the gods turned to face outward in Their circle and after a few moments bits and pieces of sparkling light were emitted from their bodies. The lights flew off in every direction until they filled the void like stars in the sky. No, Silverwind corrected himself, they are the stars in the sky. The gods still glowed, but the light was much dimmer now.

Then They turned inward again and the remainder of their luminosity fled their bodies to form the sun. Now Silverwind could discern the handsome features of Their divine bodies. He recognized regal Emtos and Mother Emmine - his consort - the creators of Humankind. Further around the circle he saw tall, dark-skinned Bellinen and Merinne - the gods of Orente. Next were the parent gods of Granom - Gran and Querna - looking like the epitome of the perfect Granomen except that Gran's hair was ash blond and Querna's was a soft red where most Granomish hair was black or dark brown unless gray with age.

They were surrounded for a minute or so by a nimbus of clear blue light and then the blue drained away from Them like water being poured from a fine crystal goblet. The resulting droplet of blue light congealed into not one but several worlds that revolved around the sun. One of these new worlds - obviously Maiyim - was paired with the considerably smaller Midbar and they performed an intricate dance together as they made their annual trip. As Silverwind watched, little points of light spun off and began to orbit each of the other worlds and with each new creation the gods became smaller and smaller until their figures merged with that of the blue globe that was Maiyim. Just before They passed from Silverwind's dream sight, he could have sworn that each of the female goddesses were pregnant.

"It didn't really happen that way, of course," a pleasant female voice said in his right ear. The wizard turned to find himself looking at a young Granomish woman with perfectly smooth, white skin and long curly black hair.

"Excuse me?"

"The creation of the universe," she replied off-handedly. "That wasn't the way it really happened. Oh, what you just saw is far more accurate than some of the nonsense your priests have come up with, and the stuff they don't know as well."

"Such as?" Silverwind asked.

"Such as the fact that My Mom and Dad have lighter-colored hair than any of Their children or that the other planets of this system also have moons more or less like Midbar. Really! You've had spyglasses and telescopes for two hundred years or better. You'd think someone might have thought of turning them toward the sky by now. There's so much you just do not know," She concluded sadly.

"Who are you, by the way?"

"I think you know Me, Silverwind," She replied, smiling gently. He took another look and realized just who this newcomer was.

"Holy Methis," Silverwind replied.

"Just Methis will do. Titles get heavy and you're a very special person yourself." Silverwind smiled wryly. This was all just a dream and if, in his conceit he chose to think that a goddess would be on a first name basis with him, at least no one else would ever know of it. "It's not, you know," She told him as though She had read his mind. "Just a dream, that is. Well, you are asleep, but there's more to this than your average dream. I mean it's quite a bit sharper than most and I guarantee that you'll remember it all when you wake up. But what really distinguishes this from most dreams is that this one has a message."

"What? That there are things we don't know and that we ought to be trying to learn them?"

"Nice try," Methis responded with a wink, "but all that stuff was just to get your attention. Well mostly anyway." Her attitude changed suddenly, becoming very serious. "We need your help."

"You have but to ask," he replied. He still believed it was only a dream, but it didn't hurt to behave as if he was really in a divine presence. "How may I be of service?"

"Ah," She sighed without any particular emphasis. "Not yet, dear wizard. Not yet. You still have to complete two great missions before you will be ready. Those who will share the burden We will place on you will have their own tasks to complete first as well."

"Who?"

"You know two of them already and are aware of the third," She replied mysteriously, Her girlish humor reasserting itself just a little.

"I know many people and have heard of more, Methis. That doesn't narrow it down very much."

"I know," She laughed, winking again. She disappeared leaving her girlish laughter behind.

Silverwind opened his eyes and found himself in the large four-poster bed in the sumptuous suite he had been given in the Wurra Palace. He looked around in the darkness and realized that the sky outside, where the fierce storm still raged, was just beginning to brighten.

"What an odd dream," he said out loud, sitting up and swinging his legs down to the floor. Can't be all that long until dawn, he thought, realizing that he wasn't going to be able to go back to sleep. Maybe I can scare up a cup of coffee. He dressed quickly, heedless of the fact that he was donning essentially the same clothes that he had worn the day before. It was still too dark to find any others in the room anyway. As he opened his door, however, he spotted a deep blue jacket of the style favored by the Granomish nobility and grabbed it on the basis that an extra layer of clothing would be warmer..

Then he stepped out of the room and made his way through the candle-lit corridors of the Garden Wing. The Garden Wing was the quiet side of the palace, but even so, the wizard was amazed to find no one else in the empty hallways until he passed a pair of servants in the depths of the main keep.

The kitchen, unlike the rest of the royal palace, was an exceedingly busy place in the pre-dawn atmosphere of Querna. Silverwind stood in the doorway, bemused by the spectacle of vital activity that pulsed before him. He had never realized just how early a kitchen staff had to be up and moving in order to have breakfast on the table.

Dozens of people worked industriously at every possible station. Granomish men and women chopped and sliced meats, cheeses and vegetables at half a dozen heavy wooden counters. Others turned the spits in three of six huge fireplaces and stirred the contents of large pots in the others. At another counter, two women were slicing loaves of bread and placing the slices in wide toaster racks. There were a dozen smaller pots on top of two large stoves that were being tended by several assistant cooks. Yet another was just lighting the fire under a large griddle. The obese head chef moved back and forth throughout the kitchen like a culinary juggernaut, tasting, considering, making changes, giving orders, and Oceanvine sat in the far corner sipping tea and reading a book on advanced magical theory.

Silverwind spotted a large coffee pot at last and a platter filled with fresh, flaky pastry and made a beeline across the room, oblivious to the kitchen staff now that he had found his objective. It wasn't until he had poured the steaming black liquid into the heavy stoneware mug and taken his first careful sip that the visual mosaic of the kitchen finally sorted itself out in his mind.

He grabbed a couple of the pastries and, with them and his coffee, walked over to the table where the pretty blond was intently studying the book, one of several she had found in the Royal Library the previous day.

"Found a nice quiet spot to study in?" he asked over the kitchen din.

"Found a nice lighted spot," she replied, looking up. Reaching out, she snatched one of the wizard's pastries as he pulled out a chair to sit down. "Thanks," she said, turning back to the book.

"But..."

"What?" she asked challengingly.

"Never mind."

"So what are you doing up this early?"

"Couldn't sleep," Silverwind replied, "how about you?"

"I'm usually up early," she replied testily.

"Not this early. As a matter of fact, we're usually up within half an hour of each other."

"I didn't stay up late, drinking with the Baronet of Endertone," she replied rather tartly.

"I only had two tankards full and it wasn't all that late."

"It was after midnight, I'm sure." Then realizing that she was really annoyed at having been unable to

sleep, not at Silverwind, she gave him a half-hearted grin and apologized, "I'm sorry. It's just that I had this really disturbing dream."

"Oh? The creation of the universe with sarcastic commentary by Methis?" the wizard asked. If they had both had the same dream, maybe it really was a visitation.

"What? No, I was back in North Horalia only this time the demon won and I had to watch him destroy the entire island before moving on to the rest of the world. After watching that several times the goddess, Wenni, appeared and told me that that's what would have happened had we failed. Then She went on to say that it was just the first of several tasks I must complete in order to ready myself for a mission from the gods Themselves."

"Did She give you any hint as to what that mission might be?" Silverwind asked.

"No," Oceanvine replied, shaking her head uncertainly, "but I asked Her what my next task was to be and She replied that I was already preparing for it. Naturally I thought immediately about my master's degree, so I got up and started studying again. Why are you taking this so seriously? It was just a dream."

"I'm not so sure," he disagreed and told her about his own dream.

"That's weird," she commented when he was through. "Who do you think the third and fourth people are?"

"The fourth one could be anyone. I haven't met him..."

"Or her," Oceanvine corrected.

"Or her," he agreed, "yet, but I've heard of a lot of people so it doesn't really bear thinking of at the moment. If this isn't just a strange coincidence, I'm sure we'll find out who it is in time. As for the third, Geraint maybe."

"Do you think so?"

"It's a possibility. If a real quest from the gods is anything like mythology it would fit; a man who must overcome the great obstacle of a demon's curse lest the quest fails and all that. It might be Meadow, although I hope not. He and I don't really get along too well, you may have noticed. He's a good man in his field, but are we really likely to come across many more animal diseases that threaten the world? Not likely."

"I don't know about that. There have been plagues in the past that were transmitted via animals," Oceanvine pointed out.

"It's a possibility, I suppose," Silverwind shrugged. "Whoever our third is, if there is a third, would have had a similarly vivid dream last night."

"Not necessarily. Perhaps he or she is not yet ready for the message."

"The message to prepare for a quest. No. The gods may work in mysterious ways, but mysteries are meant to be solved and the actions of the gods are usually comprehensible in the long run through study. I think that as of now all four parties have been given their divine warning. Of course we probably just had

similar dreams by coincidence. I'm a firm believer in coincidence, you know."

"I've noticed that from time to time," she pointed out dryly. "Of course, you are occasionally wrong."

"But not very often," he countered. "Just in case, however, be on the look-out for someone else who had a dream last night. It never hurts to be prepared. That way we won't have to go casting about at the last minute if the gods drop by for tea some afternoon." Oceanvine giggled at his bold treading of the line between humor and blasphemy.

"Speaking of which," she commented, "do be a dear and refill my cup for me."

## Five

Geraint, it turned out, had not had any particularly vivid dreams that night and had, in fact, slept like a log, so both Oceanvine and Silverwind decided to put their possible visitations aside for the time being. If they were genuine, Silverwind reasoned, the details would probably sort themselves out in time.

After breakfast, Silverwind escorted Candle to the Royal Library and, finding an appropriate history text, set the boy to studying so he and Oceanvine could attend his Majesty in the Observation Room.

"I'm surprised you were able to find basic textbooks there," Oceanvine told him as they rode the lift up to the top floor. "I would have thought that the King's own library would be filled with only the most rarified treatises and what not, like the one on Quartzvein's Unified Theory of Simul-contagion I was reading this morning."

"You forget that their Majesties have children," Silverwind pointed out. "Children who need to be taught as much or more than other children. Of course there would have to be a few basic texts floating about. As a matter of fact I had to wade through several just to make sure I was getting something relatively recent. I don't think the librarian works very hard at thinning out the useless texts."

"Most of the books are histories of one sort or another, I noticed. I don't suppose they would go out of date in the same way a magic text might."

"Oh, you'd be surprised. Historians tend to revise constantly depending on who's the king at the moment and how certain events are being viewed."

"That's a horribly skeptical way of looking at it."

"It is," Silverwind admitted, "but remember; losers don't write history, but sometimes their descendants do and very few people like the idea of having a horse thief for a grandfather." The lift came to the top floor and Silverwind graciously opened and held the door for his partner.

There were already several people seated at the large table in the center of the huge room and they all rose, including King Ksaveras, to greet the two mages as they entered.

"Silverwind!" Ksaveras called out. "Good! Now we can begin. You've already met Earl Vilimas. This is Sir Edus - Chief of Police for the Royal City of Querna, Lord Natan - the Chief Officer of Our Royal Bureau of Investigation, Lord Miklos - Our Royal Prosecutor, and Master Sandstone, who is the Chief Forensic Magician of the RBI. Gentlemen, I have the honor to introduce the Most Honorable Wizard Silverwind, Marquess of Sentendir, and Lady Oceanvine, his assistant."

There followed a chorus of greetings, handshakes, and a brief scowl from Master Sandstone directed at Oceanvine, reminding her of the Granomish tendency to discount the abilities of women. Then the Granomish mage brought his emotions firmly under control and greeted her politely if a bit stiffly.

"Lord Natan," Ksaveras said conversationally after they had sat back down, "would you bring us all up to date concerning the situation. Please start at the beginning for our newcomers."

"Of course, your Majesty," Natan replied with a slight inclination of his head. He handed out a number of folders. Each folder contained several neatly printed sheets of information which, it turned out, detailed what Lord Natan was about to say. Oceanvine was fascinated by the printing, wondering how Lord Natan had arranged to have them prepared, and needed to forcibly wrench her eyes away from them in order to pay attention to the briefing. "Sir Edus' office began receiving missing persons reports about seven months ago. All the missing people are women between the ages of eighteen and thirty, and attractive. Of the twenty-one women reported missing, sixteen are known prostitutes, four are students or teachers at the Women's Academy, and two were of the nobility. You will note that this adds up to twenty-two," he went on quickly, noticing that Oceanvine was about to point that out herself. "One of the missing noblewomen was also on the Academy's faculty. Because of the high number of prostitutes among the missing, we fear that there may be far more victims."

"Anyway, until twelve weeks ago we could only increase our surveillance of the Academy grounds and the streets where the prostitutes had been known to work. Then we began finding the bodies of some of the missing women. The most recent find, the ninth, occurred just yesterday."

"Some of the women appear to have died without any outward signs, although the bodies of three of those we have found so far exhibit a number of minor abrasions and contusions, evidence, we believe, of a struggle. The one thing, however, that they all have in common is the cause of death. All nine women died instantaneously when their hearts were removed from their bodies, magically and without any incision."

He went on to detail the circumstances and locations in which the bodies were found. At first it was by accident since they were all found buried in shallow graves along a variety of roadsides outside of the city. Later as a pattern developed, concerted searches turned up the others. In each case so far, two or three bodies were discovered near each other at the same site. The most recent find was a serendipitous event that occurred when a merchant's cart slid off the road during the beginning of the blizzard that was just now starting to abate. Searchers intend to return to that site as soon as possible.

"Master Sandstone informed us almost at the beginning that he detected traces from extremely high-level magic use," Lord Natan continued, "but was unable to fathom the actual spells or who might have cast them."

"The perpetrator is at least a very powerful wizard," Sandstone interjected, "but we all fear that it might be something more than that. These atrocities may be the work of a demon!"

There was a pause and the Granomen looked anxiously and silently at Silverwind, waiting for his confirmation of this obvious fact.

"Nonsense!" the wizard scoffed. "The occurrences of demons are very few and far between. Why in the last fifty years I only know of two confirmed cases of demonic activity and I was involved in both of them."

"Including the one we just came from," Oceanvine pointed out. "Perhaps this is all part of," she paused meaningfully, "something greater." Silverwind looked at her, remembering their dreams.

"Too soon, Vine," he told her, "there are other tasks, remember?"

"This could be one of them."

"Probably is, but that doesn't mean demons."

"Might we ask what you're talking about?" the king requested.

"Nothing important to the matter at hand, your Majesty," the wizard replied, brushing the matter away. "Oceanvine and I had some disturbing dreams last night, probably due to the excitement of our arrival."

"But how can you discount the possibility of a demon so quickly, my lord?" Sir Edus asked, "and without an investigation of any kind?"

"As I said, the actual incidence of demons is extremely low and the dangers inherent in assuming that we're dealing with a demon are far greater than in assuming that we are not."

"Why is that?"

"Demons are extremely powerful. In most ways they are far more powerful than any mortal wizard could ever hope to be. However, they're all power and very little finesse. They lack any of the subtlety that humans, Granomen, and Orenta are capable of. They're predictable along certain lines and they rely on the enormous strength of their power. No mortal has the sheer power of a demon, but we're much more devious. Demons can't predict what we're going to do next. For that matter, we have a lot of difficulty figuring that out ourselves. Otherwise they'd have eaten us for breakfast long ago."

"Demons eat people?" King Ksaveras asked, the bone-white skin of his face seeming to blanch to an even paler shade.

"Demons are omnivorous. They don't just eat anything, they'll eat everything, given the chance. Anyway, go into something like this assuming that there's a demon behind your troubles and you're likely to walk blindly into a trap."

"I, for one," Sandstone interjected stiffly, "would be just as happy to be confronting a mere mortal, but don't you think that we should be prepared for the worst?"

"Trust me, Master Sandstone," Silverwind replied dryly. "A rogue wizard is far worse than any demon."

"Why? He's only Granomish."

"Ever been in a duel with another mage?" Oceanvine asked impatiently.

"Well, no," Sandstone replied slowly.

"Then stop being so damned foolish and let's get down to business!"

Sandstone drew a breath sharply and fixed Oceanvine with a stony glare. "Mind your place, girl!" he grated out insultingly.

Oceanvine met his glare and quietly uttered a challenge. "Try me."

It was a test of wills, common among student mages, and the only form of duel officially condoned by the three universities. It was encouraged primarily as a training exercise, but more often it was used to decide who would buy the next round of drinks. Oceanvine never had to pay for her drinks if she didn't want to. Outside the University, most mages considered it a childish activity, but Oceanvine was angered by the Granomish mage's rudeness.

Sandstone, a product of his culture, was shocked by Oceanvine's brazen challenge -a woman ought to know her place, he thought. He snarled a reply and decided to teach her a lesson.

The duel began with the two contestants staring into each other's eyes, but it was far more than the simple stare-down that it might have seemed to the uninformed observer. The object was to make one's opponent lose his concentration and almost anything short of physical attack was considered fair game, although there was a generally understood progression to the contest. Normally such a struggle began with simple ploys and mild, but surprising attacks and then, if neither dueler had been vanquished, they would escalate in intensity until one had yielded.

Master Sandstone, however, saw no reason to restrict himself to the politely understood rules of the game when dealing with this girl who didn't have the sense to respect her betters and abruptly commenced a high-level attack.

Oceanvine, shocked by the Granom's poor manners nearly lost the contest right there when she found herself in a cold, arid desert of stinging, dark red dust, the color of drying blood, whipped up on gale-force winds. The illusion was very well done, she realized, keeping her eyes firmly locked on Sandstone's eyes, his only still-visible feature as required by the contest. She smiled tightly when she heard the sound of heavy footsteps combined with the deep roar of an Elistan Sandwalker behind her. The pretty blond relaxed to the sound of the illusory monster's thudding footsteps and confidently added all too realistic vibrations to the approaching illusion.

Only Sandstone and Oceanvine were able to see the Granomish mage's illusion, but the entire palace shook as though a giant treaded its halls. The King and his counsellors sat nervously as the two mages continued to wage their war of wills. Only Silverwind's relaxed attitude kept Ksaveras calm enough to refrain from ordering the two to cease.

"They couldn't hear you anyway," Silverwind told him. "Speaking of which," he continued hopefully, "I have ten crowns that say Sandstone will concede within the first three minutes." Seeing that the chief forensic mage had broken out in a cold sweat, nobody took him up on the wager.

Within the illusion, Oceanvine had easily wrested control of Sandstone's illusion in spite of all his magical exertions and was now turning his inventions against him. She allowed herself a chuckle, a deep, bubbling sound that came from deep within her throat as she directed the illusory sandwalker to walk directly up behind her where the Granomish mage could see it. Then it took another step forward until Oceanvine sat neatly framed by the giant monster's legs. Through her peripheral vision she noted that the scales of the large, bipedal, reptilian creature were the same dark red color of the wind-blown sand and dust. Then



with just a casual thought she directed the image to make a swiping reach at Sandstone with one of its massive forelegs.

The Granomish mage let a short scream burst from his lips as he jumped back out of his chair and fell to the floor holding his arms protectively over his head. The contest was over.

"You were playing with him," Silverwind admonished Oceanvine sternly. "One of these days we're going to have to talk about that mean streak of yours."

"He only got what he deserved," she replied lightly. "Besides he started it. Honestly, the rankest freshman knows better than to start with a fourth degree illusion."

"So you saw fit to up it to the sixth degree? Vine, after this meeting I want you to inspect this entire palace, top to bottom, and you will fix any damage you find!"

"Silverwind!" she exclaimed in dismay. "That will take hours and it's unlikely there was any damage at all."

"You will make sure though, won't you?" She nodded contritely. "All right, Sandstone you can get up off the floor." The mage looked up and then yelped and fell back to the floor in terror. "Vine!" Now Silverwind was genuinely angry. "Release that spell!"

"I did as soon as the contest was over," Oceanvine protested.

"Really?" Silverwind asked curiously, more thinking out loud than questioning his partner's word. "Let's have a look." He closed his eyes briefly and then started laughing. "I'm sorry, Vine. You're right. He did this to himself, it was part of his own spell. Master Sandstone, you ought to be ashamed of yourself. Cheating at your age!" He tsked a few times just for good measure before irritably freeing Sandstone of his self-inflicted curse. "By the way, it wouldn't have worked on Oceanvine. That spell is sex-specific."

"It is?" Sandstone asked as his boss, Lord Natan, helped him to his feet.

Silverwind exchanged glances with Oceanvine before replying, "Yes. As a matter of fact it is. Now," he said to Oceanvine, "will you stop worrying about that exam?"

"If the children are done playing," Ksaveras added acidly, "perhaps we can get back to business."

Six

"You didn't exactly make a friend of Master Sandstone," Silverwind told Oceanvine after the briefing.

"I wasn't trying to," she replied with a toss of her head that sent a lock of her long, blond hair flying back from in front of her face. "The man is a bigoted throw-back to the Dark Ages."

"He's a typical Granom," the wizard corrected her. "For that matter your temper tantrum didn't garner you any respect from Sir Edus or Lords Natan and Miklos."

"Temper tantrum!" Oceanvine huffed.

"You have a better word for it, I'm sure," Silverwind replied dryly.

"I was defending my rights!" she insisted.

"Of course."

"Silverwind!"

"Oceanvine!" he duplicated her tone, then switched to a more reasonable tone of voice. "We're not in Emmine any longer, and this sure isn't Bellinen - temperatures all wrong for one thing. The Granomen are, well, conservative. After several weeks at sea on a Granomish ship I would have thought you'd noticed by now."

"Captain Yakaw and his crew accepted me."

"You also gave them the time to get to know you. I also don't recall seeing you issue challenges at the time."

"No one on theMarga spoke to me with such disdain either."

"Sailors have a more cosmopolitan outlook than Master Sandstone. I doubt he's ever been off this island. Probably grew up in a suburban neighborhood of Querna at that. The concept of equality of the sexes hasn't had the chance to rise above rank heresy in his eyes."

"I won't apologize for my actions," she told him stiffly.

"I wasn't going to ask you to. Just between you and me I think Sandstone is even more of a twit than you do. Any mage who can't undo one of his own spells ought not to have been licensed in the first place."

"Maybe he bought his degree."

"That's always a possibility. Oh, I almost forgot." he reached inside the rich blue jacket he wore over his tunic and pulled out a heavy paper envelope. "Here. You may need this."

"What is it?" she asked, accepting the envelope.

"A letter of recommendation to the University. You may need it."

"Really? Oh, thank you!" She hugged him and kissed him on the cheek. "But we have to meet with Lord Natan tomorrow morning. When will I ever get the chance to use this?"

"This afternoon, I guess," he shrugged.

"But you told me to search the palace for damage."

"Over that little spell? The vibrations were no worse than a troop of guardsmen marching past in lock-step. I made a big deal over it to keep anyone else from doing so. This way our Granomish friends think you're being justly disciplined for your impertinence. If I hadn't stepped in, his Majesty might have

and then you really would have been searching for cracked porcelain and the like." Oceanvine silently absorbed that. "Go on," he said gently, "I'll be spending the afternoon with Candle. It's been over two weeks since I've taken the time and the gods only know how long it will be before I have the time again."

"Besides," Oceanvine added, "he's been trying to show you his solution to the lock problem you gave him for days."

"Really? I hadn't noticed."

"Of course not. You've been too busy; drinking mostly."

"I haven't gotten drunk in months," Silverwind protested.

"Not through lack of trying."

"You know that's not true, Vine."

"Oceanvine," she corrected him.

"Whatever. So are you going to the University this afternoon?"

Oceanvine exasperatedly stared at the wizard. Biting back a retort, she took a deep breath and then let it out slowly before answering, "I suppose so. At least I will as soon as I find out where it is."

"Use a taxi," Silverwind advised. "The driver will know where. Better yet, ask Prince Zakhar. He seems to like you and it might do him some good to do something useful for a change." With that wry pronouncement, he turned and walked away leaving the pretty blond wondering what a taxi was.

She found out soon enough, however, when Zak not only insisted on accompanying her to the University, but paid for the ride in a two-wheeled, black-lacquered, horse-drawn wagon with a convertible leather roof, as well. Zak, however, had trouble believing that she had never heard of taxi cabriolets.

"Randona," he insisted, "is the largest city in the world. How does one get about there?"

"Walking, mostly. If you have to go a fair distance across the city and you have the money, you can go by horse or private carriage and there's always the omnibus, although that's not as comfortable or convenient as this, but mostly we walked."

"What's an omnibus?"

"A large horse drawn wagon fitted up with long benches. There's a local company in Randona that runs several routes with maybe two dozen such vehicles. A ride costs a bronze ounce."

"Clever," Zak murmured admiringly, "and far cheaper than a cab."

"You get what you pay for," she told him. "Buses are slow and make a lot of stops. The hard wooden benches are no match for these marvelous leather seats, and unless you're planning to go more than two miles, it normally doesn't pay to stand around waiting for the next bus to come along."

"Maybe they should run on a schedule."

"They have schedules, but they don't really keep to them very well."

"I'm sure that can be corrected. I wonder if such a service would be profitable in Querna."

"Maybe," Oceanvine conceded, "but this is far more comfortable and well worth the extra expense."

"For the gentry and nobility," Zak pointed out, "but commoners can't afford the luxury, whereas they might find an omnibus worthwhile."

"If nothing else, me Lord," the driver of the cabriolet added bravely, "it would allow one to work further away from home. Me wife, she cleans homes to bring a little extra money in, usually half a day here and there. With one of those omnibooses you're talking about, she could probably find one or two more customers and bring in even more."

"A very good point, fellow," Zak commended him. "Very good. And the family has been pushing me to find something useful to occupy my time. I'll start looking into it when we get back to the palace."

A few minutes later, amid a myriad of questions concerning public transportation in the capital city of Emmine, they arrived at the main gate of the University at Querna. The institution was comprised of a host of buildings which, unlike the rest of Querna, appeared to have been built without any thought toward aesthetic integration with their neighbors. The gate itself was a wide, tall arch with open wooden doors constructed of massive oak planks and a raised, wrought-iron portcullis. It was one of only three openings in a thick granite wall that looked like it had been built to hold off the ravening hordes of illiteracy. Zak paid the cabbie and escorted Oceanvine up to the gate.

"They say that the portcullis will come crashing down if a woman should ever matriculate here," he commented nervously as they walked under the sharpened iron points at the bottom of the heavy lattice.

"Really?" Oceanvine asked quietly. Zak nodded. Then a malicious grin creased her face. "Let's find out. Which is the Ad building?"

"Ad building?"

"Administration," she clarified.

"Oh, you want Querna Main. It's the big black sandstone one over there."

Oceanvine glanced in the direction Zak pointed and then did a double take. The entire campus looked to her like a large "What's wrong with this picture" puzzle. The only problem was that to her human eye, none of this amalgam of Granomish architecture looked right. Where the rest of the city seemed to be composed of tall graceful spires, built in conscious imitation of the Wurra Palace, the University seemed to have been designed as a three-dimensional portrait of gravity and other heavy subjects. Buildings were squat and blocky, and most were faced with either dark red brick or blackened sandstone, although at the far end of the campus Oceanvine could see one building of pure white marble and several structures appeared to have been painted in vivid color combinations that even the Orenta, known for their love of garish, bright colors, might have found to be in poor taste.

Color and architecture were not the only distinguishing features of the University buildings. The finish work was also unique to the city. The lines of the pink granite and quartz spires were clean and straight. The architects who designed the city were intent on drawing the viewers' eyes upward toward Heaven.

Consequently they had kept the ornamentation relatively simple and what they had employed served to continue drawing the eye upward.

However, on the buildings that surrounded the snow-covered quadrant of the University campus, ornamentation was an end unto itself. Some buildings were trimmed with intricate scroll-work, others were adorned by magnificent bas reliefs and sculpted columns. Oceanvine particularly liked one building into whose stone columns lifelike grape vines with fruit had been carved windingly up to the roof. She remarked on the difference between the campus and the rest of the city.

"His Majesty's grandfather and mine, Ksaveras VII, found himself with very little to keep his army occupied following the Battle of Sinid. Not much use in keeping a standing army of half the able male population when you're at peace, is there? But when most of the army was disbanded we had an unemployment problem of monumental proportions. There were entire families that had done nothing for generations but serve in the army.

"It was about a year after the war was over that the City of Querna burned to the ground - about three-quarters of it anyway. A small group of disgruntled former officers were blamed, but just between you and me, I think old Ksaveras VII did it himself. Regardless, rebuilding the city put most of the veterans to work for over twenty years. After that they moved on to the other cities of Granom. Their descendants are still out there somewhere practicing urban renewal."

"Nice story," Oceanvine replied dryly, "but what has that got to do with the University?"

"The University has some unusual conditions in its royal charter and was protected from the fire by the resident mages. One of those conditions was that the school administration was solely responsible for the design and upkeep of University buildings. Invoking that particular clause, they were able to resist the King's sweeping architectural changes. Consequently these are the only buildings in Querna that pre-date the great fire."

"I particularly like the gargoyles on the roof of Querna Main," Oceanvine said admiringly.

"Just be careful walking under them," Zak cautioned her. "The designers didn't pay any attention to the way water drips off of them and what look like great crystal fangs are actually icicles. A few people have been hurt here by falling ice, and thousands have gotten absolutely drenched in an otherwise light shower because of the way those monsters funnel all the water to directly over the Main's front doors."

As he said that there was a sharp cracking noise and a pair of sharp ice fangs plummeted to the flagstone sidewalk below. Oceanvine shuddered involuntarily when they shattered and then hurried on inside before it could happen again.

The front doors opened on a small antechamber which led, in turn, to a large open hall. The hall was a mixture of dark wood panels, light-colored plaster ceilings, and murals everywhere the walls were large enough to accommodate them. The colors were warm, but Oceanvine found the atmosphere cool and stiffly formal.

There were two female Granomen working as receptionists at the far end of the room at the foot of a wide staircase that led to the upper floors. They were dressed in similarly somber-colored dresses over which they wore light grey uniform blazers, which Zak later informed Oceanvine indicated that they were graduates of the Women's Academy. Their hair was pulled back severely and with their similarly shaped faces they might have been identical twins except that one's hair was a dark brown, the dominant Granomish hair color, and the other's was a light red.

They immediately stopped working and stared in amazement as Oceanvine and Zak approached them. Oceanvine assumed they stared because she was human. Granom was a world away from Emmine, so there wouldn't be more than a handful of humans here and those were most likely faculty or graduate students. She was only half right.

"Yes, sir," the brunette receptionist responded as they came to a halt at her desk, "may I help you?"

"I'm just along for the ride," Zak replied smoothly and turned to the blond mage beside him. "Milady?" Both receptionists' jaws dropped open as Zak deferred to Oceanvine.

"Yes," she began, noting their surprise but not understanding their reaction, "I'm here to enroll as a Master of the Arts candidate in the College of Magical Studies."

"Your kidding!" the redhead replied in an astonished half whisper that instantly earned her a light kick in the shins from her companion.

"Are you certain, Milady?" the brunette asked, repeating the title Zak had used. "No woman has ever been accepted at University. That's why we have the Women's Academy."

"I don't suppose the Academy has a Magic Department, does it?" She didn't say it as a question. The brunette shook her head. "Then I'll just have to be the first, won't I?" Zak chuckled softly and Oceanvine became aware that he had walked several steps away and was now making a great show of studying one of the murals.

"Just between you and me, dear," the brunette told Oceanvine conspiratorially, "some of the more liberal members of the faculty have been saying that they might some day allow women to attend University, but only in the liberal arts. The science departments - and especially those magicians - are the most conservatively stubborn group of..."

"Ahem!" a deep male voice interrupted her from above. "And what is all this about?" Oceanvine looked up to see a balding, obese Granom making his way laboriously down the stairs. He was wearing a charcoal gray Granomish business suit, consisting of heavy woolen trousers and jacket. Under the jacket, she could see a simple black tunic, tastefully trimmed with silver-thread embroidery. It was an expensive ensemble, she knew, and a very conservative style in this archipelago.

"Dean Frostglow!" the brunette gasped, startled. Then she continued in a more deliberate vein, "This lady is enrolling as a master's candidate in your department." Frostglow's eyes widened dramatically and his face darkened. The brunette achieved only slight success at hiding her own satisfaction at having needled the man. Zak, standing unnoticed off to one side, wondered just what the Dean of Magical Studies had done to annoy the receptionist. Oceanvine, however, didn't have Zak's opportunity to make observations for the Dean's ire had become focused on her.

"You fancy yourself a mage, do you?" he asked coldly.

"I have a letter of recommendation..."

"I'm sure you do."

"...from one of your former students and faculty members," she finished, handing over the envelope Silverwind had given her. Frostglow opened it and read the contents, pausing occasionally to glare at

Oceanvine.

"Silverwind?" he asked, mostly to himself. "It was bad enough when he was teaching here. Now he's got to infect these halls from a distance."

"Not all that distant," she thought, unaware she had spoken..

"What was that?"

"Nothing, sir," she replied hastily.

"I'm sure his Majesty would appreciate your consideration of her application as well, Master Frostglow," Zak commented flatly from where he stood.

"Prince Zakhar!" Frostglow started. "I didn't see you there. Is she with you?"

"Actually, it's the other way around. I'm with her. So's my cousin."

"His Majesty has no sway over the policies of this institution."

"Very true. Say! Isn't one of those policies that every applicant must be allowed to take the admission exams and the results of those exams be given due consideration?"

"It is," Frostglow admitted grudgingly, "but passing the written exam does not guarantee admission to the University if the examining board does not feel that the candidate demonstrates a properly moral attitude." His tone implied that there was no doubt as to what the decision of the board would be.

"Just give her the test," Zak told him uncompromisingly, "and we'll see."

"It's a waste of time."

"It's my time to waste," Oceanvine replied. "Let's do it. I'm ready now."

Frostglow glared at her for a moment before a tight humorless smile crossed his face, "Of course," he murmured. "However, it will take a few days to set up."

"How long?"

"No more than a week. Why don't you report to the Magic building first thing in the morning one week from today. We'll be all ready by then."

Oceanvine nodded mutely and the matter was settled.

"I didn't want to say it in there," Zak told her later as they rode back to the palace, "but you're just wasting your time. They'll never accept you willingly and I don't know how they could ever be forced."

"Frostglow is only one man," she replied uncertainly. "Maybe the others will be more reasonable. Why can't they be forced? I noticed he wasn't very impressed when you invoked his Majesty's name."

"It's all part of the royal charter they received from Ksaveras IV. They have nearly complete autonomy from the dictates of any government. Unless accused of treason, even the King couldn't touch them and I

doubt any of that bunch is really interested in threatening their own income."

"Excuse me?"

"Most of the money to run the University comes from the Crown. It keep tuition here down to just a few bronze ounces per year. That way any deserving student can, in theory, attend the University."

"Any male student, anyway," Oceanvine grumbled. Zak nodded. The remainder of their trip back to the palace passed in silence.

Seven

Silverwind found Candle, not in the library where he had left him, but in the kitchen drinking some sort of fruit juice. The boy did not look well. His eyes were red and his face flushed. He seemed to be drinking the fruit juice almost desperately.

"Candle?" Silverwind asked solicitously. "Are you sick?"

"Thirsty," the boy replied between gulps. "So thirsty my throat hurts, just a bit."

"You have a sore throat," Silverwind concluded, "or the beginnings of one. Let me feel your forehead." He compared Candle's temperature to his own. "I think you're a bit warm too."

"I feel cold," Candle disagreed.

"I'm not surprised, lad. You're sick. Probably just a cold, but I'll have the royal physician look in on you. Go back to your room and I'll have him see you there."

"But I haven't eaten yet and I'm still thirsty."

"You're going to be thirsty for a few days, I think. You have a cold, Candle, or maybe influenza. Whatever, your best course is bed rest. The fact that you're hungry, of course, is probably a good sign. I'll have a tray sent to your room. All right? Good. Now off to your room." Candle nodded and after another drink left the kitchen. Silverwind thought his apprentice's steps weaved a bit as he walked away, but that may have just been to get out of the way of the busy kitchen staff.

Silverwind spoke to the head cook about sending Candle his meals and a servant was quickly dispatched with a small tray for the ailing boy. Then the wizard found the physician, who quickly packed up a few tools and other items in a heavy-duty carpet bag and rushed off to examine Candle.

"These early spring illnesses," the man told Silverwind, "are nothing to trifle with. Best to treat the boy now before this spreads to the entire palace."

The wizard accompanied the man to show him where the boy was staying and remained in the room while the examination took place.

"It's just a cold," the physician reported when he was finished, "although it may be a bad one. It's too



soon to tell."

"Can you cure it?" Candle asked.

"Not even with magic, lad," he replied. "A cold is not a serious illness as long as you take the proper precautions. However, I will prepare some medicine for you that will ease some of your discomfort. It will probably make you sleepy, but that will help you rest, and rest is what you need. I imagine that you ache all over?"

"A bit," Candle admitted.

"More than a bit," the doctor told him with a reassuring smile. "That's normal." He reached into his case and pulled out a small glass bottle full of small white pills. He gave one of the pills to Candle and had him swallow it with a cup full of fruit juice. "Here," he told Silverwind, handing him the rest of the bottle. "See that he takes one of these every four hours or so."

"What are these?"

"An analgesic. It's a derivative of spiraeic acid, if that means anything to you. A colleague of mine makes them and keeps me supplied. They're fairly new, but seem quite effective at reducing pain and fever."

Silverwind nodded and assured the physician that he would make sure Candle got the pills. The man left, promising to return later with the other promised medicines. When Silverwind and Candle were alone, the boy wanted to show Silverwind how he was finally able to pick the locks open by magic, but was frustrated when he was unable to.

"It's the illness," the wizard explained. "It's disrupting your concentration. The pain is probably also making it harder to relax. When you're better, I'll give you a new exercise."

"You promised to teach me how to start a fire," Candle reminded him.

"All right," Silverwind nodded agreeably, noticing the fireplace in the boy's room where kindling and split logs had already been carefully laid. "I'll show you now. Watch closely." A moment later the wood burst into the bright yellow and orange flames of a cheerful fire. "There, you see?" he teased the apprentice.

"No, and you know it!" Candle accused, sitting up.

"When you're better. Get some rest now. All right?"

"Okay." He lay back down in the bed, closed his eyes, and was asleep a few minutes later. Silverwind stayed in the room for a bit, but seeing the boy resting comfortably, he headed back down to the kitchen for a much-belated lunch. He was about halfway there when he met the returning Oceanvine and Prince Zakhar. Oceanvine seemed to have a perpetual scowl on her face and she was speaking with angry rapidity. Zak was very carefully agreeing with everything she said, but he shot a look of quiet appeal to Silverwind as they approached.

"Been out making friends and influencing Granomen?" the wizard asked without preamble, noting Oceanvine's expression. He sighed, wondering how long it would take his usually intelligent partner to learn this particular lesson. "Have you had lunch yet?"

"Not yet," Zak replied hopefully. "Let's get something to eat."

"Eat, hell!" snapped Oceanvine, "I need a drink."

"A drink, Vine?" Silverwind asked, somehow shocked by her words. "You?"

"You're buying," she retorted. A few minutes later, after Zak had led them to a small room, however, she relented and settled for hot coffee heavily laced with cream and sugar. "You should have warned me," she told Silverwind accusingly.

"That Granomish culture is almost fanatically conservative regarding the roles of the sexes? You knew that. In fact, I'd have thought you'd have been more careful after this morning. You usually don't make that sort of mistake more than once."

"Emmine rural society," Oceanvine pointed out, reminding the wizard of her own upbringing, "has many of the same values, but I expected better of the University. Randona is far more liberal than the rest of Emmine."

"So is Merrine," the wizard said agreeably. "Cancel that. Merrine, unlike Randona, is typical of its country. This, however, is Querna and it is also typical of the people who live in this archipelago."

"Actually, you're wrong, my lord," Zak corrected him.

"How so?"

"The University is far more conservatively male-oriented than any other place in Granom. And to put that statement into perspective, keep in mind that the person who said it is fifth in line to the throne and Granomish kings are not known for their rabid liberalism."

"The princes tend to be fairly radical, however," Silverwind countered.

"It's a fine old tradition," Zak laughed. "We who don't actually have the responsibility of the crown always seem to think we can do the job better."

"Oh? Do you think you'd be a better king than Ksaveras?" Silverwind asked lightly.

"Not hardly. No," Zak replied perhaps a little too quickly. "But then I came all too close to actually wearing the crown some years ago." He paused to sip his coffee.

"Tell me about it," Silverwind requested.

"It's not much of a story. His Majesty is an only child you see, so until he sired some heirs of his own I, as the eldest son of Ksaveras VII's second son, was next in line. This might never have been important but my cousin contracted a high fever shortly after his coronation."

"I remember that," Silverwind admitted. "It was in the middle of the winter. He should never have marched back from the temple of Gran in those light silk robes."

"He was trying to show how fit he was to rule," Zak explained. "His father had been sick for such a long time after all."

"The reasoning was sound, but he should have found some other way to demonstrate his health. A

regular exercise program might have served him better."

"All this is very interesting," Oceanvine told them acidly, "but what does it have to do with my problem?"

"Nothing directly, except that perhaps you ought to find another way of dealing with Granomen in general. Matching them power for power never worked. The Orenta learned that finally. Try not to take as long as they did," Silverwind replied. "Why? What do you want to know?"

Oceanvine glared at the wizard for a moment. She wanted sympathy and help, not a lecture. She forced herself to remain calm and, after a deep breath, said, "Well, how am I going to get my degree if I can't even get admitted into the graduate program?"

"Did they accept your application?"

"They let me fill one out, if that's what you mean. I'm supposed to take an entrance exam a week from tomorrow, but the dean gave the impression that I could save him a lot of trouble by never having been born."

"I don't imagine you plan to oblige him," Silverwind commented with a crooked smile. "Who is the dean these days?"

"A fat toad of a man," she retorted harshly. "Calls himself Frostglow."

"Frostglow? How the hell did he ever become dean? For that matter how did that incompetent fool ever get tenure? Has the faculty board traded in their brains in favor of spoiled sourfruit juice?"

"Is he really that bad?" Zak asked.

"My apprentice is already a better mage and he's only been at it a few months. At least he would have better sense than to try experimenting with ignition spells in a hayloft. Nearly killed himself."

"He didn't!" Oceanvine laughed.

"He did. It was shortly after he graduated as a journeyman. He thought he could become the youngest wizard of all time."

"I thought you were the youngest," Zak cut in.

"I am, or was at the time I earned my degree. I believe Oakheart in Kornedd is a year or two my junior. Frostglow, on the other hand, hasn't got the brains the gods gave geese. Vine, if he's your only problem, you'll be a master in a fortnight."

"Doesn't Master Frostglow, as dean, have final approval on every new student?" Zak asked.

"He has approval," Silverwind admitted grudgingly, "but it isn't final. Frostglow is only the dean of the College of Magical Studies. A rejected applicant can always appeal to the Dean of Students. Just make sure you score high on that entrance exam, Vine."

"Oceanvine," she corrected him tightly. "That isn't going to be the standard exam, you know."

"You can handle it, I'm sure," he replied with irritating serenity.

"Thanks," she shot back dryly.

## Eight

The sun rose the next morning to find a cloudless sky waiting. As its golden light touched the rooftops of Querna, the air temperature rose and the snow, which had half-turned to slush the previous day, continued on its inevitable journey to the sea, so that by the time Silverwind and Oceanvine emerged from the Wurra Palace, the gutters that fimbriated the cobblestone streets had been transformed into minor rivers. Where several key storm drains had already reached their capacity, the streets were several inches deep in the frigid water.

"And you wanted to walk," Silverwind said accusingly as the horse drawing their cabriolet treaded its way through the near-freezing stream.

"How was I to know the streets would be flooded? It never happens in Randona."

"Of course it does," the wizard replied. "At least it does when a half-yard of snow tries to melt all at once."

"I don't recall ever seeing that much snow in Randona. never more than four or five inches at any time."

"Winter does seem to be the dry season there," he admitted, "but they do have a major winter storm once every seven or eight years. You were only there for half that time so it's no surprise that you might have missed one of the really big storms. Well, aside from the difference in architecture, this is pretty much what it would have been like."

A few minutes later they reached the Tower of Justice. The building was typical of Quernan architecture. Like most other government buildings in the city it was constructed of pink granite and was trimmed with some sort of opaque black rock. Only the palace itself was adorned with magically fused smokey quartz. The Tower of Justice may have been a single, tall structure when it was first established as the home of the kingdom's judicial power, but with the passage of time, as more room was needed for offices, court-rooms and the like, it had turned into a sprawling complex of buildings surrounding a central courtyard, much like a miniature version of the Wurra Palace.

The courtyard that the two mages walked through to reach the Royal Prosecutor's office had been carefully arranged with boulders and gravel to be aesthetically pleasing to the eye even in winter. Somehow, even the few traces of remaining snow accentuated the beauty of the design.

"This must be really beautiful in the summer," Oceanvine commented, eyeing several dark green mountain laurel bushes and places where annual flowers might be planted.

"It is," Silverwind replied. "The finest gardeners in the world of any race are trained here in Granom, and Querna is a city of gardens where only the very best landscapers are allowed to practice. The weather should be turning soon, perhaps we'll be here long enough for you to see some of that for yourself."

"That would be nice. I've always thought of Granomen, in general, as mechanics and engineers.

Tradesmen in the less artistic fashion."

"That's because in spite of your involvement in the 'One Maiyim' movement you still think of them as trolls. The word warps one's thoughts and is not particularly accurate. When you think of a troll, you think of someone who is slow and brutish and that just isn't how it is. True, as a people, Granomen are less cerebral than humans and Orenta, although there are individual exceptions, but when it comes to working with their hands, they're the best. Whether that's as an engineer or a gardener makes very little difference. They've come up with any number of inventions on their own, although they really excel at taking ideas from elves and humans and then working out physical applications of them. They're a very clever people, Vine. Every bit as clever as we or the elves are. Try not to forget that."

"I'll try not to," she replied abashed. She was silent the rest of the way to Lord Miklos's office while re-evaluating her beliefs and actions over the last two days.

The office suite of the Royal Prosecutor occupied an entire floor in the Tower of Justice complex. After being passed by the receptionist, the two mages found themselves walking through a large room predominantly filled with Granomish women, most of whom were working at the keyboards of strange, clattering machines. Oceanvine paused to inspect one and discovered that these were obviously the source of those printed reports she had seen at the briefing.

"What's this?" she asked. "A desk-top printing press?"

"We call them typewriters, miss," the woman at that desk corrected her politely.

"Really? I've never seen anything like them. Silverwind, have you?"

"Last time I was in Querna," he replied. "Although it looks as if the keyboard has a different arrangement."

"Oh, you must have seen some of the old alphabetical layouts," the typist replied. "These were designed with the frequency that each letter is used in mind, like a printer's type case."

"So these are more efficient," Oceanvine concluded.

"Too much so," the typist laughed, "Sometimes I find my fingers moving faster than the machine is able to work. That gets the type wands all tangled up."

"Maybe another keyboard layout is needed," Silverwind suggested, "something slower than this but faster than the alphabetic format. Come along, Vine. We've kept Lord Miklos waiting long enough." Oceanvine corrected his use of the detested nickname automatically and paused to thank the Granomish Woman for her time before continuing on.

Lord Miklos was as deep within the office suite as one could get in a large corner office overlooking the city. Oceanvine was surprised at the sparsely appointed room that the large Granom used. The furniture was well-made, but utilitarian in nature. There were no paintings or wall-hangings and the only personal touches the Royal Prosecutor allowed were confined to his sturdy walnut desk. There the visitors could see a small tin-type photograph of his wife and another of his two children, a hand-carved box filled with cigars, a heavy, colored glass ashtray emblazoned with his family's coat of arms, and a small crystal vase filled with a trio of jonquils that were the only splash of color in the room. Miklos's large frame was garbed in a light gray business suit similar in cut to the one Master Frostglow had worn. His tunic, however, was a far less conservative, bright red satin with gold lace trim.

"I'm certainly happy to help you in your investigation, my Lord Wizard," Miklos said after greeting both mages cordially, "but may I ask why you are starting here?"

"Why not?" Silverwind shrugged.

"I'd have thought that either Sir Edus' or Lord Natan's offices would have been a more logical starting point. They do head up the police and the Bureau of Investigation after all."

"We'll get to them fairly soon," the wizard assured him, "but I imagine that since they are separate departments that there will be some data that one has and the other hasn't. As Royal Prosecutor, however, you ought to have everything they both have and without the redundancy we'll eventually have to wade through."

"My records can save you the redundancy," Miklos responded, "but I doubt you'll have the most complete picture here either. My office, you see, deals with evidence, and we use it to make a case against potential suspects, of which we have none at the moment. My associate and assistant prosecutors have access to both Natan's and Edus' investigations, so they can always go back and review the total evidence if they need to, and that happens a lot, but they usually only record those bits and pieces that seem important in our own files. If we copied everything, this entire building could easily be filled with the results of any one or two cases."

"So you strive to reduce redundancy between departments as well," Silverwind concluded reluctantly.

"Exactly," Miklos beamed.

"Terrific," the wizard muttered flatly.

"No one ever promised you this would be easy," Oceanvine told him uncomfortably. "That's why they pay your big bills."

He ignored that and plunged on, "It will slow me down, but I have to start somewhere and this seems as likely a place as any."

"Of course," Miklos agreed. "We have an entire room dedicated to this case and several assistant prosecutors who can answer your questions. One of them ought to be there at any given moment."

He was abruptly cut off by a shrill, female voice, "Mikki!" They looked up and saw an unusually thin and slightly disheveled Granomish lady making her way rapidly toward them. "Mikki!" she repeated, much closer now. Oceanvine noted that her eyes seemed slightly glazed. "I'm going shopping with the girls. Do be a dear and give me a bit of money."

"Dear," Miklos greeted her a little sternly, hoping that she would behave herself, "I present the Most Honorable Wizard Silverwind and Lady Oceanvine, mages from Emmine. My Lord and Lady, this is my lady wife, Ferike of Querna." He gave them time to exchange polite greetings - although Ferike gushed a bit more than was seemly - before continuing, "Ferike dear, I'm very busy just now. If you could just wait in my office a few minutes, I will be right with you."

"Oh pooh!" she retorted. Then she saw the angry expression on her husband's face and said to no one in particular, "You will excuse me, I'm sure," and made her way to Miklos' office with as much dignity as she could muster.

Miklos tried to ignore his wife's behavior, but both mages could tell that he felt embarrassed, although neither could discern exactly why. With as few words as possible he escorted them to the room he had mentioned before and left them with a young gentleman he called Klim.

Klim was tall for a Granom and almost able to look Oceanvine straight in the eye. He wore a suit similar to that of Lord Miklos, leading her to conclude that this was a sort of unofficial uniform.

Silverwind meanwhile was studying a large map of the greater city region that covered one wall of the room. There was a mixture of several colored pins, each one with a small slip of paper attached, stuck into the map in various places.

"What do all these pins indicate, Master Klim?" he asked.

"Various sites pertinent to this case, my Lord," Klim replied. "The red pins indicate where we have been finding bodies."

"Except for this one," Oceanvine said, pointing at one pin to the north of the city, "they seem to be in groups."

"That's true," Klim replied. "That one was just found the other day. Now that the storm is over, searchers are scouring the area for more bodies. I don't envy them that task. It's a messy business. Just looking at the remains afterward has been keeping me awake nights."

"What about the other pins?" Silverwind asked.

"The green pins represent the homes of the missing women and the yellow pins are the work places, when known."

"How about these blue ones?" Oceanvine asked.

"Locations where they were last seen, if different from work place or home."

"With the exception of this cluster," Silverwind concluded, "there doesn't seem to be much of a pattern, if any."

"That cluster is the Women's Academy. Four of the missing were students or teachers there."

"I think we've heard that already, but it helps to see all this on the map."

"There is a pattern, however, although I'm not certain how much help it'll be to you. We haven't been making it widely known, mind you, no need to publicly embarrass their families and some of them are quite respectable. I mean they're dead and if they were participating in the activity we suspect they were, well, why soil their names needlessly, you know?"

"No, we don't. Just tell us already!" Oceanvine demanded harshly.

"We think they were all prostitutes."

"Lord Natan told us that only sixteen of the missing women were," Silverwind pointed out.

"That's the official story," Klim replied. "We know that one of the students at the Academy had been hooking to cover the cost of her tuition and now think she may have been part of a larger ring. If the other three were also, we have our connection."

"That's a very big if," Oceanvine told him. "What sort of hard proof do you have?"

"Nothing yet," he admitted, "but it makes for a nice neat explanation."

"We'll see."

-

Nine

"Something's bothering you," Oceanvine observed. Having finished up in Lord Miklos' office, she and Silverwind had gone on to talk to Sir Edus, the Querna chief of police, elsewhere in the Tower of Justice complex. They had learned nothing new there and were now on their way across town to the Royal Bureau of Investigation. The temperature had continued to rise and now the only visible traces of the recent blizzard were confined to deeply shadowed alleys.

The problem of flooded streets, however had intensified and their driver chose to make two long detours rather than risk his cab's wheels on an uncertain road surface, invisible under the muddy waters.

"Potholes," was all he had said.

"I don't like what we've learned so far this morning," Silverwind replied to his assistant's comment.

"What do you mean? I know you aren't referring to the horrible nature of those women's deaths."

"Two items bother me although they may be part and parcel of the same problem. The first is that the Royal Prosecutor is not keeping records of all the evidence."

"He explained that, didn't he?"

"Did he?" the wizard countered. "How do they know what evidence is relevant if they don't even have a suspect yet? It doesn't take all that much room to file written summaries of officer's reports. Aside from the map, there was very little of value in that entire room Lord Miklos dedicated to the case. The police files were a bit better and not too far, but Lord Natan's organization is almost two miles away. That's one hell of a lot of leg work."

"What's the second item?"

"The Women's Academy. Why are so many of the missing women associated with it, and why is the Prosecutor's Office so eager to point its finger there at a possible prostitution ring, while keeping the matter hushed up. You'll notice that Sir Edus hadn't heard of it before and his police would have to do the actual job of arresting the women should Miklos decide to act. The whole thing stinks, although whether of sloppiness or of an inside job, I don't know yet. I don't like to admit this, but we're going to have to work with Sandstone."



"What do you have against Master Sandstone?" Oceanvine asked. "Sure, he's a typically conservative Granom and a little blind when it comes to the abilities of women, but I don't hold a personal grudge against him - he's just a product of his culture - why should you?"

"You're getting remarkably open-minded," he replied, hoping to change the subject.

"After my encounter with Frostglow, Sandstone seems downright benevolent," she replied with a tight, nearly humorless smile. "You didn't answer my question."

"No, I didn't. All right, Sandstone is a petty-minded fool and not a very capable one at that. That spell he tried to place on you was sloppy and ill-considered."

"He underestimated me, and, like I said, he's a product of his culture. No doubt the presence of a woman in what he considers to be a man's place provoked him to his foolishness."

"Vine, I don't recall you ever being so understanding of an attacker!"

"I've had the time to think about what happened yesterday. Some of it, I think, may have been my fault. He'll probably never be a wizard, but then so few mages ever reach that level. I think you'll find he's competent in his field."

"Well, he's no Frostglow - rising in the ranks purely through bribery and political maneuvers - but... Oh well, I suppose he does deserve a second chance. You did push him rather hard."

"You know, as I think of it," Oceanvine continued, "you don't seem to have a very high opinion of many other mages. You haven't had a good word for Frostglow or Sandstone and you didn't get along with Meadow either and he's a fellow wizard. I think you're becoming a snob in your old age."

"You know better than that," the wizard retorted. "Meadow and I respect each other even though we don't agree on matters of decorum. He's the best man on Maiyim when it comes to animals, and he could probably be a fair general practitioner if he cared to be. Maybe I'm judging Sandstone on a bad first impression, but Frostglow I know all too well. Last time I saw him he had just passed his master's exams on the tenth try. I was on his examination committee and can tell you that the verdict was not unanimous. Not by a long shot!"

He might have said more but the drive brought the cabriolet to a halt just then at the front door of the Bureau of Investigation's building. Silverwind paid the driver and exited the cab.

Heedless of his footing as he stepped down, the wizard missed the curbing and plunged his soft leather boot directly into the icy water that surged through the gutter. He quickly yanked that foot out of the water, but, in doing so, lost his balance and fell. Oceanvine's laughter as he raised himself to his feet did nothing to improve his temperament and his scowls only set her off still more.

"If you're finished with your morning's entertainment," he said sternly, trying to salvage what was left of his dignity, "perhaps we can go inside."

"Would you like some help drying off?" she offered between giggles.

"No, thank you," I'll handle it myself. Immediately the water his garments had absorbed began to evaporate and they went inside.

The receptionist found herself severely startled by the sight of the steaming wizard as they approached, but she soon recovered and directed them to Master Sandstone's office.

Sandstone's office was far smaller than that of Lord Miklos, and it was not the showplace that Royal Prosecutor's office was. Instead of wide tracks of empty space, Sandstone's work place looked more like a study in efficient storage space. Very little of his desk, an expensive antique with a carved and sealed red sandstone top, showed under the piles of paper, mostly in files, which nearly covered every available space. There were two colorful, hand-drawn and inked maps on the walls; one of the City of Querna and the other of the Granom Archipelago. The office's single, wide window had been filled with an assortment of flowering plants in various states of health that Sandstone had collected over a period of years. There were four large filing cabinets that occupied the better part of the one wall that was neither adorned by maps nor by the window and drapes. In addition to the chair behind Sandstone's desk, there were four other chairs situated around the desk, and a wide padded couch and coffee table - all covered by still more mounds of paper - occupied most of the remaining space leaving only minimal room to navigate across the cramped room.

The Granomish mage welcomed them warmly enough, but was not completely successful at hiding his irritation at their presence. He quickly cleared off two chairs for his visitors, haphazardly dumping their contents onto two other chairs.

"So, how may I help you today?" he asked, obviously forcing a smile.

"We're just getting started," Silverwind replied. "So far we've been to Miklos' and Edus' offices for all the help they have been, and now we're here. Yesterday's briefing was all well and good, but it was in generalities, the sort of thing I imagine your newspapers have been printing. If I and Oceanvine are to be of any use to you, we'll need to know all the details."

"That sounds reasonable," Sandstone admitted, "but I would have thought that Lord Miklos had everything we've turned up on file."

"Evidently not," Silverwind replied. "His people seem to be relying on the police and the RBI to do their filing for them. Claim they just don't have the room."

"That's odd. I know that the Royal Archivist is a busy man - aren't we all - but his storage facilities are not yet full. Surely they send their closed case files to the archives." The wizard shrugged. "Ah well, there is nothing we can do about that right now. What do you want from me?"

"Well, one obvious lack in the evidence we have noted are the technical details concerning your own magical investigations. All we really know we learned yesterday; that all the remains have been found to be missing their hearts and that they were removed without benefit of an incision. I'll admit that almost proves magic."

"Almost?" Sandstone asked incredulously. "Do you know of any way those hearts could have been removed without magic?"

"No, I honestly cannot," Silverwind admitted easily, "but I'm trying to keep an open mind. Were there any spell traces left on the bodies?"

"Hmm. Let me see." Sandstone frowned and searched through a few of the file folders on his desk. "Ah! Here we are. Varying traces of class TP type four and seven spells over the chest area, a class BA type three hypnotic emanating from the head melded to an unidentified spell type. Some of the bodies also

yielded traces of translocatory magic."

"Sounds like we're up against an accomplished mage. What about that unidentified magic?"

"It was unlike any magic classified in our incantatorical keys."

"Surely you were able to describe it in some way."

Sandstone suddenly looked embarrassed. "The diagnoses were performed by one of my assistants. Oh, I checked his results and agreed, but you must realized that it is necessary for me to supervise many such investigations. I simply don't have the time to do everything myself. That's why I had to read this file before answering your question. Snowfall - that's his name - should have been more thorough however," he concluded with a frown.

"Then perhaps we should consult with him," Silverwind suggested.

"Yes!" Sandstone replied a little too quickly. "An excellent notion." He rose from his seat. "Come. I'll introduce you right away." Silverwind and Oceanvine exchanged a quick glance before following him out the door.

Oceanvine was willing to bet big money that if Snowfall hadn't heard them coming, they would have caught him napping at his desk. However, Sandstone's constant chatter had given him fair warning and the younger Granom was actively shuffling papers back and forth across the desk in his windowless office. Sandstone performed a quick set of introductions and then just as quickly excused himself, stressing just how busy a man he was.

Snowfall, a journeyman mage, seemed much friendlier than his master. His office, more a large cubicle, was also neater and openly more organized than Sandstone's. Without a window, the small room needed artificial lighting; a problem Snowfall had solved with an illumination spell. In spite of himself, however, Silverwind was impressed by the way Snowfall had applied the spell which produced a point source of bright light that hurt the eyes to look at directly. Snowfall had set it, however, to shine from within a frosted glass bowl and hung that bowl from the ceiling. The bowl diffused the light and comfortably illuminated the room. There was a smaller lamp created by the same technique sitting on a pedestal on his desk, although he had found it necessary to rig a shade to keep it from shining too brightly in his eyes.

"I'd like to know more about the unidentified spell traces you found on the bodies," Silverwind told him, sitting in the one spare chair the office afforded after Oceanvine chose to perch on a two-drawer filing cabinet.

"Oh yes," Snowfall replied, "a fascinating spell. Never seen anything like it, assuming that the traces weren't degenerate, of course."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm beginning to think that the traces I picked up were too old. These things do fade with time and every spell has a different half-life. My latest theory is that the killer used a two-stage hypnotic of which one was remarkably unstable."

"That would be unfortunate," Silverwind said flatly. "What makes you so sure that these are degenerate spell traces?"

"There's no definable pattern to them. The traces are random - chaotic."

"What?" Oceanvine and Silverwind asked as one.

"Impossible, isn't it?" Snowfall shrugged. "They look as though the energy had been flowing in every direction at once. Now what would that accomplish?"

"We need to examine the bodies," Oceanvine said firmly. Silverwind nodded emphatically.

"No good," Snowfall said shaking his head. "The diagnostic spells we used dispersed all remaining traces. You'll have to wait until another body is found. What do you expect to find?"

Silverwind looked at Oceanvine and then opened his mouth to speak but she hastily beat him to it. "Something unexpected," she said simply holding the wizard's eyes with her own. He smiled tightly and gave her a miniscule nod.

"Do you have experience with this sort of thing?" Snowfall asked her.

"Probably not," she replied much too easily. "You most likely are right about degenerate spell traces."

Later as they rode back to the palace Silverwind asked her, "What was that all about?"

"I don't trust him," she replied.

"Why not?"

A frown creased her face as she replied, "I don't know. Just a hunch, I guess. I don't like the way none of these departments or bureaus or whatever they call them are fully cooperating with one another and I have an especially bad feeling about this Snowfall. What sort of diagnostic spell would destroy the evidence?"

"An extremely powerful one," the wizard replied. "It would leave traces that mask out the old ones."

"Is that much power really necessary?"

"It's hard to say. I just got here. Who knows what they've had to deal with."

"I thought that was what we were doing today," Oceanvine commented, "finding out what they had to deal with."

"Did we?" he asked pointedly.

"No."

"Then we'll have to try harder tomorrow," he laughed.

"Where do we go next?"

"Well, I'd like to tour the city with an eye toward that map Klim showed us, and then we can go nose about the Women's Academy. However, I'll be willing to change my plans if another body is found, because until we can see for ourselves, our investigation will not truly have begun."

Ten

Boredom and misery battled for mastery of Candle's emotions. Whatever his illness was, although the palace physician assured him it was "only a cold", it left him listless most of the time and aching all over all the time. The worst part was that he was confined to bed and even when he had the energy, there was nothing for him to do and the small half-closed shuttered window in his room afforded him only a small, unrepresentative view of the partly cloudy skies.

Candle was desperate for something to do, however, and he eventually retrieved one of his locks from the top of a bureau. Back in bed, he played with the device, opening it with the levitation spell he knew several times before he grew too tired and had to nap again.

When he next woke he picked up the lock again, but found it couldn't hold his interest. He was tempted to find the other lock, but before he could crawl out of the bed he remembered that the dissimilarity between the combinations of the locks' tumblers made no difference at all in the way he applied the spell. It was then that the boy's creativity came into play.

Every time Silverwind teaches me a spell, he reasoned, he makes me figure it out for myself. Why wait? He was then left with a decision of what he wanted to do. The wizard had promised to teach him how to make fire, but he wasn't so feverish as to think that was a good idea while still in bed and he didn't feel well enough to spend any more time up than necessary. He was thirsty however. Yes, a cup of juice would be good right now. He'd seen Silverwind produce food and drink on occasion. Not very often because it was rarely necessary. Candle thought he did it just to show off. He wasn't far off.

Now, how to do it? Was he supposed to just think about juice? No, Silverwind had always said that it was necessary for a mage to know exactly what he was doing and to understand how the process worked.

How is juice made? Candle wondered. By squeezing fruit. What fruit? Where is it? On trees? No, it's the wrong time of year. Candle shook his head and immediately regretted the action as a wave of nausea passed over him.

Lying back down, he slept again, but when he awoke once more his throat was parched. He tried to call out but was shocked at how feeble his voice sounded and doubted that anyone had heard him. His immense thirst reminded him that he was going to try to get something to drink, but when he sat up, he felt too dizzy to try walking.

Juice is too difficult, he thought, but what about water? He reasoned that the palace must have a well and while he didn't know where it was, there must be water in the ground somewhere beneath him. He closed his eyes and used the self-hypnotic techniques Silverwind and Oceanvine had taught him to help him both relax and concentrate on the matter at hand. Relaxed concentration, they had told him constantly, was the key to magic. Both were difficult in his current state of health, but he tried his hardest. Nothing happened the first time he tried to bring water to himself, nor were there any results the next few times, and the efforts left him exhausted once more.

The sky was beginning to darken when he woke up next and he was still thirsty, so he tried one last time.

Relax!he told himself repeatedly as he touched one finger to the middle of his forehead. The finger touch was the prompt that allowed his mind to sink into the hypnotic state.Relax! Now, water. It's down there somewhere. Must bring it here. MUST! BRING! IT! HERE!

Silverwind and Oceanvine had just returned from their first day of investigation and were walking down the hall toward Candle's room when the door suddenly burst open, spewing torrents of water out into the corridor. They jumped back instinctively in a vain attempt to avoid the flood, but as Candle himself came tumbling and sputtering out of the room toward the end of the long wave, they rushed forward in concern.

"Gods!" Oceanvine swore as the water level receded. In the near distance she could hear it flowing down the closest stairway. "What happened?" Candle continued to cough up water.

"Candle?" Silverwind asked gently. "Did you do this?" The boy was able to stop coughing long enough to nod his head, but when he tried to speak, his body was wracked by another coughing fit. "Why?"

Candle, soaked to the bone and shivering uncontrollably, finally got some control over his voice and croaked out a single word, "Thirsty."

Silverwind and Oceanvine, who were kneeling to either side of the stricken boy, briefly stared at each other before their dual composure dissolved in laughter.

"Wait a minute," Oceanvine said between laughs. "Are you telling us you flooded the entire wing of the palace because you wanted a drink?" She started laughing again and had to face Candle's accusing eyes. The boy was in no condition to recognize the humor of the situation and she didn't help matters by asking, "So did you have enough, or should I bring you more?"

"Too salty," Candle replied. Silverwind's brow furrowed a bit at that and a light seemed to flicker on within him. He stuck a finger into a nearby puddle and brought it to his mouth to taste it.

"Brackish," he reported.

"Where did it all come from?" Oceanvine wondered aloud. "He couldn't have accomplished a transformation, especially of salt water."

"I think it's translocation," Silverwind replied, lifting the shivering boy in his arms. "Let's get him to my bedroom."

"Translocation?" Oceanvine asked. "Did all this come from the harbor? Candle, you know you can't drink salt water."

"Know that," he replied softly as he was carried to the next room down the hall. Oceanvine walked ahead to open the doors and Silverwind carried the boy in past the small sitting room that came with his suite and laid him down on the bed.

"Find a dry robe in the closet, Vine," the wizard instructed as he slipped the boy out of his wet garments.

Once Candle was in the robe and safely under the covers of Silverwind's bed, the boy continued his explanation, "I tried to get the water out of the well."

"What well?" Silverwind asked.

"The castle's well."

"The palace doesn't have a well, lad."

"It doesn't?"

"No, the wells of Querna turned brackish centuries ago. All the drinking water is brought in by aqueduct."

"What's a aqua... Never mind. You can tell me when i feel better."

"What's going on up here?" A harsh voice demanded from out in the corridor. "where's all that water coming from."

"I'll handle it," Oceanvine said, leaving the wizard alone with his apprentice.

"Candle," Silverwind told the boy very seriously. "I want you to promise me that you will never try to cast a spell I haven't given you permission to try first."

Candle was starting to fall asleep again, but he held on long enough to reply, "I promise."

"Good. You could have been killed, you know," Silverwind continued, but Candle had already fallen asleep. He watched the boy for a few minutes and then turned to leave and found that Oceanvine had returned and was also standing quietly, observing the boy. Silverwind opened his mouth to speak but Oceanvine put her finger to her lips and indicated they should go back into the other room.

"I'm impressed," she whispered once she had shut the bedroom door behind them. "Considering his condition, I'm surprised he was able to cast a spell at all. I don't know if I could, especially such a high level spell. For that matter I don't know if I could pull that stunt off while perfectly healthy."

"The lad does have potential," Silverwind agreed, "assuming he doesn't kill himself before his fifteenth birthday. Wheneverthat is."

"Candle doesn't know that himself."

"There may be records in Tarnsa. He did live in an orphanage before he took to his brief career in crime. I suppose we could always celebrate the anniversary of the day we met him."

"Do you remember which day that was?"

"I have it pinned down to one of two days," the wizard replied. "As you know I do keep an irregular journal and the taking of an apprentice was significant enough to rate an entry. The only thing I don't know was whether or not it was after midnight when we caught him rummaging through the cart."

"Does it really matter?" Oceanvine asked.

"How do you view the day Master Sunbear took you on as an apprentice?" he countered. "Do you remember what day it was?"

"Of course," she replied quickly. "The nineteenth of Endyear, 2236... Oh, I see what you mean, but I doubt Candle knew what day it was."

"Maybe not, but I'm sure he'll want to celebrate. Well, I might as well let him have my suite and I'll move in somewhere else. I believe the rooms across the hall are empty."

"Want me to go check?" she offered.

"I'll handle that, but if you want to help, why don't you see about having Candle's things cleaned and dried. He should be up and about in a day or two, at least enough to make his way down to the kitchen. Oh while you're out see about having some food and drink brought to him on a more frequent basis."

"I already did. There should be something for him any time now. Speaking of which, perhaps we should get something as well. I may remember my apprenticeship, but I don't remember lunch."

"Can't have been very important to you then," Silverwind retorted.

Before Oceanvine could phrase a suitable reply, one of the palace pages, a young Granomish boy wearing a red and gold tabard, appeared with a written note for Silverwind. The wizard opened it and read.

"Well, no rest for the wizard," he said grimly a minute later.

"What's the problem?"

"It appears that the searchers were successful today," he replied bleakly. "Two more bodies have been found."

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Eleven

Silverwind had wanted to rush right over and examine the bodies, but Oceanvine convinced him that the women in question wouldn't be any less dead in the morning. Besides, what was his hurry?

"Autopsy is not a pleasant job, Vine," he had replied stiffly. "I would rather get it over with as soon as possible. On an empty stomach, if possible."

She agreed with that, but noted that they could skip breakfast just as well, and that with her own lack of experience in postmortem examinations she would prefer to have a good night's sleep first. Silverwind agreed, warning her that it might be the last one she got for a while.

The next morning turned out to be even warmer than the day before, promising all the joys of spring. Oceanvine commented that given their immediate destination, the weather seemed singularly inappropriate.

"Let's not complain too loudly," the wizard suggested lightly. "By the time we're done, a warm spring afternoon will do wonders for us."



The city's morgue was, predictably, in the basement of the tower of justice. Oceanvine's first impression was of an all-pervading, cold dampness. Then she realized that while the basement was not as warm as the upper floors, most of the eerie humidity was in her own mind. There was most definitely a smell at once both musty and acrid that she could not identify. She asked about it after meeting the coroner, a short elderly Granom who used the mage name Nightfall although he readily admitted that magic was only a minor discipline for him, having concentrated on medicine.

"The fumes," he replied distractedly. "Yes, the fumes. From the embalming fluid, you see. Otherwise this place would stink like Aritos' own court, don't you know. You get used to it in time. The fumes, that is, the fumes. I hardly notice them at all anymore."

Oceanvine wondered if the fumes had destroyed the old man's brain cells over the years, but kept a polite silence, not wanting to offend one of the few Granomen who seemed to see nothing unusual in her presence. Silverwind then asked about the two bodies that had been found most recently.

"Oh yes. Those poor, poor women. Even if they were breaking the law, they didn't deserve this. Not this."

"May we see them?" the wizard asked.

"Are you sure you're authorized?"

"By the King himself. My name is Silverwind and this is Oceanvine."

"Silverwind," Nightfall mused. "Silverwind. I think I've heard of you. Yes. Didn't you used to lecture at the University?"

"That was some years ago, but yes."

"Ah. I seem to remember a meeting you spoke at. Very stirring. Very persuasive. Something about One Maiyim was it?"

"One Maiyim?" Oceanvine asked in shock at hearing the name of the world peace and ecology movement she belonged to. "Silverwind, you never told me you had anything to do with the movement."

"Anything to do, girl?" Nightfall laughed dryly. "He started it!"

"Not really," Silverwind denied, "but I was there at the beginning. I'll explain later," he told Oceanvine. "For now, however, we need to see..."

"The remains of those poor women," Nightfall concluded. "Yes, yes. Perhaps the lady should wait here. It's not a pleasant sight. I have some tea, if you like."

"Vine is my assistant and partner, Doctor Nightfall. I'll want her there. Besides," he said in a stage whisper, "I think she's tougher than you and I together."

"Perhaps," Nightfall replied, oblivious to the wizard's humor. "Perhaps. Then, my dear, you are a mage as well?"

"I am," Oceanvine replied warily, expecting insults and outrage next.

"Good for you, girl!" Nightfall told her, patting her shoulder. "Good for you." Oceanvine gave him her warmest smile and the three left the office.

Beyond the office area, they walked past several examination rooms, two of which were in use. Oceanvine carefully kept from looking inside and seeing the coroner's men at their grisly, although necessary work.

Finally, they came to the storage room - a small chamber that seemed even colder and more redolent of the embalming fluid fumes than the rest of the morgue. There were over two dozen drawer-like compartments built into one wall, although Nightfall commented that they were rarely all in use at once. He checked with a young man who was busy doing paperwork at a small desk in the corner and ascertained where the two bodies they wished to view were.

Oceanvine swallowed hard and held her breath as the first drawer rolled open to reveal a cloth-enshrouded body. She averted her eyes instinctively as Nightfall unwrapped the loose cloth, but forced herself to look at the corpse with the fascination of a moth for flame.

What she saw was not, at first, recognizably human. Then she noted traces of hair and rotted skin. The corpse was a grotesquery; it seemed a bizarre, unreal thing that somehow failed to affect her. Then the fetid stench of the thing reached her nostrils, raggedly cutting through the merely unpleasant aroma of the embalming fluid, and she felt her stomach lurch in a vain attempt to expel the breakfast she did not eat. She fought for and achieved control, but in the struggle was unable to attempt to follow the investigative spells that Silverwind cast.

"Damn!" he shouted, startling everyone in the room. "Incompetent fool!" Oceanvine's attention was immediately fixated on her partner. He was sputtering almost incoherently now, but the one word he kept repeating was "incompetent." Through the years of their association, she had come to know that word was the worst insult he could lay on anyone. Incompetence, in Silverwind's estimation, was the very worst sin anyone could be guilty of.

She let him trail off before asking, "What's wrong?"

He stopped and clenched his teeth, fighting for his own control. Oceanvine could tell he was mentally running through a complex spell series in the same way that some people would count to ten before answering. "Someone got here ahead of us," he told her finally.

"Of course," Nightfall replied. "Didn't I tell you? Young Snowfall was here last night, almost as soon as the bodies arrived."

"Is that normal?" Oceanvine asked suspiciously. "Does he always show up as soon as a body is found?"

"Why, yes," Nightfall replied. "I believe he does. He likes to get to them before spell traces can deteriorate any further, although given their condition, I don't know what the hurry is. Do you?"

"Maybe he's as squeamish as I am," she speculated. "Did he examine both bodies?"

"I would imagine so. I was off duty at the time."

"Let's see," Silverwind requested tightly. A few minutes later, he started using words Oceanvine had never heard before, but had no trouble understanding their meanings given the context.

"Where to now?" Oceanvine asked not long afterward as they left the morgue. "The Women's Academy?" She was surprised to notice that all traces of nausea had left her at about the same time that Silverwind had started swearing. The problem of helping him keep calm had taken her mind off the horrible sights and smells.

"We'll get there after lunch," he replied.

"That's two hours away," she pointed out.

"I know, but we have a little business to take care of at the Royal Bureau of Investigation."

Half an hour later she sat in Master Sandstone's office while the Granomish master mage and Silverwind alternately lit into Snowfall. Oceanvine really wanted to join in - she was similarly angered at the young man's actions - but chose to sit back and let the senior mages do the job.

"You knew I wanted to examine those bodies," the wizard told him accusingly.

"I sent you a note."

"You sent a note telling me they had been found, not that you were about to erase every spell trace that might have helped me quickly solve this case."

"And what could you have done that I did not?" Snowfall snapped, having been pushed to his own limit.

"We may never know, little man," Silverwind told him coldly. Snowfall laughed humorlessly. "On the other hand, if you ever, ever examine a body connected with this case without Oceanvine's or my presence, I guarantee you will know what it is like to be a turnip."

"That's impossible," Snowfall scoffed. "Nobody can cast that sort of transformation." He looked confidently in the direction of Sandstone and Oceanvine. The Granomish master had raised his eyebrows in interest, but Oceanvine had to put her hands over her mouth to hide the smile that threatened to break out. She shook with silent laughter.

Then Snowfall turned back to Silverwind, feeling far less confidence as the wizard muttered, "Let's find out, shall we?"

Snowfall might have been a fool, but he was not a complete idiot. Thinking quickly, he replied, "My apologies, my Lord. I spoke without thinking."

Silverwind glared at Snowfall for a minute, while the young man imagined that he felt leaves growing out of his head. "Very well," the wizard said at last. "From this point on, however," he announced, "I am taking full charge of this investigation."

He spun around to look at Sandstone expecting protest, but the older Granom merely gave him an acquiescent nod and said, "I will agree so long as you promise to share with us everything you learn."

"I will, and with the Police and the Prosecutor's office as well. The more heads, I think, the better. I am going to want everyone currently working on this to meet with me every morning at the palace one hour after dawn for the duration unless I instruct them otherwise. For tomorrow morning, Snowfall, I want a full written description of everything you have found. And it had damn-well better be more completely detailed than these travesties you've been turning in to Master Sandstone. Do we understand one

another?" Snowfall nodded meekly. "We shall see you at breakfast." Sandstone's assistant mumbled something that sounded like agreement and left the room. "How did he ever get his job?" the wizard asked Sandstone.

"The usual way - connections. He comes from a very wealthy and respected family; not noble, mind you, but of the gentry. Until now, however, I have found him quite capable. Why?" Silverwind merely shrugged.

## Twelve

After hearing so much about the Women's Academy, Oceanvine had expected something more than two ivy-encrusted buildings; one that housed less than fifty students and ten faculty members and the other for classes and administration. The dean, a kindly, old Granomish lady who served them chamomile tea in thin, porcelain cups, mistakenly thought that Oceanvine had come to enroll and that Silverwind was an older male relative if not actually her father.

"Most of our ladies are a little younger than you, dear," she told the pretty blond mage, "and I do not believe we have ever enrolled a human student, but you are certainly welcome."

"Lady Valma," Oceanvine began gently, while Silverwind looked about for a potted plant to pour the tea into, "that will hardly be necessary. I already have a degree from University." He soon realized that the only plants in sight were on the far side of the room and he would have to hold his nose and choke the tea down politely. A moment later he decided instead to change the liquid into something more palatable, so while the ladies sipped their tea, he rather enjoyed his cup of whiskey

"Our University?" Lady Valma responded. "I had not heard they had accepted a female student, much less granted one a degree. We would have declare a holiday, I assure you."

"Uh, no..." Oceanvine tried again, but the dean cut her off.

"Young lady!" Valma admonished her. "With your training you must know better than to say 'Uh'. Sloppy vocal habit. Really. None of my ladies would, I assure you."

"Yes, ma'am," Oceanvine replied, genuinely embarrassed. However, the wizard's open laughter quickly snapped her out of it. Irrationally she was tempted to challenge him to the same sort of stare-down she had bested Sandstone at, but stopped herself at the last. Silverwind was the one person she could never beat. She had tried and he shrugged off her attempts with little apparent effort.

"I wish we were here to increase your student body," Silverwind told Lady Valma, unconsciously speaking with greater precision than normal. "Unfortunately, we are investigating the reports of missing women and the evident series of murders. Oceanvine, by the way, holds her journeyman's degree from the University at Randona, not Querna."

"That's a pity," Valma muttered. "I had so hoped those stuffy men at the University had suddenly joined the modern world."

"I hope to get my master's here," Oceanvine said simply. "I have an entrance exam next week."

"Then maybe we shall have that holiday yet, but don't even start to hope until you see the exam. A number of our ladies have applied, but the questions they were asked! If the men received those same exams, the University would run out of students."

"What sort of questions?"

"Just about anything they feel like, really. I have a large file full of them if you're interested, although they never repeat themselves. Oh!" Understanding suddenly dawned in Lady Valma's eyes and she turned to Silverwind. "You must be the wizard his Majesty is said to have summoned." The wizard charmingly pleaded guilty. "Such a shame, those poor girls. How may I help you?"

"We understand that some of the missing women were associated with the Academy."

"Yes. Three students, all girls of respectable families and one faculty member, Lady Anci of Talinca. She taught the literature classes. I still have not replaced her and have had to teach her classes myself."

Silverwind paused to consider his next question, but then decided to blunder on ahead. "We were told that there is some thought concerning a connecting thread between all the women involved."

"They were all relatively young," Valma replied uncertainly.

"That too, but you know that most of the women not associated with your school had been arrested on charges of..."

"My Lord Silverwind," Valma replied indignantly, "my ladies are not," she paused, searching for the properly polite term, "not common trollops! This institution prides itself on the high moral fiber of all those we allow to associate with us."

"I see. My apologies, but it is a question that needs to be asked."

"I do not see the need."

"Lady Valma," Oceanvine tried, "the question has already been asked in other quarters. The best way to retain the fine reputation of your academy is, of course, to show that no such activity is taking place here."

"Well, I suppose you are correct, but this is the sort of charge that would stain us merely by being made."

"We'll keep our investigation as discreet as possible, my Lady," Silverwind said reassuringly. He took his last sip of whiskey and put the cup down.

"I should hope so."

Silverwind gave her a moment to sip her tea and calm down a bit before continuing on. "We will need to interview the members of your faculty and probably some of your students."

"You will not mention a word of," she paused before whispering, "prostitution, I hope."

"It's something we must look into."

"Oh dear! Could you at least promise not to announce your findings publicly?"

"I can't promise that if the case ever comes to trial, but until that time I will only discuss it with those agencies that have been working on this case. So far none of them have made these suspicions public, so I doubt they will do so now."

Lady Valma was not so certain, but after another cup of tea's worth of fretting - and another of whiskey for Silverwind - she finally allowed them to interview her faculty and students. However, if anyone knew anything concerning the missing women, there were no volunteers, although several students seemed more uncomfortable than the others.

"For the next step," Silverwind said after the last interviewee, a gentlewoman from one of the northern islands whose name went in one ear and out the other, "I had hoped we would have Candle to assist, but I guess we'll have to proceed without him."

Oceanvine looked confused and asked, "What were you going to have Candle do?"

"Search the town for informants. With those old rags we made him keep, he'd fit right in as just another street urchin. People might be more willing to talk to him than to one of us."

"Not likely," she replied. "At least, not right away. No clothing, no matter how ragged will help a human boy fit in with a bunch of Granomen."

"It's true," Silverwind admitted. "He's not a troll, but he might have been able to have a quiet look around. We still have a couple hours before dinner. Want to go talk to the man in the street?"

"Thanks, but I'd like to have a look at those exam questions Lady Valma has on file. Maybe they'll give me some idea of what to expect."

"Oh, I can tell you what to expect; anything you might have learned since the time the gods made the world until it dies of old age."

"That's a lot of help," she replied dryly, "but I still want to see for myself."

"Have it your way," he shrugged. "I guess I'll go talk to the hookers."

"Try not to enjoy your work too much," Oceanvine told him with an edge to her voice that he completely misinterpreted.

"What I learn from them could be crucial to the case," he explained.

"I'm sure. Don't forget the bums lying drunk in the gutters. For the right price they'll no doubt remember anything you want them to."

"You have a problem, Vine?"

"Yes, I do. How many times have I told you not to call me that?" Wisely, for a change Silverwind didn't try to answer that and instead left to continue his investigation.

## Thirteen

Once out on the street, Silverwind noted that his next destination was on a direct line back to the palace, so he instructed the cabriolet driver to wait for Oceanvine and proceeded on foot.

The entire nature of the city seemed to change every three blocks or so. The Women's Academy stood just outside the University's north gate in what was mostly a residential neighborhood with just a smattering of grocers, bakeries and other services that catered to the student-faculty population of the area. A few blocks on, however, he found himself strolling through a business district with banks, office buildings, and a wide variety of stores. He was just passing the window of a provisioner when he nearly walked head-long into his old friend, Geraint.

"Out for your afternoon constitutional?" Geraint asked, smiling.

"Working mostly," the wizard replied.

"Working or walking?"

"Both, I guess. Haven't seen you for a while."

"Been busy. There are several merchants here that I've been buying from indirectly for years, so I'm cutting out the middleman. I'll probably be leaving day after tomorrow, though. The Isle of Marga is shipping out for Kanaduin again and that may be my only chance to sail back directly for a month or better. So what brings you this way?" Silverwind told him. "Sounds like a good idea. It might take weeks to get any useful information working by yourself though."

"Do you have a better way to do this?"

"Let's walk. There's a tavern not far from here, the owner learned brewing from the same master Jim-peg did, although I think Jim's brew is slightly better. Maybe I'm prejudiced. You be the judge." Geraint led the way as they walked from the business district into an area that seemed more devoted to entertainment with several taverns, restaurants and theaters.

"I really ought to try interviewing a few hookers."

"You can do that there too, and for a lot cheaper than if you try to pick them up on the streets"

"What do you mean?"

"My friend, for a man of the world, you have led an amazingly sheltered life. Do you really think the average street walker is going to say more than a few words to you if you don't pay her price?"

"I hadn't thought of that," Silverwind admitted reluctantly.

"Didn't think you had. Well, in a bar-room you can probably talk for a few over-priced and watered-down drinks combined with a healthy tip."

"How healthy a tip? I don't exactly have unlimited funds, you know."

"You don't? I imagine the Crown would pay any reasonable expenses. Just ask for an advance."

"Buy evidence?"

"You think the police and the RBI don't? I doubt it will cost too much in any case. Eventually the word will get out that you're on the job and you'll have more informants, all trying to out-bid each other for the few pennies you'll give them."

"Right, desperate people all telling me anything they think I want to hear."

"Right, and when you stop paying they'll stop coming even quicker than they started."

"And what good will that do?"

"Consider it cheap advertising. Somewhere in the city there are some very frightened women. Now when people are that terrified most will panic and look for someplace to hide, but there's almost always a few with the courage to fight back, given the chance. You're going to give them that chance. And all they have to do is talk. The only thing we're leaving to chance is whether or not the brave ones know anything. Here's the place."

The tavern was like a hundred other Silverwind had visited in the Granom Archipelago. Where drinkers in Emmine preferred sitting at rough wooden tables scattered about the room, leaving just enough space for a harried barmaid to thread her way between them, this tavern catered to the Granomish preference for privacy with half enclosed booths along the walls and several back rooms for larger parties. There were stools placed along the long, brass-railed bar, although few of them were in use, but the center of the wide, but shallow taproom had been left empty. Few Granomen would opt to sit at a center table given the chance. In contrast, Orenta preferred to do their drinking in well-lit venues, preferably out-of-doors where the warm tropical breezes of Bellinen could add their own contribution to the occasion.

Silverwind and Geraint made their way to one of the booths and ordered a pitcher of dark ale a moment later when an attentive barmaid asked. The pitcher came with two glasses and a large basket of steaming hot kamo biscuits - dark red, irregularly-shaped blobs of fried dough favored by connoisseurs of Granomish dark ale. They didn't have to wait long before the first prostitute made her approach.

Geraint noticed her walking their way first and subtly pointed her out to Silverwind. Her clothing consisted of a tight-fitting blouse with an extremely deep V neckline and sleeves that only covered three-quarters of her arms, and a skirt that was immodestly short, just barely covering her knees. She kept her black hair long and straight and used make-up liberally to make her features appear tanned. She did not quite look Orentan, but that was obviously the effect she was trying for. Silverwind was, as he had been before, amused by the fact that while most Granomen disliked elves, they found an elf-like look appropriate and even desirable among their whores. He also noticed that the woman's eyes had a slightly glazed look, but chalked it up to a reaction to the pungent perfume she wore or maybe to all the smoke in the room. The fireplace showed all the signs of needing a good chimney sweep.

"I'm Snowflake," she introduced herself seductively, sitting next to Silverwind. Even if he had led as sheltered a life as his friend implied, he would have known this was pure acting; there was very little interspecies sex appeal between humans and trolls. "Buy me a drink?" Geraint nodded to him almost imperceptibly.



"What are you having?" Silverwind asked.

"Villy knows."

"Villy?"

"Bartender," she explained. Without waiting for the wizard's assent, she signalled to the large Granom who tended the bar. He made a big production of mixing up something that was probably only a mixture of fruit juice and spring water. "You are most kind," she purred suggestively. "Perhaps I can be kind to you as well?"

"Perhaps," Silverwind replied. "I'd like to ask you a few questions." Now finished with the hooker's drink, Villy gave the resultant concoction to the barmaid who promptly shuttled it to their table. The price was twice that of the beer and biscuits.

"Oh," she commented in a flat, almost disgusted voice. "Why's a nice girl like me working the bars? Funny, you didn't seem like that sort."

"What sort is that?"

"A talker. Warn you, I charge for that too." Geraint laughed and she glared at him.

"But not as much if we stay here in the booth," he concluded.

"Depends how long you want to talk. I gotta make a living you know. You pay Villy, by the way," she added.

"How much?"

"Work that out with him."

Geraint nodded and went to talk to the bartender. A moment later he came back and said, "Ten minutes." Snowflake's glazed eyes widened slightly with mild surprise, but said nothing.

"Some girls have gone missing lately," Silverwind began.

"I've heard," she replied matter-of-factly. "What's that got to do with me?"

"You wouldn't want to be the next, would you?" he asked. She started at that suggestion and looked around the room wildly for a moment. Then she saw that Villy was watching them surreptitiously and calmed down again.

"I'm safe enough," she replied.

"What makes you think so?"

She laughed harshly, but only replied, "What's it to you?"

"It's my job," he told her. "I've been commissioned to find the murderer."

"You're the wizard!" she gasped.

"I guess it's no secret that I'm here," he commented sourly to Geraint, but Snowflake took it as though said to her.

"You kiddin'? Everyone in town knows you're here." She looked like there was something else she wanted to say, but her face went blank for a moment. When life returned to it a moment later, she told them, "The others, the missing women that is. They were all independents - working on their own. No, uh, agents. I thought everyone knew that."

"Now that's news," Silverwind remarked, "if it's true."

Snowflake shrugged as if to say, "Believe what you want." Prompted by questions, she told Silverwind and Geraint that she knew none of the missing women, nor did she know anyone who claimed they did. Before she left, Silverwind slipped her a few silver coins that the bartender didn't see. They spoke to the other five girls in the bar but only learned one more thing from them and that Geraint did not tell his friend about until they were walking drunkenly back toward the palace.

"I've always been a cheap drunk," the merchant admitted, "but you used to hold your ale better. We only had a pitcher of the stuff."

"Hmm?" Silverwind responded. "Oh, I was drinking whiskey at the Women's Academy."

"Lady Valma served you whiskey? That doesn't sound likely."

"I said that I drank whiskey. She served tea, and you know how I feel about tea. Just one step above water. Whale to the starboard," Silverwind broke into song, "whale to the port...Why aren't you singing?"

"Not appropriate. Did you notice the women we spoke to?"

"Hmm? Yeah, half of them were sort of trollish parodies of the elves, and the others..."

"That's not what I meant. Did you notice their eyes?"

"Their eyes?" Silverwind stopped walking for a moment and concentrated. When he spoke again, there was no trace of drunkenness in his voice. "They were all sort of glazed, weren't they? I figured that was because of the smoke or something."

"More something," Geraint said grimly. "The glazed eyes made me suspicious so I took the opportunity to do a little investigation of my own. Those girls, every last one of them, were on the Hook."

"Do you think that relates to the missing women?"

"I don't know, but if there's even a chance that it does, Elewys would never forgive me if I didn't try to do something about it, so if you want my help for the duration, you've got it."

"Thanks, old friend."

They arrived at the palace a short while later, but before they could enter, one of the ceremonial guards at the gate handed Silverwind a message. The wizard thanked him and moved on inside before reading the note.

"Don't bother taking off your cloak," he told Geraint. "Another body has been found and I want to examine it before anyone has a chance to muck up the evidence."

Fourteen

Silverwind dreamed.

He walked through thick charcoal mists of midnight along countless streets following the sound of hard leather-soled footsteps. From the foggy visual images he could have been in any major city in the world, but somehow knew for a certainty that he was in Querna.

From time to time he would pass one of the natural gas street lamps where the visibility would be improbably clear and he would catch a glimpse of a caped and hooded man in black far ahead. Then the dream would compel him to move on and the dark mists would close in on him once more. He rushed on through the dream world but his quarry kept his lead.

Suddenly he emerged from the mists to see the caped man, far, far ahead, talking to a dark-haired Granomish woman, dressed in much the same way that Snowflake and some of her friends had been. Before the wizard could react. The woman slumped to the ground and the caped man vanished with a silent flash of light.

Rushing to the side of the fallen woman, Silverwind noted that the curly brown wig she had been wearing had slipped off revealing natural, long, blond hair underneath. With a palpable dread, he reached out and turned the very much dead woman over to look at her face and saw Oceanvine staring back at him with sightless eyes and a thin line of dark blood running from her mouth.

"NO!" he screamed, coming fully awake.

Silverwind sat up in bed, a cold sweat soaking his night clothes. He looked out the window and saw just the faintest hint of false dawn frosting the horizon. He sat there for several minutes trying to understand this latest dream.

Was it a prophetic dream? He doubted that. The wizard thought of himself as a rational man and believed only in those things that could be proved. Scientific, reproducible results; those were the foundations of his faith. He kept himself open to the existence of the gods. Over the course of history there had been enough incidents that it was not entirely impossible, although he often wondered why there were only ten. Why not one hundred or one thousand or just one for that matter?

Prophecy, however, was something else again. There were, to his knowledge, no cases of prophecy that were both unambiguous and not otherwise explainable.

"Show me a documentable case of prophecy," he had once challenged a class at the University at Merinne on the first day of the year, "and you can all take the rest of the semester off. Until then,

however, I suggest you keep to the syllabus." There was, inevitably, one student who tried to take him up on the proposition, and had almost succeeded. Silverwind chuckled a bit at the memory. The young lady, usually such a serious student, almost had him convinced until she got to the last bit of supposedly corroborating evidence and then was unable to keep a straight face. Silverwind was not surprised when he learned that she graduated at the top of her class.

But if the dream wasn't a vision of things to come, then what, if anything, did it mean. One of Silverwind's professors had taught a class on dream interpretation. It was a popular class, not because of the subject matter, but because the master who taught it was a notorious easy grader. In spite of himself, Silverwind found the class fascinating at the time, although he had forgotten most of it since then. One of the few things he did remember was his professor's assertion that dreams were symbolic in nature; not everything was precisely what it seemed to be. Death in a dream, for example, very often signified change.

That memory did not help him particularly and as he got dressed he concluded that the dream was more a warning from his own mind, that he and the young woman he cared very much about - he had never admitted, not even to himself, that it was love - were placing themselves in danger. By the time he was dressed, the sky outside had brightened considerably, although it was still two hours before the breakfast meeting he had called.

He walked down to the kitchen and spotted Oceanvine working at the same table she had used several mornings earlier. This time, however, he was wise enough to snag an extra pastry before joining her.

"Another dream?" he asked, sitting down across from her.

"No," she replied. "I've been getting up early every morning since we got here. It's the only time I have to study." She lifted her tea cup and drained its contents. She put the cup down and refilled it from a small cozy-covered teapot. "Why? Did you have another visitation from the gods?"

"No. Just a disturbing dream."

"Want to talk about it?" she offered.

"I don't think so," he replied after a moment. "It was probably nothing." She wasn't convinced, but let the matter drop and went back to the open book in front of her until Silverwind spoke again. "I didn't see you last evening."

"I got in rather late," she told him. "Lost track of the time. One of the girls who had applied to the University is still on the Academy faculty and we talked until well past midnight."

"Were the cabriolets still running that time of night?"

"Not hardly. I had to walk back. I hope the exercise did me some good."

"You walked back alone after midnight? Don't you know how dangerous that was?"

"How dangerous could it have been?" she asked lightly. "There was hardly anyone out."

"No. Just a few hookers and the one who's been murdering them," he retorted bluntly.

"Were you worried?" she asked. There was an oddly hopeful tone to her voice that he failed to

recognized.

"Not at the time," he replied obliviously. "I thought you had gone to bed early, but, my gods! You could have been killed out there."

"I can take care of myself," she replied confidently. "It's not the first time I've been out after dark in a big city, you know."

"How many times have you been out when a murderous magician was known to be at large?"

"First time this week," she laughed. Noticing for the first time that she had picked up the one habit of Silverwind's that had always annoyed her the most, she had a sudden insight into why he often had a flippant answer for anyone who struck him as being too serious. It was just plain fun. Unfortunately he wasn't showing any signs of being able to give as good as he got.

"That isn't funny, Vine," he told her sternly.

"The hell it isn't!" she gasped out before dissolving in laughter. She might have managed to keep a straight face, but his stony features only set her off anew. Finally she took a deep breath and, refusing to look him in the eye for fear of losing control yet again, told him pointedly, "And you would think so too if our situations were reversed. Admit it."

His brow creased for a moment and Oceanvine thought he was about to deliver a blistering lecture on personal safety, but instead he replied, "You're right, but that's different."

"In what way?" she asked challengingly.

He held his tongue. He wanted to speak about those dangers that she as a woman might suffer that he would not, but that was unlikely in Querna. It was not that there was no rape in Granom, but as a human she would not be desirable to most Granomish men. Those few with such exotic tastes would most likely be living in Emmine already.

Then he knew what was truly different about the situation. He wasn't the one in danger. Instead it was this young woman that he cared for. In that moment he glimpsed into the true depths of his feelings for her, but still he kept his silence. He was twenty years her senior; old enough, in theory, to be her father. No need to make a complete fool of himself by expressing feelings he was certain she would never return.

He sipped at the lukewarm coffee he had drawn en route to the table. Now when had it gotten so cold? Glancing over the rim of the cup, he saw Oceanvine still waiting for an answer. He shrugged and gave her what he thought of as his most charming grin. She took the hint and let the matter drop.

"Actually, I didn't see any women on the streets last night," she told him. "Was that unusual?"

"Maybe not," he conceded. "It was after midnight, after all. I imagine there weren't a lot of men out either." She shook her head, confirming his suspicions. "Then any girl who hadn't turned a trick or two by then wasn't likely to after that."

"Prostitutes keep hours?"

"In a way," he replied. "They'll only work as long as they have a chance of finding a customer. If there's

no one else out, they won't be either."

"That makes sense," she agreed. "The only men I saw were too drunk to know what island they were on."

"That makes it all the more dangerous."

"Why?"

"There are always a few people out there willing to roll the drunks and a defenseless young woman would have been fair game as well. Ask Candle if you don't believe me. He lived on the streets for a while."

"I am hardly defenseless," she asserted.

"Oh? And what would you do if someone sneaked up and hit you from behind?"

She had no answer to that, so she changed the subject, "So what did you learn last night?"

"Not a lot," he replied. "I ran into Geraint and we went to get a drink."

"Very investigative," she told him sarcastically.

"We made it so," he replied with dignity and went on to summarize what he learned.

"So none of the missing hookers had, uh, agents?"

"They are usually called pimps," he corrected her, "and at least that's what the girl in the bar said. None of the others there seemed overly concerned."

"So there's probably some truth to it."

"Not necessarily. It might well have been her pimp that started that story just to keep her in line. Vine, prostitution is often more than just trading sex for money. Those pimps often keep some sort of hold on their girls and they live in a form of slavery."

"That's a sure death sentence," she replied naively.

"Only if caught, and the courts tend to only see the women, not the pimps. Besides these women were being held far more firmly than usual. Remember what Elewys told us in Keesport?"

"The Hook?"

He nodded grimly. "Geraint spotted it. He knows all the signs."

"Can we do something about it? And does this relate to the killings?"

"I've thought up a few twists. The only way we know to truly unHook someone is Geraint's technique, and that's a long, laborious, and intimate process, but there might be a way to reverse the flow of the spell and Hook the pimps to their girls rather than the other way around. It would be justice of a sort, but I'm not sure what side-effects there might be. Does it relate? That we don't know at all. There's no

reason that there can't be two rogues running around town."

"That's a comforting thought. The last time I heard of there being more than one rogue in any one place was over three centuries ago."

"And that was an entire cult of demon worshipers," Silverwind replied distastefully. "I don't think that's the case here. The signs are all wrong."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember what we had to deal with in North Horalia. The killings were all accompanied by the Bond of Aritos and the beasts were found in a pattern that formed another Bond. These killings are gruesome enough, but they're not ritualistic in nature, and that's a requirement in raising a demon. And we both know there isn't one already abroad. Demons aren't known for subtlety. Besides, I thought we already discounted that possibility."

"We did and I agree. We're not facing a demon. It's an ugly case, Silverwind," she concluded sadly.

"There aren't a lot of pretty ones in forensic magic, but I know what you mean. North Horalia was clean and wholesome in comparison."

"Yeah. I'd expect a demon to be evil, but people? Makes it seem worse that way."

"You want out, Vine? I can probably handle this on my own if I have to, and you have your exam to occupy you."

"I can take it," she replied firmly, "and it helps to have a real danger to face. If I can't get into the University, there's always Merinne or Randona."

"I wondered how long it would take you to figure that out," he replied lightly. "Well, I'm going to take a walk around the palace walls. See you at the meeting."

The palace was larger than he guessed and by the time he was half way around the top of the perimeter wall a young page came running up to him to let him know that his guests were waiting for him.

"Maybe tomorrow," he mused before following the page back into the Castle.

## Fifteen

Silverwind chose not to hold his meeting in the observatory. It was a beautiful room with an even more beautiful view, but it was just too distracting. During the last meeting, he had noticed that many of the attenders spent the time when they weren't actually reporting staring out the windows. That was fine for briefing him and Oceanvine, but from here on he wanted everyone to be active participants.

He entered the small dining room to find the others sitting silently. Most of them were pointedly ignoring the others.

Now doesn't this bode well for teamwork? he thought sourly, then aloud, "Good morning, gentlemen." Good thing that term no longer applies strictly to the gentry or I'd have them bickering already. "So good of you to come." At least those of you who did. Of the department chiefs, only Sir Edus, the chief of police, had shown up with the three detectives he had assigned to the case. Klim was the only representative from the Prosecutor's office and Snowfall had arrived with Sir Kharald of Palsondir, an older Granom who headed up the investigation for the RBI. Silverwind gestured to them to remain seated as he made his way to the head of the table between Oceanvine and Geraint. All in all, the meeting was smaller than he had expected and there were empty places for Lords Natan and Miklos as well as Master Sandstone. Silverwind made a note to continue having those places set. Maybe the hint that they ought to be present would get back to them.

"Did you hold up breakfast, Oceanvine?" he asked.

"It should be here in a few minutes," she replied noting that he had not used the detested nickname for a change. Strangely, she missed it. It made the occasion seem all the more serious, not that this was a great party.

"Good. Then let's get started. Gentlemen, Oceanvine and I have only been here a few days, but I feel we are ready to come to a few conclusions concerning this case."

"So soon?" Snowfall blurted out.

"Impossible!" Sir Edus exclaimed at nearly the same time. "We have been working on this for months. How can you claim to have the case solved already?"

"I never said we'd found the murderer," Silverwind replied, the personification of infuriating calmness. "I said we've come to some conclusions. Unfortunately the conclusions are in regards to why you haven't managed to solve this on your own yet."

"Oh? And why, my Lord Marquess," Sir Edus demanded, formally indignant, "have we not solved this case?"

"Oh, a lot of little reasons but they all boil down to one big one; none of you seem to want to talk to each other, and that, Sir Edus, is why we are all here this morning. From now on we are going to meet here every morning until we either find the killer or this investigation is closed. Do I make myself clear? Good." As he spoke several servants entered the room with breakfast. Silverwind had been tempted to have them serve extremely rare steak and then go on talking about mutilated bodies, but had relented, realizing that the average Granom would not make the connection between a bloody slab of meat and a dead person. Just as well, he thought to himself, since I'd have only risked making Geraint and Oceanvine ill.

"Now, let's get down to business," he continued. "I want a quick update from each of you." There followed a long period of protests that quieted down a bit when breakfast was served. Eventually each man gave a summary of what he knew about the case. To Silverwind's dismay there was nothing that he didn't already know, so after they had finished, he related what he had learned since arriving, then he seemed to change the subject. "Gentlemen, have you ever heard of the Hook? Snowfall? You looked startled there for a moment. Anything you care to tell us?"

"I've heard rumors," the Granomish mage replied quietly, "nothing more. I always thought they were just stories."



"Not hardly. The problem crops up from time to time, although mostly in the urban areas of Emmine. Master Windchime, would you care to enlighten us?" Geraint had agreed to the use of his mage name when Silverwind convinced him that it would save them time and trouble in establishing his bona fides. None of those present had heard of Geraint the merchant, but all had heard the name Windchime. Thanks to a long series of penny-dreadfuls that name was as famous as Silverwind's own, although those stories had often painted him more as sidekick than the full partner to the wizard that Windchime was.

Silverwind's former partner cleared his throat and began to speak. "The Hook, gentlemen. It's a relatively low-level coercion spell, not completely unlike those used in the arrest and transportation of criminals - any senior journeyman could cast it if he knew how, but only the most deranged or desperate magician would ever dare - however, the results are way out of proportion to the effort put into the spell."

"Is that possible?" one of Sir Edus' men asked. "I was never good enough to get into the degree program in the College of Magic, but I was taught that the power of a spell was directly dependant on the amount of energy and control put into it by the mage."

"Strictly speaking, that is true," Geraint agreed, "but this nasty piece of black magic works directly on the mind rather than the body of the victim, so that after a while the poor soul subjected to the spell actually helps in his or her own enslavement. The two major components of the spell are the subject, or the slave if you would rather, and the slave master. The slaves are bound magically to the master through a thread of magical energy we call a string. The slave is the abject property of the slave master and has no choice but to do whatever is commanded regardless of his or her own desires, and believe me, gentlemen, the victim knows exactly what has happened, but is powerless to do anything about it. The life of a victim is an absolute horror. The master, on the other hand, has it all including the power to snuff out the lives of the slaves. All he has to do is 'cut the string'. By that I mean he has the power to release the victim if it so pleases him, but the entirety of the slave's will has been tied up in the string so that, when released, the victim loses all will to live and almost always dies within minutes."

"Master Windchime," Klim asked, raising his hand for attention, "the slave master; is he always the mage who cast the spell?"

"Not at all, in fact, it very rarely is, and don't be fooled by my use of conventional Granomish speech. The master can be either male or female as can the slaves. The first time the spell was used was about twenty years ago in eastern Emmine where a large group of men were Hooked and put to work in a secret gold mine. It took a long time to track them down, but eventually the Army found the small island where all the men were disappearing and the gold was coming from. By the time they landed there, however, the slaves had been dead for an hour and the slave master, trapped in the mine, took her own life. They never found the mage who cast the spell. Whoever it was lived long enough to teach someone else how to do it."

"There is still something I don't understand about the Hook, my Lord," Klim continued. "You say the spell robs its victims of their will. Wouldn't that make them act rather listless and therefore easy to spot?"

"It makes them act in whatever way the master wants them to act," Geraint replied. "They have to obey the master's commands. If they resist he can yank their string. Sorry that's the way the Hook users put it. The master, even without being a mage, can use the spell to manipulate the actions of the slave. He can use it to inflict pain or pleasure or merely to blot out a victim's willfulness. The thing to remember is that a slave who is pliable but can still think, at least along certain lines, is far more useful than one who has to be led through a task one step at a time. Cleverly applied pain and pleasure can usually break a slave adequately, although induced amnesia is quite common as well."

"However," Geraint went on, "the signs are quite easy to spot to one with a trained eye. The first visual sign of Hook addiction is a glazing of the eyes."

"That's also a common sign of drug use," Sir Edus pointed out, "and most prostitutes, in Querna at least, are addicts."

"Perhaps, but the use of drugs doesn't produce a spell signature, and the Hook most certainly does."

"This is all very interesting, my Lord," Sir Kharald commented, "but what does it have to do with the missing and dead women?"

"Maybe nothing," Geraint admitted, "but I doubt that. After a preliminary investigation, Wizard Silverwind and I estimate that at least half the prostitutes in Querna are on the Hook. Add that to the fact that most, if not all, the missing women are prostitutes and you have a possible connection that needs to be investigated."

"Not to mention," Silverwind added, "the fact that the presence of the Hook in Querna is a serious enough matter all by itself."

"True," Geraint agreed quickly, not to be upstaged by his old friend. "But there's more. Yesterday afternoon we got word that another one of the victims had been found. Silverwind and I rushed to examine the body. Along with the previously stated autopsy results, we found traces of a spell similar to the Hook."

Silverwind heard a soft cough coming from his right.

"You've been holding out on me," Oceanvine accused softly.

"Just slipped my mind when we got off on a tangent," the wizard whispered his explanation. "Sorry about that." Then he spoke louder, turning toward Snowfall, "That was your mystery spell, journeyman. By the way, our examination did not destroy the spell traces like yours did. If you like we'll be glad to show you the spells we used. They aren't particularly difficult," he added scathingly. Snowfall, at least, had the grace to wince at the reprimand, but he didn't show the wit to ask the question he should have before Klim beat him to it.

"You say the spell traces are similar to the Hook, but not the same?"

"Not quite," Geraint answered after glancing at Silverwind. "The traces tell us a lot about the spell, but they are only traces and we can only read so much about the nature of the spell that left them. The body of the woman we examined revealed traces of having been subjected to a coercion spell that had directly affected the workings of her brain. The Hook starts with the brain, but once completely set spreads out and affects the entire body. This spell never had the all-inclusive grip of the Hook."

"So," Sir Edus concluded, "on the one hand we have a rogue mage who casts this Hook spell for the local pimps and maybe the madames as well, although that's my own addition, and on the other we have a murderer who is probably a magician, but may only have one for a partner."

"The possibility of more than one involved in the killings hadn't occurred to me," Silverwind admitted. "Do you have evidence of that?"

"None at all," Edus replied in a smug imitation of the wizard, "but since we are trying to cover all the possibilities, I thought I might as well point that one out." Silverwind nodded approval. "Anyway, we have no proof that these two problems are connected."

"I plan to look into that tomorrow morning," Geraint replied.

"How?" Snowfall asked, causing Silverwind and Oceanvine to share a startled glance. The technique Geraint began to explain was advanced, but the theory was taught to every apprentice.

"I'll study the spell signatures. My senior project at Randona involved them, so I'm fairly good at it."

"What are spell signatures?" one of Sir Edus's men asked.

"Magic is accomplished by directing the flow of a certain type of energy."

"Is it like electricity?" the man asked.

"Electricity?" Geraint asked, awash to the term. He looked to Silverwind and Oceanvine who shrugged as one in reply.

"I learned about it last while on another case, involving the death of a gentleman inventor in the Edgehill neighborhood. According to his notes, he was working on harnessing the power of lightning, which was sometimes called electricity. Something went wrong and he sent a large surge of the energy through his own body, killing him instantly by stopping his heart. I understand that there are several men at the University studying his notes now for safer practical uses."

"He tried to harness lightning?" Oceanvine asked, awestruck at the possibility. "Is that possible?" she asked Silverwind.

"If you know what you're doing. Like any other magic, I suppose."

Oh, this wasn't magic," the police lieutenant told them. "It was done with wires, metal plates, acid, and other mechanical means. The boffins at University tell me the wires should have been insulated to contain the energy, but they were bare and when one touched him, the energy went right through him."

"I don't imagine there was much of him left," Silverwind commented dryly, "after digesting a bolt of lightning."

"Actually, the charge wasn't all that much, just a few minor burns on one arm. We almost missed them."

"We're getting off the subject," Edus complained.

"Probably," Geraint agreed. "In answer to your question, I can only say, 'maybe.' Lightning does seem to flow and so does magic, but lightning is a rather destructive force, although I suppose it might be possible to make such power useful, but magic is decidedly neutral until consciously directed. It's just there, and then after you're done using it, it eventually returns to the neutral state."

"Of course," Oceanvine added, "you can set up a loop in which the energy will flow continuously even after releasing conscious control. That's how we set a more permanent spell."

"Exactly," Geraint agreed. "Anyway, the process of using magic sets up a flow pattern as directed by the

mind of the mage. That pattern, unless locked into a loop will eventually degenerate, leaving traces that a trained observer can interpret, reconstructing the original spell to one degree or another. However, each mind is different and prone to set a spell pattern in a characteristic manner. Basic spell patterns are the same, but there are an infinite amount of minor, insignificant variants to any spell. Insignificant, that is, to the operation of the spell itself. However, no two mages can set a spell in precisely the same way. Those insignificant differences are called spell signatures."

"And by studying those signatures you can determine who cast the spells?"

"Maybe. After years of partnership, I can spot one of Silverwind's spells in a second, but more to the point I can determine whether the mage who set the Hooks is the same as the killer we're hunting. As I said, I'll start in on that tomorrow."

"Why not today?" Sir Edus asked impatiently.

"All this caught me in the middle of some personal business and rather than leave it all hanging I want to take the day to clear it away so I won't have it on my mind while working. Trust me, I'll work better that way."

Edus nodded. It was reasonable.

"We learned something else yesterday," Silverwind announced after a pause. "There seems to be a widely held belief that the missing or murdered hookers were all independents; they didn't work for a pimp or a madame. Anyone else heard that?" Head shakes all around.

"That's news to me," Sir Edus vocalized the others' thoughts. "May I inquire where you heard it."

"There were several girls at the Red Bear yesterday who all told us the same story."

"And you believed the tales of a bunch of ignorant whores?"

"Careful, Sir Edus," Geraint laughed. "Your cultural prejudices are showing."

"Actually," Silverwind cut in before the Chief of police could frame a retort, "We're not sure whether we can believe them or not, but it is another possible lead. As I've already discussed with my associates, the story could well be one their pimp came up with to keep them in line. Having considered that, however, I doubt it now; the Hook keeps its victims in line well enough on its own. Any further questions or observations? No? All right, let's enjoy what's left of breakfast and I'll see you all again tomorrow morning."

Sixteen

Oceanvine spent the better part of the day in the palace library alternating between cramming for her impending exam and breathing fire over having been left behind just when the interesting phase of the investigation was beginning. Silverwind had taken Geraint with him on a tour of the sites where the bodies had been found and Oceanvine's jealousy for the wizard's old partner reasserted itself. That bothered her most of all since she thought she had banished that particular demon months ago.

The library, which on first discovery was invaluable to her preparations, only ranked third in her preferences of places to be at the moment. Unable to accompany Silverwind, she had hoped to check out the library of the University. As an accepted candidate for the entrance exams, or so she had learned while at the Women's Academy she had free access to the University's collection; a point no one else had bothered to tell her.

However Silverwind had to squash that idea as well. After Candle's abortive foray into the world of translocation they had decided that it might be best for one of them to stay in the palace if at all possible. Oceanvine, with her need to study, was elected.

It was almost noon before she finally settled down enough to get any real work done and she decided to ignore her stomach's protests of her shocking disregard for its comfort. She was taking notes from one of the driest tomes on Wizard Bloodstone's Classification Table of Spell Elements, recognized by most historians as the first major work of modern magic, when Candle, looking much better than he had earlier, wandered in to find her.

"Candle," she asked, "how are you feeling?"

"Bored," he replied instantly. "Do you have any idea what I've been through?" She stared at him for a moment. The boy's biggest problem since he had fallen ill was in sleeping to avoid the boredom between meals he had trouble keeping down. To think he had been through a lot was ludicrous and her laughter shortly told him she thought so. "It's not funny!" he insisted.

She told him what she and Silverwind had been up to, thinking, That ought to shut the little monster up .

"So you haven't done much either," he concluded.

"We've made progress," she replied much too defensively, but he wasn't buying. "If it wasn't a difficult problem, we would never have been summoned to handle it ourselves."

"We're the best," Candle replied with adolescent confidence.

"Well," she hedged, "Silverwind is considered the best and I suppose that, as his team, part of that reputation rubs off on us, but it's not polite to say it ourselves. In the meantime, most of the work is being done by Silverwind and Geraint."

"Oh," he nodded, "no wonder you're so touchy."

"Excuse me?"

"Come on!" the boy chided her. "Ever since I walked in, you've been sitting at attention. You're wound up so tight, I'm surprised you don't snap." She had no answer to that, so he changed the subject. "Have you eaten lunch? Me neither. Let's go."

"Candle, I have an exam the day after tomorrow," she protested.

"Don't worry," he replied easily in unconscious imitation of Silverwind, "You'll still have it whether you eat today or not." Reluctantly, she let him lead her toward the kitchen. They were almost there when they were nearly run over by Prince Zakhar.

"Lady Oceanvine," he gasped out breathlessly, betraying the fact that he had been running, "do you know where I might find Marquess Silverwind?"

"Not really. He's out surveying the sites where bodies have been found. Why? Has something come up?"

"Haven't you heard?"

"Heard what? I've been breathing library dust all day. Candle's just convinced me I should eat."

"All over the city." He paused to catch his breath. "Women, prostitutes every one of them, are dying. It's like some great plague has suddenly infected the lot of them. They lie on the ground or floor, whatever, twitching in agony for an hour or more before finally dying."

"Their strings have been cut," Oceanvine concluded, horrified at the prospect. "How many?"

"Strings?" Zak asked.

"How many are dead or dying?" she repeated emphatically.

"Uh, at least two hundred women, at least that's Sir Edus' estimate."

"My gods! So much for lunch," she muttered. "Candle, you go on to the kitchen. I'll see you when I get back."

"Oh, no you don't," he complained. "I'm coming with you."

"Not today, Candle. You're just up out of bed. Give it another day or two before going out."

"And what am I supposed to do here?" he demanded.

"Continue your lessons," she suggested. "You've days to catch up on."

"Hm, let's see," Candle replied deviously. "Silverwind was about to teach me how to make fire. I suppose he'd want me to figure it out for myself just like floating rocks, and lock picking, and that water spell I worked out the other day. Hey! How hard can fire be?"

"Are you done yet?" Oceanvine asked, not fooled for a second.

"I suppose," he sulked back at her.

"Good. Now put on a heavy over-tunic and a woolen coat and I'll let you come with me."

"You will?"

"Yes. Now that you've thought all that up, I'd hate to return only to find that you've decided to form a volcano in the middle of the palace in the hopes of making a small fire." Candle rushed off.

"You said you hadn't eaten yet?" Zak asked.

"Too busy studying."

"Good," Zak replied. Oceanvine raised an eyebrow and he explained, "You've been eating most of your meals in, but the kitchen is not truly representative of regional Granomish food."

"Silverwind is the real gourmet of the team," Oceanvine noted, "but you've managed to peak my interest. What sort of cuisine are you planning to initiate me in?"

"That all depends. Do you prefer mild or spicy foods?"

"I prefer my food to be flavorful," she replied. "I enjoy spicy foods, but can appreciate mild flavors as long as you don't equate mild with bland."

"Fair enough. There's a small 'hole-in-the-wall' sort of place that does Ahlernese food not too far from where we'll be. Perhaps after you finish with your business we can have a late lunch."

"I may not feel much like eating afterward," she warned him.

"Then we'll go another time," he told her with a shrug.

Candle soon rejoined them, bringing a heavy woolen cloak for Oceanvine. She was pleasantly surprised by his thoughtfulness and then equally confused when he insisted on sitting between her and Zak in the cabriolet a few minutes later as though trying to put a wall between them. The cloak she realized was warm but hung over her shoulders shapelessly. Was he actually trying to protect her from Prince Zakhar? How silly. There could never be anything but friendship between them. She could never become romantically involved with a non-magician. Now Silverwind; she was hopelessly in love with him and had been for nearly as long as she had known him, but in spite of what she thought had been rather blatant hints, he never seemed to notice. Even so, she resented Candle's attempt to keep Zak at a distance from her, so she spent the short trip asking interested questions about Ahlernese cuisine.

There were several members of the Querna City Police Force blocking the way into a wide, roofed-over alley, their archaic-styled uniforms forming a dark gray barrier across the normally open breezeway. They were unwilling to let either Oceanvine or Prince Zakhar beyond the gray wall of wool, but one of the lieutenants, Toska of Farmist by name, who had attended the morning meeting was there and quickly allowed both to pass. Candle, however, was left waiting in the cab at Toska's insistence. Oceanvine had wanted to show him some basic diagnostic spells that he could use if Silverwind decided to send him out to gather information like he had in North Horalia, but that would have to wait.

Unlike many breezeways and alleys in Querna, this one was not the model of cleanliness that Oceanvine had come to expect, but then until now she had not spent much time in this, the seedier part of town. Lieutenant Toska and his men were stepping carefully around reeking piles of garbage and over small puddles and rivulets of unwholesome-looking liquid. One man was working with a pad of paper, making sketches of something at the breezeway's far end, while another was using a large chunk of natural chalk to draw on the pavement.

"It's not pretty back there," Toska warned Oceanvine.

"I'm a big girl," she maintained grimly. "I can take anything you can."

"Of course, my Lady," the lieutenant agreed quickly. Oceanvine stared at him a moment, unable to tell whether he was patronizing her, but decided that he was not. He had been suitably impressed by the wizard's high opinion of this human woman and was more concerned with getting the job done, than about who actually did it. "This way, please."

Oceanvine decided that her imagination must be more developed than necessary. The sight at the dead end of the alley was far less upsetting than the visions that had been running through her mind. There, lying amid the refuse were the cool and stiffening bodies of ten or more Granomish women. Their clothing, at least in Granomish society obviously marked them as prostitutes. A quick check revealed the cause of death.

"They were Hooked," Oceanvine reported promptly and emotionlessly. "At least I think they were; the spell seems to have degenerated rapidly leaving very few traces. Even those few are disappearing as I watch. Whoever the bastard was, he cut their strings. They were probably dead in under an hour. Then it was just a matter of dumping the bodies."

"Is there a possibility that they got here under their own power?" Toska asked. "There's no sign of their being dragged here or pushed, just a lot of normal footprints as though they calmly walked into the alley and then died. In fact, we found no fresh prints leaving the alley, except for those left by the boys who found them here."

"No doubt their master commanded them to come here before cutting the string," she replied, disgusted at the cold-blooded manner in which the poor women were slaughtered. "Have you put a call out for Silverwind and Windchime?" Toska nodded. "Good. Silverwind has more power at his disposal than any three mages and Master Windchime has more experience with this particular spell than I ever want to have."

"I also asked Master Sandstone and his assistant to attend, but they don't always show up at the actual scene. They seem to prefer seeing the bodies after they've been cleaned up and moved to the morgue."

"Just as well," Oceanvine replied. "I'm beginning to have some real doubts about those two. What about the Prosecutor's office?"

"They work with us, mostly using our reports to build a case on."

"That makes a certain amount of sense. It's bad enough we have the RBI and the police tripping over each other." Toska nodded agreement. "And now Silverwind, Windchime and I make a third investigation."

"You're different," Toska told her.

"How so?"

"As foreigners you are a neutral party to Granom's politics. As such your investigation is acting as a cohesive force making us all work together rather than at the usual cross purposes we find ourselves at."

"Really? I'm surprised to hear that. So far I thought all the local authorities resented our presence here."

"They do, or at least the bosses all do. Everyone wants the credit for solving this case and if you and Wizard Silverwind do your jobs, then they'll all look bad."

"But you don't feel that way?"

"I'm one of those rare idealists," Toska admitted. "I just want to see this bastard caught, tried, and executed, although I'm not too particular about the order we do it in. A cop's job is difficult enough in



normal times, but when we have a serial killer on the loose, I'll take any qualified help I can get."

"Admirable," Zak commented for the first time since entering the alley.

"Practical, your Highness. All modesty aside, I'm very good at my job. So good that I know when I do and don't need help. This time we're all so far out of our element that I welcome Lord Silverwind and his team."

"But don't you want a promotion? I would imagine that most lieutenants would want the kick up to captain."

"As I said, I'm good. I'll make captain in good time, and I'd rather have a reputation for self-discipline and logic when I get it. Very few show-offs and grandstanders ever get that far anyway." Zak nodded.

"If someone has a spare pad of paper," Oceanvine changed the subject, "I'll write down as much as I can before we lose whatever evidence we have here." Toska reached into his coat and pulled out a small, leather-bound notebook and a pencil and handed it to her. She began writing furiously. A few minutes later, she was abruptly interrupted by a soft groaning sound that seemed to come from underneath some of the other bodies.

She rushed toward the source of the sound and with Zak's and Toska's help quickly uncovered another woman who had gone unnoticed previously. Even more amazing, she was still alive.

Oceanvine, heedless of the condition of the breezeway's surface, quickly sank to the ground in a cross-legged position and closed her eyes. Quickly she ran through the procedure that would put her into the self-hypnotic state she would need for the required control for what she might have to do. Through her mind's eye she studied the still-living woman.

All living creatures had an aura, she had learned early on in her studies, but they were often hard to detect to all but the most accomplished mage. The dying woman's aura was little more than a thin, transparent film that wrapped her body. It was almost completely sublimated by the overlying aura of a potent spell that Oceanvine identified as the Hook.

Nobody knew why some people were more or less resistant to magic than others or, in a few rare cases, completely magic proof - unaffected by any spell. Still rarer were those who were magic-null and were capable of blocking the efforts of a mage if they stood in close enough proximity. Whatever the reason, however, the enchantment that held this particular victim in thrall was apparently falling apart at a much slower rate than it did on the others.

As she watched, Oceanvine detected a hair-thin strand of magical energy that whipped its way back and forth randomly. It was growing gradually shorter and now stretched out only a foot away from the woman's body. Quite literally, this was what mages referred to as a string; the tie between two people bound together by a common spell. Candle and Silverwind shared just such a string although the bond between them as student and teacher was far more subtle and benevolent, limited to symbiotic properties. The Hook, on the other hand was a parasite and the bond was entirely one way.

At first Oceanvine did nothing, unsure of what she should do. The loose string before her grew shorter and shorter and the woman it was attached to became more agitated, obviously enduring increasing amounts of pain. With sudden insight, the young mage realized that when the string had contracted entirely, the woman would die. A vision of Elewys, the kindly, gentle wife of Geraint who had treated Oceanvine so well when she was last in Keesport flashed across her mind and she realized that her friend

had once been in this situation.

Oceanvine acted. She mentally reached forth and grabbed on to the woman's rapidly shrinking string intending only to stretch it. Instead as her controlled magical energies made contact with the remnants of the Hook spell, the string fastened on to her, giving the dying woman a much-needed anchor in the magic-spawned storm that assaulted her being.

The woman opened a pair of deep brown eyes and stared into Oceanvine's face. There was a look of shock on the whore's face at first that soon relaxed as she gazed at the unfamiliar blond-haired, blue-eyed, human woman before her. They held each other's gaze for a long moment and then the Granomish woman sank into a welcome oblivion of unconsciousness.

"Is she dead?" someone asked. Oceanvine thought it was Lieutenant Toska.

She replied without looking up, "No, just passed out, or asleep maybe. I'm really not sure myself, but she's out of danger for now."

"Then you found a way to cure the Hook?"

"No. I did the next best thing and took the place of the master who cut her string. Technically, she is my slave now and will be until Geraint can show me how to release her safely." She looked up and discovered that she had been talking to Zak, although Toska stood right beside him. "The bond gives me knowledge of her condition that I might not otherwise have, however. We'll need to move her to a hospital. Her pimp had been slowly starving her to death."

"Why would he do that?" Zak asked.

"Common practice," Toska replied. "Granomen are fairly thick-boned compared to the other people of Maiyim, but when thinned by starvation the girls can better emulate human and Orenta women. It makes them seem more exotic and many Granomish men find that attractive. Damned if I know why," he concluded.

"She also has a few minor diseases and a sickening large area of bruising. Nothing fatal but they should be looked after. I don't think the bruises were all gained at the same time. If this woman was able to resist the termination of the Hook as long as she did, she may have had some resistance to the spell itself. No doubt her pimp beat her to keep her in line."

"Or just for the fun of it," Toska amended. "Anyone capable of enslavement is probably capable of other perversions. I'll have her put under guard in Querna Charity."

"Oh, one more thing," Oceanvine requested. "I don't want anyone else to know where she is. Just in case."

"That will be hard," Toska replied. "TheCharityHospital's records are public."

"Then take her to the palace," Zak suggested.

"You're not serious! A common whore in the palace?"

"Why not? The noblewomen can probably fend off the competition." He paused to grin slightly, letting Toska know he was making a joke. One in very poor taste, but a joke nonetheless. "We can let the

Royal Guards protect her, their Majesties' own physician can attend her, and there are several empty suites in the same wing that Oceanvine is staying in. Even if everyone knows she's in the palace, no one will know for certain exactly where."

## Seventeen

As usual, Silverwind found Oceanvine two mornings later with her pretty nose deep in a book about higher magical theory at the same small kitchen table. Once more he negotiated his way across the early morning traffic in the large palace kitchen, grabbed a cup of coffee and several pastries, and sat down across from her.

She looked up and saw the pastry and shook her head slightly, saying, "No thank you. I'm not hungry. Today's the day, you know."

"I know," he agreed, "but try to eat one or two anyway. You'll need the energy later and it's the last chance you'll have until the exam is over. Besides, you should try to relax. Anything you don't know now, you're not likely to find out in the next hour or so."

"You never know," she countered. "They might ask me something about Quicksand's Counter-rotational Theory of Spell Dynamics." She pointed at the book in front of her.

"Whose what of which?" the wizard asked. "Never heard of it and the odds are that neither have they. Vine, you're about to take a general entrance exam, they can just as easily ask you to define an E flat major chord, discuss Roabawā's Principals of Thermodynamics, or refute Lord Ellis Bellman's Theory of Evolution."

"I hadn't thought of that," she admitted, panic-stricken. "I'll never have time to study properly. Why didn't you warn me?"

"I tried. Doesn't matter anyway. Unless you get a perfect score, the content of your answers won't really make much difference anyway. They'll be more concerned with the way you answer."

"How should I answer questions then?"

"Like they would. Try to convince them that you're really a man who wears a dress. That might help. Most of the faculty at this school have never been out of Granom Archipelago and have had only the most limited experience with humans and elves."

"Orenta," she corrected him.

"Whatever."

"So what do you suggest? That I walk in, spit and scratch my crotch a lot?" She said that with such a straight face that Silverwind couldn't help laughing at the mental image she had just conjured up. A moment later she joined him.

"You could try it. If nothing else, it would be something they've probably never seen. However, just be

cool, dignified, and no matter what happens during the oral part of the exam do not, under any circumstances, challenge them to one of those sophomoric stare-downs you seem to like indulging in."

"I'll do my best," she promised.

"Do that. Now about your clothes..."

"What's wrong with my clothing?" she protested. "It's not like I have a Bellinen bathing suit on. In Emmine this outfit is quite fashionable and I've seen other women wearing similar togs."

"Too feminine. You want to wear something that won't constantly remind them that you're a woman."

"What then? A business suit like you've been wearing?"

"Let's not go too far. That would make them think you're trying to get away with something." Silverwind made a grimace all of a sudden and quickly sipped some of his cooling coffee.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. Just a sore throat. I think I'm catching Candle's cold."

"Terrific."

"I'll live. About your clothes. Go to the Queen's dressmaker, she's usually up this early, and see if you can talk her out of one of those women's blazer-type jackets I saw worn at the party the other night. In a dark color, blue perhaps, they might pass for a feminine form of a business jacket. Wear it with a dark ankle-length skirt and a white blouse. That might work and, if nothing else, will show you tried."

"What a strange combination of clothes. Not my usual style at all," she commented.

"No, you usually wear short pants and parade around Renton as shamelessly as an elf."

"I haven't heard any complaints."

"Not from the men, no, but I used to get complaints from their wives." He laughed remembering those encounters. "I told them that mages tend to be eccentric. They believed that. It's true after all. Then I told them that the more powerful the magician, the more eccentric. After that they were afraid to complain."

"I wondered why the people always tried to avoid me."

"Sure, they were afraid of being turned into the object lesson of a new fairy tale."

"I can't do that," she protested.

"True, but I didn't tell them. You'd better get going if you want to be dressed and on time," he suggested, "And take one more pastry." She grabbed the last piece mumbled some thanks and raced out of the kitchen, scullions parting before her like water before a cabriolet wheel. "Good luck!" he shouted at her receding back. A wave over her shoulder was the only sign she had heard him.

A few minutes later Geraint entered and, over the protesting scowl of the head cook, helped himself to a large tankard of brown ale and a plate of biscuits. Leaving the man muttering about what he would like to

do with royal guests, Geraint walked over to join Silverwind who sat contemplating a cold, half-emptied cup of coffee.

"And what do we have planned for this morning's meeting?" Geraint asked after quaffing down half the tankard just to slake his early morning thirst.

"How can you drink that stuff so early in the morning?" Silverwind asked, oblivious to his friend's question.

"It didn't used to stop you, as I recall. Maybe you've been hanging around Oceanvine too long. She's having an unnatural effect on you."

"I don't remember seeing you drink as much as one drop on Keesport," the wizard countered.

"So Elewys is having the same unnatural effect on me, except I've been away for a while and I'm reverting. The difference is that Oceanvine doesn't want to let you out of her sight."

Silverwind laughed for all of a second and then quickly grew serious, "Do you mean, Vine thinks of us as a married couple?" The idea unsettled him.

"Oceanvine's a realist. She won't think of you as a husband until three days after the binding ceremony."

"You mean at the confirmation."

"Right. Why is the idea that unthinkable?"

"Gods!" Silverwind swore. "I'm old enough to be her father."

"Really? I don't recall you being married when you were twenty. That happened several years later, if you call that affair with Ysemay a marriage. I warned you about her type; attracted to magicians. I was always surprised she went so far as to marry you. They usually just try to sleep with as many magicians as they can."

"Ysemay had those tendencies, but we really loved each other for a while," Silverwind replied, "but if you don't spend enough time together you grow apart. I didn't exactly invite her along to join my hermitage."

"Maybe not, but you did supply her with a more than comfortable living. Look what I found in the palace library." Geraint dropped a small paper-bound book on the table between them.

"'Silverwind Against the League of Evil'," the wizard read the title aloud, "by Astil of Randona. Another of Ysemay's dubious contributions to the world of literature, I see. I don't believe I've seen that particular one before."

"It's new this year. His Majesty has the entire collection. I'm surprised he hasn't asked you to autograph them."

"I'm surprised he hasn't summoned Ysemay to record my glowing exploits in 'Silverwind and the Cardiokiller.' Sounds like it's right up her alley. If she finished the story before we finished the investigation, we'd know what to do next."

"What do we do next?"

"Have another morning meeting. Last I heard another body was found yesterday but two more women are reported missing. Did we ever have a case like this? So many dead and dying people?"

"Rjalkatyp?"

"The Isle of Fire." Silverwind nodded. "All right. There were more casualties in Rjalkatyp, but even Arithan did not give each of his victims such cold-blooded, personal attention."

"No, he just strolled through the town, crushing buildings like so many blades of grass." Geraint blanched and shivered.

"Good gods, man! You make him sound like a giant. He appeared slightly shorter than you as I remember, not like that thing Vine and I faced in Horalia. Now that was a giant!" Then he noticed that Geraint wasn't really listening. "What's wrong? You look awful." His friend had closed his eyes and was trembling while breaking out in a cold sweat.

"Emtos save me," Geraint gasped a few minutes later. "That's the first time in years I've felt the nightmare while awake. Too much magic lately. Maybe I'd better pace myself."

"The only way to banish the nightmare is to confront it."

"So you've said before. Silverwind, I just don't have your strength. I have the patience to wait out an attack, but I just cannot face one head-on."

"Maybe you should take a day or two off."

"I'll be all right. I'll just leave the magic to you for a while. You know, you don't look too good either."

"I seem to have caught Candle's cold. May have to take some time off as well, but it's just coming on. I should be able to hang on through today, then Oceanvine can fill in after her exam."

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Oceanvine showed up precisely on time for the exam in a neatly pressed blazer and skirt, that the Queen's dressmaker assured her was fashionable and properly feminine while showing the correctly serious attitude that the young mage desired to show. The plain gray wool skirt that Silverwind had suggested, however had been replaced by a predominantly wine-red plaid and the blazer was a much lighter gray than Oceanvine had thought would portray seriousness.

"Trust me, dear," the dressmaker, a grandmotherly Granomish woman, had told her. "Granomish perceptions are similar to human ones, I've noticed, but there are differences. A dark blazer would be seen as presumptuous." Oceanvine had nodded and soon rushed off to drop her other clothing back in her room.

She stopped by Candle's room, but he was already up and out somewhere, so grabbing her purse and,

dropping in several pencils, a dip pen with two of the new metal nibs and a small bottle of ink to mix freely with her usual miscellaneous supplies, she rushed off to find a taxi cabriolet.

The University was the same darkly foreboding place it had seemed during her prior visit, even now that the recent warmer weather had encouraged the grass to begin its vernal evolution into a bright green carpet. Here and there she noticed white, purple, and yellow crocuses in bloom, sticking their heads up through the lawn in a festive display, but even these bold dashes of color along with the promise of daffodils springing up from the nearby beds seemed only to accentuate the somber aura of this monument to education.

She raised a few eyebrows by asking for directions to the Department of Magical Studies from a small group of passing students, but they answered quickly and politely enough. One even wished her luck.

The building that housed the Department of Magical Studies stood out as unique even among the eclectic collection that made up the University. It appeared to be a plain granite box with a large circular hole punched out through the center. More curiously, the four-story cube rested on four legs that were realistically carved to resemble the legs and paws of some animal, possibly a wolf. As she moved closer, she saw that the central hole seemed to be enclosed with a single large pane of perfectly clear glass. She learned sometime later that the room was used as a winter laboratory for experimenting with large-area spells.

She climbed the apparently free-standing staircase that led to the building's foyer and after asking directions again, this time from a receptionist, made her way as quickly as she dared without taking the risk of appearing unseemly to her testing room.

The room was almost entirely without character - pale green walls, dark, water-stained wooden floor, a few windows along one wall and a large, black slate chalkboard. In addition there was the expected teacher's desk and about two dozen smaller ones for the students. It looked like almost every other classroom Oceanvine had ever seen.

There was a middle-aged Granom seated at the teacher's desk reading one of the "Silverwind" penny-dreadfuls. His long salt and pepper hair and beard spilled out over his bright red woolen sweater which contrasted sharply with the heavy blue-cloth slacks he wore. It was standard garb for a student, Oceanvine knew, but most faculty members, at least those at Randona, preferred more formal attire at work. This man was a welcome exception.

"Good morning," he greeted her pleasantly enough, looking up from the cheap novel. "You are Oceanvine?"

"Yes sir," she replied cautiously.

"Excellent," he replied with a smile. "I am Master Quartzvein. " He saw Oceanvine start at the name. "Oh, you've heard of my grandfather."

"He first proposed the Unified Theory of Simul-contagion."

"I know." Quartzvein replied, smiling ruefully, "and I've been try to fill his shoes ever since. Well, it's my own fault for choosing to commemorate him with my name. I'm a bit surprised that a human mage has heard of him, however. His theory is not widely accepted even here in Granom. Do they teach it in Randona?"

"They might, but I came across his book in the library of the Wurra Palace. I'm afraid I had some trouble following his arguments in places."

"Don't worry. I still do. The man was a genius, but when writing out his thoughts he had a bad habit of skipping over large sections that he felt should be intuitively understood. Never mind that, however. Now, you are Silverwind's apprentice?"

"Assistant," Oceanvine corrected him, carefully keeping her tone from becoming too sharp. "He usually calls me a partner, but I'll feel a bit more comfortable with that description after I have my master's degree."

"I've always wanted to meet him," Quartzvein said wistfully. "I was working in Farmist when he was at the University last."

"I'm sure he'd be happy to meet you. We're both staying at the palace, but I must warn you, he's nothing like the character in the books."

"I suppose not," Quartzvein shrugged. "The author obviously knows very little about magic, why should he know much about magicians?"

"She."

"Excuse me?"

"The author is a woman writing under a male pseudonym. His ex-wife, I believe, although he's never admitted that directly to me."

"Curious. You would think she would know him well enough to get the character right."

"I don't know. He's just a man, better than most, I think, but still a mere mortal. I really can't imagine him riding to the rescue on dragon-back like one of those stories has him doing. Another warning; when you meet him be prepared to do some heavy drinking."

"He drinks?" Quartzvein seemed shocked. Most mages stayed away from alcoholic beverages. They were too dangerous; either one lost the ability to concentrate on what one was trying to do, or if you were able to cast a spell, the results were entirely random.

"Often, although I haven't seen him get drunk in months. Just thought you should know."

"Ah, yes. Well, we might as well start." He handed her a small folder containing ten, neatly typed sheets of paper. "This is the written portion of the exam. It's only the entrance exam, you realize, so the questions can be about absolutely anything that you might have learned while working toward your journeyman's degree or even earlier. There are one hundred questions and they are all equally weighted. Passing for entrance to the master's program is eighty percent correct, so don't worry too much if you have to skip one or two. Write as much or as little as you think appropriate. Some of these questions only need one or two words to answer, while others you will find could easily be the basis for a wizard's dissertation. Try to stick to the point, however. In most cases the men who constructed this exam had various key phrases in mind. I know I did. So as long as your answers are written in good Granomish and have the right information they should suffice."

"Granomish, not Emmine or Orenta?"



"We are in Granom, and you do seem to speak our language with only a hint of an accent."

"My spelling could stand improvement. Granomish spelling rules are irregular."

"Modern Granomish is a combination of Middle Granomish and early modern Emmine," Quartzvein admitted. "The trick is often in knowing which language a word came from originally. Just do your best. Does it help to know that many Granomen have difficulty spelling too?" She nodded. "All right. Write all your answers in these booklets." He reached into the desk and pulled out six light red pamphlets. The writing on the covers said, "Examination Book" and each contained eight pieces of white paper folded in half and stapled down the center. Handing her the red booklets he continued. "If you need more, just ask. The drawer is full of them." To illustrate, he reached in again and pulled out a large handful, and then released them to fall back inside with a muffled crash. "You have until one hour past noon to finish this section of the exam, at which time the oral portion of the exam will begin. If you want time out for lunch, you'll need to finish early. Most applicants work through, however. Do you need a pencil? Any questions?" Oceanvine shook her head to both questions. "Good luck." With that he picked the penny-dreadful up again and continued reading.

Oceanvine opened the folder and pulled out the first sheet. Her desk was too small to hold every thing, so she co-opted the one next to her to hold extra pencils, red booklets, and the remaining questions. Quartzvein, noticing her movements looked up, saw what she was doing and nodded approvingly, giving her the impression that she had just passed the first test.

Encouraged, she began reading. The first question was a killer. Boiled down, it might have been translated as, "State the history of the world and give three examples." She eventually learned that it was just one of a dozen such questions on the exam. Intimidating as such a question might be, she soon realized that each of them wanted that history as seen from a specialized viewpoint and once she figured out exactly what that perspective was, the answers came easily enough. Most of the questions she found were embarrassingly easy and very often she caught herself smiling as she wrote and twice had to stifle the urge to laugh. Other questions left her nervously sweating. The process seemed to take forever, but finally she finished, having answered every question on the exam.

She put down her pencil and glanced at the clock on the wall to discover that she still had an hour and a half left. Grimly she picked the pencil back up again and began reviewing what she had written. Twice she decided to amend an answer, but the remainder she continued to be comfortable with. She neatly stacked the six red booklets; Master Quartzvein had accurately estimated how many she would need and handed them back to the mage at the desk.

"Already?" he asked, startled. "You still have over an hour to go."

"I've gone over it all twice," she replied, shrugging. "Much more and my eyes will start to cross."

"It's your decision." He took the folder and booklets and stood up. "Do you want something to eat or drink? The cafeteria is serving now and the University is obligated to feed you if you want."

"Silverwind said I wouldn't get the chance to eat."

"I've never known an applicant to finish the written portion of the exam. No doubt, neither has he."

"It wasn't all that hard."

Quartzvein looked at her strangely for a moment before replying, "If you say so." He picked up the exam and her answers and led her out the door. He pointed out the cafeteria building, gave her an engraved metal meal token, and then left her on her own, with the warning to return to the testing room by the time the University's carillonneur finished its noontime concert.

Before she could ask what carillonneur, the campus was filled with the harmonic sound of bells pealing in a brilliant arpeggio. There was a slight pause, now that the instrumentalist ostensibly had the attention of the audience - difficult to determine from inside a closed room at the top of a bell tower - and then music began to issue from the gargoyle-encrusted spire of the administration building. Captivated by the beauty of the music that seemed to contrast so greatly with the oppressive solemnity of the University buildings, Oceanvine made her way to the cafeteria oblivious to the open-mouthed stares she invoked by her presence.

She wasn't really hungry, so she settled for a small pot of tea and a few pieces of short bread that she could sip and eat contemplatively while listening to the carillon.

It's a shame, she thought, it's still too cool to sit outside and listen. To make up for that she found an empty table near a window and allowed herself to stare off into space.

"So, how'd it go?" a male voice broke into her reverie. Startled, she looked up to discover herself surrounded by the young men who had given her directions that morning.

"A cup of tea and a piece of cake so far," she replied.

"We can see that," he countered, pointing at what passed for her lunch. "I meant how did the exam go?"

"So did I. Oh, sorry. That's an Emmine expression, loosely translated. It's been fairly easy so far. Oh, a few hard questions, but nothing I couldn't handle. Got the Orals this afternoon."

"Orals? I thought only post-graduate candidates had to take oral entrance exams."

"That's right," she replied. "I got my journeyman's degree at Randona."

"You're already a mage? I didn't think there were any female magicians, except witches in the old fairy tales, but they don't really count, do they?" He paused then added the courtesy, "my Lady,"

She shrugged off the title in the same way that Silverwind usually did. "Well, there are more men in the field, but there are at least a dozen women in any graduating class at Randona. I'm told Merinne is the same. Oh, I'm Oceanvine."

"Not here. Never had a women matriculate in Querna. They all go to the Academy. Tymek of Mith," he finally introduced himself, "journeyman candidate in Mechanical Engineering." The others introduced themselves as well. All were engineering students of one ilk or another and totally fascinated by the concept of a female mage. In spite of her dislike for showing off, she allowed them to talk her into "doing a few tricks" and discovered that they were quite satisfied by a demonstration of simple levitation that even the boy, Candle, had mastered by now.

It seemed like no time at all had passed when a particularly florid piece of bell music was followed by five identical, measured tones, each one second long in duration sounded. Then as though that was a mistake, the player began playing an intricate fugue.

"Uh oh," Tymek said, getting up from the table. "That's the signal. Next class starts in five minutes."

"One past noon?" Oceanvine asked. He nodded. "Then I've got to hurry too. Emmine only knows how much they'll penalize me for being late."

Hurriedly, she brought her dishes to a designated collection spot and fidgeted when she lost three minutes waiting in line. Then she fairly ran across the campus and returned to the room just as the final note from the carillon began to drift away on the afternoon air. Already seated in the room were Masters Frostglow and Quartzvein as well as an elderly mage that Oceanvine had not yet met. Only Quartzvein rose as she entered the room breathlessly.

"Cutting it rather fine aren't you?" Frostglow asked harshly before Quartzvein could say anything.

"I'm sorry to have kept you all waiting," Oceanvine replied.

"No need. Actually, you are precisely on time," Quartzvein told her with a pointed look at the Dean of Magical Studies. Oceanvine relaxed a little bit. It was nice to know that there was at least one person on her admission board who, if not a friend, was at least in favor of giving her a fair chance. "You already know Master Frostglow, I believe. This is Wizard Bowsprit." Try as she might, Oceanvine could not recall hearing his name before. There were only a double handful of active wizards on Maiyim and she thought she had at least heard of them all.

"Semi-retired," Bowsprit commented.

"Yes, semi-retired senior faculty member and former Dean of Magical Studies," Quartzvein amplified. "Please have a seat, Miss Oceanvine, and we will begin."

No sooner had she made contact with the seat than Frostglow fired the first question at her. It concerned the Laws of Thermodynamics and wasn't particularly hard, but taken by surprise, both by the suddenness of the question and by the fact that she had expected the oral section to be exclusively on her magical knowledge, she hesitated before answering. When she did begin to answer, she was only half way through the first sentence before Frostglow shook his head suddenly and fired off another question.

For the next three hours the three professors asked her questions about anything and everything, but mostly about advanced magical theory. Many questions, however involved her upbringing and the mages she had studied with. Wizard Bowsprit spent a full quarter hour asking about Master Sunbear, to whom Oceanvine had apprenticed in Medda; who he had studied with and what his specialty was if she knew.

Oceanvine felt she was holding her own most of the time, but every so often one of them would ask something of which she had no knowledge. Frostglow would usually demand that she try to make an educated guess, if she could and gloated blatantly when her answer was off the mark.

By far, the hardest questions, however, came from Bowsprit. They were never on subjects that she was unacquainted with but they were asked in such a way that they provided new insights for her, forcing her to carefully think out her answers before replying.

Frostglow was usually prepared to pounce on her when she didn't have an instant answer, but after the first hour of such tactics Bowsprit lost his patience with the current dean, telling him gruffly, "Shut up! This is my turn to ask the questions, not yours." After that Frostglow was a bit more subdued when the wizard asked questions, but was all the more vindictive when Oceanvine was forced to admit her ignorance.

Finally the ordeal came to an end. Quartzvein informed her that she would be informed of the results of her evaluation in a few days and then the three professors stood and walked toward the door leaving the stunned young mage behind them.

A moment after they had all passed through the door Bowsprit returned and beckoned for Oceanvine to join him. She collected her purse and went to the door.

"So you've been working with Silverwind, have you?" he asked wryly. She nodded. It had come up no less than three times that afternoon. "I remember when he was here," the wizard chuckled. "A troublemaker. A real pain in the ass. Don't imagine that's changed, has it?" Oceanvine shrugged noncommittally. "I suppose you're probably the same."

"I try not to be," she told him.

"Well, stop trying," he advised. "We need a few troublemakers of that sort. Keep the rest of us on our toes. Know what I mean." Oceanvine smiled in spite of herself and the elderly Granom took it for the agreement it was. "Surprised to hear an old troll say that sort of thing, aren't you?"

Oceanvine thought a moment and decided to answer honestly, "A bit."

"Well when you get to be my age, and I'm not telling what that is, mind you, but when you do, there's two ways to go. You can turn into one of those dried up prunes, afraid of even the threat of change, like Frostglow, although he's a few decades ahead of his time. Or you can get bored with the same old thing. When that happens you start to welcome novelty even in a staid old society like this one, or maybe especially in one like this.

"Well, girl. I decided long ago that I didn't want to be a prune. Don't like prunes. Prefer apricots - just as good for you and they're sharper." Oceanvine chuckled softly at the image the metaphor brought to mind. "Give that young up-start my regards, girl," Bowsprit concluded and walked away leaving Oceanvine a warm feeling of hope.

## Eighteen

Silverwind stumbled back into the palace using every ounce of his will to fend off the debilitating effects of his fever. Geraint kept trying to help him, but he brushed off all attempts irritably.

"I told you," Geraint reminded him, "you should have stayed in today. Now you're burning up and so damned stubborn you won't even let me help you back to bed."

"Yes, mother," Silverwind bantered weakly, his voice barely a croaking whisper. "I can put myself to bed."

"Fine," Geraint replied, exasperated. "I'll go get the physician, and don't you start telling me you don't want a physician!" Silverwind stopped and tried to stare his old friend down, but gave up after all of two seconds and began walking again while Geraint just watched him move away. Then when the wizard was out of hearing range he leaned over to one of the door guards and instructed, "Follow him back to his room but at a distance. Don't help him unless he actually passes out along the way."

"Yes, sir," the guard replied and promptly obeyed.

"Damned fool wizards," Geraint grumbled, that having been taken care of, "can stop the sun in the sky if it suits them, but don't have the sense to come in out of the cold when they're sick." Still grumbling, he wandered off in search of the physician. An hour and two tankards of red ale later Oceanvine found him in an only slightly calmer state.

"I've been meaning to ask," she said without preamble on seeing Geraint alone in the small tap room where his Majesty preferred to entertain close friends, "why do you insist on calling that Granomish beverage ale?"

"Excuse me?"

"The ale. I've never been particularly partial to the stuff, but there was a decent brewer on Kern where I grew up. One day I was curious and asked a few questions and the way he described it, the brewing of beer utilizes hops, ale doesn't. Now you made a big deal about buying that shipment of hops to send to Jim-peg for his ale. Shouldn't he be calling it beer?"

Geraint stared at her as though she had just grown a spare head or a superfluous arm. "Well," he replied after rummaging through decades of unused memory, "strictly speaking you're right. Granomish red ale is made with Marga hops and is really a beer. The confusion comes from the differences between our two languages.

"You may have noticed how many Emmine-derived words there are in modern Granomish. Often they are virtually unchanged except for the addition of Granomish case endings. As a matter of fact there are quite a few Granomish and Orentan words in Emmine as well. Takes a professional linguist to keep them all straight.

"Anyway, the Granomish word for beer is *alse*. Sounds pretty close to ale doesn't it. That's what the first humans to visit Granom thought too. Consequently Granomish ales are almost always hopped beer. The Granomish word for ale, by the way, is *samase*. Why? Was that on your exam? How'd it go?"

"Hard to say and, no, it wasn't. I thought the written part was easy enough, but Master Frostglow was all over me during the orals. They said they'd let me know. Do you know a Wizard named Bowsprit? He was on my committee."

"Bowsprit? That old codger! Is he still around? Gran! He was ancient when Silverwind and I were here. How is the old goat?"

"As spry as ever, or at least that's the impression he gives. I never even knew he existed before today. Said to give his regards to Silverwind. Called him a pain in the ass and a young up-start."

"That's his way of showing affection," Geraint explained.

"I got that impression myself. He says he's semi-retired these days."

"He was saying that twenty years ago, too."

"Oh well. Where is the 'young up-start' anyway?"

"I'm right here," Candle said from the doorway. "What did I do now?"

"I wasn't talking about you, Candle," Oceanvine explained and repeated her story about Wizard Bowsprit.

"Silverwind's down with a fever," Geraint told her when she had finished. "I've got the physician up looking at him now. Damned fool doesn't know enough to bundle up if he's going to go outside all day with a cold."

"He usually just uses a spell to heat his clothing to keep him warm."

"He must have forgotten today. Either that or he applied the spell to himself instead. In any case, he's in his room and if I knew some way to keep a wizard confined, I'd use it now."

"I know a way," Oceanvine replied. "It's all part of my thesis. I could make a selectively permeable ward that would pass anything but him."

"He told me he'd found a way through any ward."

"History. He still hasn't figured out my alternating or random current wards, but let's see if he behaves himself. He got sick winter before last and managed to stay in bed most of the time."

"If you say so." Geraint wasn't convinced. "He was never that good when I worked with him."

"Well, as I recall, there was no pressing research at the moment aside from the observation of a meteor shower and that was more my project than his."

"Well," Geraint repeated in a conscious imitation of Oceanvine that elicited a chuckle from Candle, "we'll play it your way for now especially since you're in charge until Silverwind is up again."

"I am?" she asked, shocked at the prospect. "First I've heard of it."

"Silverwind likes surprises."

"He does," she agreed, "but I wonder how much he'd like it if we solved this mystery without him."

"He'd hate that," Geraint laughed. "Ale?" he offered.

"Beer," she corrected him, shaking her head negatively.

"Whatever."

"Is this a private party or can anyone join in?" Prince Zakhar asked, sticking his head in through the door. Oceanvine smiled and Geraint waved him in. He walked directly to the bar and drew a tankard of Granomish ale for himself. Seeing that Oceanvine wasn't drinking yet he filled a glass with the hard cider he, by now, knew she favored and also made Candle a concoction of seltzer and fruit syrup. "By the way," he asked as he prepared the drinks, "have you heard the news?"

"Something to do with the murders?" Oceanvine asked.

"For a change, no. This came in off the Emmine Star just in from Rjalkatyp. Here," he said giving

Oceanvine and Candle their drinks, "you look thirsty."

"What's this?" Candle asked, puzzled.

"Sweet seltzer," Zak replied. "You should like it. I know I did when I was your age."

"Thanks," the boy replied with distracted politeness.

"And thank you for the cider, Zak," Oceanvine added. "Now sit down and tell us about the Isle of Fire."

"Yeah," Geraint agreed. "Anything to get our minds off all these killings. Some happy news might be nice for a change."

"Not sure whether this is happy news or not. I've only heard the bare bones of it myself, but the word my cousin got is that there's been an armed revolt on the Isle of Fire."

"Against their king?" Candle asked.

"The people of the Isle of Fire have no king, boy," Geraint told him. "It's a democratic republic."

"Or was anyway," Zak added.

"What's a democ..." he stumbled over the words.

"Democratic republic, Candle," Oceanvine finished for him. "That means the people choose their own leaders."

"That must be exciting," Candle replied sarcastically with the implication that it would be best viewed from a great distance. "And any time they don't like their choices they can change?"

"That would be, well, unstable. Leaders are elected for set terms and at the ends of those terms can be re-elected or else must step aside for someone else. They have a parliament, like in Emmine and Bellinen, although it's called The Senate in Bellinen."

"It's Congress in Rjalkatyp," Zak added.

"Really?" Oceanvine asked. "All right. And the Congress of the Isle of Fire is presided over by his Democratic Majesty, the President, who serves for a single six year non-renewable term."

"Sounds complicated," Candle opined disdainfully.

"More than you think," Geraint laughed. "She simplified it for you."

"All that's in the past if what the senators who came in on the Emmine Star say is true," Zakhar told them. "They're up in the observatory now, telling Ksaveras all about it. I imagine there will be a big feast in their honor tomorrow night, but for tonight it will be amazing if any of them get out before dawn. We're straying again." He paused to sip his beer and then continued. "The government of the Isle of Fire has been replaced by a - well I guess we can call it a triumvirate - three men sharing the control over the land. The elves used such a system once didn't they?"

"Temporarily, during one of the wars with Granom. Yes. It was meant as a temporary situation and

probably wouldn't have been stable in the long run."

"I doubt this is intended as a temporary set up. The triumvirs have put a death sentence on the entire Congress. They executed the President and Vice-president right off and caught the Supreme Court justices while in session."

"How did those senators who made it here survive?" Geraint asked.

"The court might have been in session, but Congress wasn't. When the military started taking over, the senators sought sanctuary in the Granomish embassy. A few days later they were smuggled aboard the Emmine Star and brought here."

"Are they the only survivors of the former government?" Oceanvine asked.

"Almost. A handful of congressmen made it to the Emmine, Bellinen, and Ellistan consulates as well and there are a few unaccounted for who may be hiding out in the hills."

"There are a lot of hills outside of Rjalkatyp," Geraint commented dryly, "some very dangerous terrain. They may never be heard from again."

"Or they may be along next year to head another revolution," Oceanvine commented.

"Either way," Zak concluded. "I fear our cousins are suffering a fascinating new chapter of history, with all the upheaval that usually entails. The gods only know if and when martial law will be lifted there."

## Nineteen

Oceanvine was decidedly not accustomed to being in charge. It was not that she shied from the responsibility nor that she preferred to follow orders. Oceanvine had a mind of her own and was fully capable of using it in any way she desired. She had just rarely had the opportunity to lead. That inexperience was obvious to those who attended the meeting the next morning - a rapidly shrinking group. Consequently, with everyone else talking about the unheard of developments on the Isle of Fire, she had trouble bringing the discussion to order.

"Publicly executed the entire Presidential family, I understand," Sir Edus was saying to Sir Kharald. "Beheaded them right in the town square."

"Rather messy, what?" Kharald replied, disgustedly fascinated.

"And not a little archaic. At least they didn't shoot them out of a bombard. They have one in the square. I've heard." Both men shivered.

"Whatever for?"

"War memorial, I believe."

"Gentlemen," Oceanvine began.



"I heard that half of Rjalkatyp was burned to the ground," Klim added to the general conversation, "in reprisal for one family who supposedly tried to shelter the President's assistant."

"Try again," Geraint suggested softly to Oceanvine.

"You mean the Vice President?" Master Sandstone asked.

"Gentlemen," Oceanvine tried again. Still no response. A snarl began to form on her lips, but once more Geraint counselled her to patience.

"First I've heard that," Sandstone continued.

"Is it true that Mount Rjal began to erupt at the moment the President was killed?" Klim asked.

"Isn't that more than a little unlikely?" Sir Edus countered.

"'Twould be a sign that the gods, themselves, are displeased."

"The gods told us to handle our own affairs over three millennia ago," Sandstone replied. "I doubt they'd break their silence over this."

"Gentlemen." Oceanvine's call to order went by unheeded yet again and she began to consider slightly more flamboyant methods of getting their attention. She was all the more encouraged when Geraint told her to have fun.

"The overthrow of a legitimate government isn't a big enough matter to you?" Klim asked, astounded.

"Legitimate government," Sandstone mused. "There are times when I wonder whether that isn't a contradiction in terms,"

"Here, here!" Sir Edus cheered.

"Gran!" Klim swore fervently. "The kingdom's being run by a bunch of anarchists!"

"Ah!" Sir Kharald added, mostly just to needle the young assistant prosecutor. "Another contradiction in terms."

Their laughter was brought to an abrupt halt by a blinding flash of lightning followed by an instant clap of thunder. This too they might have ignored, except that the apparent storm was wholly contained within the small dining room. As their eyes cleared, they noticed that the room had darkened almost to black except for a bright white aura that made Oceanvine seem to shine of her own internal light.

"Gentlemen," she said sweetly, as though nothing out of the ordinary had happened, "now that I have your attention, perhaps we can discuss our business. I'm certain that the people of Rjalkatyp can sort out their own problems without our able assistance."

"I don't suppose you could turn the lights back on," one of the men asked meekly. Oceanvine thought it might have been Snowfall. A moment later she terminated the illusion spell she had been holding and the room returned to normal, revealing several palace servants who stood at the door, afraid to enter, with trays of food.

"Better?" she asked then turned to the liveried people at the door. "You may serve breakfast now. Thank you. I notice our numbers seem to be shrinking," she commented as food was placed on the table.

"I have had to reduce the number of detectives on this case," Sir Edus informed her. "Lieutenant Toska is now in full charge of this investigation. I believe this will make for easier and less confused communications with the Prosecutor's office."

"That sounds reasonable," Oceanvine replied. "but where is Lieutenant Toska this morning?"

"He sent word that he would be unable to attend this morning."

"Why not?"

"He has a suspect under continuous surveillance."

"Is that something new?"

"It was discussed yesterday, but not implemented until last evening after the Royal Prosecutor agreed with our conclusions."

"I notice he isn't here this morning either," she observed.

"Lord Miklos was unable to attend this morning," Klim volunteered. "A personal matter involving his wife."

"Nothing serious, I hope."

"Depends on how you see it," the assistant prosecutor replied, smiling. "It seems that somebody broke into their home yesterday afternoon and left Lady Ferike locked up in the wine cellar. She was quite drunk by the time anyone found her. Lord Miklos is personally conducting the investigation on that matter."

"I can understand that. Was there much stolen?"

"Not a thing," Sir Edus answered. "At least that's what they told my officer. There was a little damage, but mostly there was just a few piece of furniture knocked over."

"Strange," Oceanvine commented. "Any chance that connects with our serial killer?"

"Anything is possible," the police chief shrugged, "especially since we know nothing just yet, but for now I am treating it as a separate matter."

"All right. I notice that Lord Natan has yet to join us."

"Lord Natan," Master Sandstone replied stiffly, "is a very busy man. This investigation is just one of many cases under consideration by the bureau at this time."

"That doesn't seem to prevent the bureau's chief forensic mage from attending," Oceanvine replied pointedly. "I imagine you are equally as busy."

"This will probably be my last appearance here as well," Sandstone informed her. "To date we have accomplished very little and as you said I, too, am a very busy man. I believe that Snowfall is adequately capable of handling this case without my supervision." He got up to leave.

"I'm sure Wizard Silverwind would prefer that you stay with us," Geraint pointed out.

"I notice that Silverwind is not with us this morning as well, Master Windchime, and I do not need advice from either of his sidekicks. Good day, gentlemen." He paused to look at Oceanvine for a minute as if to accentuate the fact he did not consider her worthy of his notice and then continued on.

"You gonna take that?" Geraint whispered to Oceanvine.

"Of course, I'll take it," she replied out loud before Sandstone could leave the room. "If Master Sandstone couldn't accomplish anything over the months that passed before we arrived, then I doubt his assistance would be worth anything now." Sandstone stiffened and began to turn around, but Geraint spoke before he could complete the motion.

"Well said," Geraint agreed and applauded loudly. "See you around, Sandy !"

Sandstone said something incoherent and stomped angrily out of hearing.

"Well, well!" Sir Kharald exclaimed, happily digging into the breakfast food before them. "More for the rest of us, what?"

"You don't seem particularly sorry to see Master Sandstone leave," Oceanvine observed. "Don't you have to work with the man?"

"All too often, yes, but we've never been particularly fond of each other. He's buggered up more than one of my investigations."

"Because his additional evidence disproved your own pet theories," Snowfall added accusingly. Kharald glared at Sandstone's assistant only to be met by an empty, humorless laugh.

Oceanvine quickly brought the meeting back to the subject at hand, saying, "I was out of touch for the most part yesterday. Have there been any developments into the investigation of the dead and dying women whose strings were cut?"

"Grisly business, that," Sir Kharald shuddered. "Are you sure you want to discuss it over such a nice breakfast."

"I'm certain I don't," Oceanvine snapped, "but these meetings were not my decision, they were Silverwind's and until he says otherwise, we'll continue. Now can anyone update me?"

"Ah, yes," Sir Edus reported. "In all we found two hundred and thirty-eight bodies, in various parts of town, none of them were particularly well-hidden, but I suppose that wasn't the point. All had been dead for some time, except of course the one you saved."

"There was a survivor?" Snowfall asked incredulously. "Is she still alive?"

Oceanvine closed her eyes for a moment and concentrated on the magic string that still connected her to the woman. The bond was far more intimate than an apprenticeship bond and in an instant she had all the

answers she needed.

"She lives," she reported briefly, "and should be up for some light questioning although she'll be weak for a while yet."

"I would like to see her," Snowfall requested promptly. "I mean, I've never known a victim of the Hook to be able to survive having her string cut."

"I didn't realize you were acquainted with the Hook," Geraint commented suspiciously.

"One of my professors at the University had practiced forensic magic in Randona for a couple years. He mentioned it during a lab session one day and, interested, I asked a few questions. I didn't mean to imply any great knowledge. We've never had that problem here before."

"I will talk to the girl today," Oceanvine decided. "When she is up to lengthier sessions we'll schedule them."

"Where is she being held?" Snowfall asked.

"Here in the palace. Why?"

"Just curious. Are you trying to hide something from us?" he asked aggressively.

"Not at all," she replied easily, "but I'd rather that as few people know where she is as possible. As it stands right now only Silverwind, Windchime, and I know precisely where she is and until she's stronger, I think that will be for the best."

"Then you're accusing one of us of being in league with the murderer," Sir Edus retorted angrily.

"I'm accusing no one, but Silverwind wants her location to be kept secret for a while longer. Now, if you want to go ask him about it yourself, I'll be glad to give you directions to his room."

"That should be fun," Geraint chuckled. Edus blanched and let the matter drop, but Kharald had a related question.

"The mass death of those women is a serious matter, but do we have any connection to the serial killings, or is this just another tangential matter?"

"That's right," Snowfall chimed in. "The victims of the Cardiokiller were all missing their hearts. Surely that wasn't the case with the two hundred odd who died two days ago."

"Admittedly so," Geraint replied, "but as you know all spells leave traces and every mage leaves a sort of signature in the spells he casts. I am comparing the spell traces left on the bodies of the victims of both crimes for similarities."

"Find any yet?"

"Maybe. The strings of the hookers who died all at once were not simply cut. Someone did something to obscure the spell traces of the Hook. Fortunately I know what such traces should look like, so I hope to be able to sort things out today or tomorrow."

Twenty

"She's so weak," Oceanvine whispered to Geraint. A faint trace of sunlight stole its way between the slats of the shutters of the room's single window and fell across the face of the woman in the bed. The stray beam illuminated her naturally pale white face and dark brown hair. "Has she been able to eat anything?" she asked the physician who stood nearby, ready to stop any activity that might disturb his patient. Regardless of her class, now that she was in his care, he was utterly committed to bringing her back to health.

"She has been awake for a few minutes at a time," he replied. "Not very often, but when she has been up we've gotten her to drink some enriched fruit juice. Last time we kept her awake long enough to eat half a bowl of chicken soup."

"When was she up last?"

"About half an hour ago. She'll probably sleep for another hour or two now."

"I see." Oceanvine wanted to ask Geraint some questions, but decided it would be best to get the doctor out of the room. "Have you checked on Silverwind yet this morning."

"He threw me out of his room last night," the doctor replied indignantly. "Threatened to turn me into a water lily."

"He gets a bit cranky when he's sick," Geraint replied solemnly. The physician was not one to truly understand humor. "Try bringing one of your prettier nurses with you and let her hold his hand while you work." Geraint ignored Oceanvine's scowl at the suggestion and instead gently ushered the confused doctor to the door. "Now," he asked once the door had closed, "what did you want to know?"

"Was I that obvious?" she asked in return.

"Moderately so. Let's face it. When you set your mind to accomplish something, you're about as subtle as a dragon. Fortunately, you can also be as dangerous as one as well so it all evens out."

Oceanvine was flustered at Geraint's dead-on reading of her, but managed to push on. Like a dragon, she thought bitterly. Aloud, she asked, "How do we go about getting her off the Hook?"

"Oh, she isn't ready for that, I don't think. She's far too weak just yet to stand on her own. She lost a lot when her string was cut."

"How did you bring Elewys back?"

"I hijacked her, sort of," Geraint admitted.

"What?"

"After studying the spell, I... Well I guess if we're going to call the bond a string you can say that I spliced into it. For a very brief time, she had both me and Archel as master."

"How brief?"

"Oh about one second. As soon as I had a grip on her string, I cut Archel's connection. Damn near killed us both, but then I was drunk at the time and nearly spliced into the string in the wrong direction."

"Magic and drinking don't mix," Oceanvine said piously.

"Maybe not, but perhaps you've forgotten my little problem. Silverwind may have solved it, although I'm not entirely sure he's correct. You'll find out in a few months when the anniversary of our encounter with Arithan comes up again. In any case, I was still in pretty bad shape. Drinking doesn't really help you forget, but it does make the nightmares seem unreal, less frightening. I'm a lot better these days, but in case you haven't noticed the nightmares have started again since I began casting so many high level spells."

"You're carrying the burden well."

"Am I? I couldn't tell. Silverwind noticed immediately. Told me to cut back for a while. I will as soon as he's well enough to work again."

"Will you be all right?"

"I think so." Oceanvine frowned, but Geraint brought them back to the main subject before she could dig any deeper. "You're going to have to give her some of your own will."

"How do I do that?" she asked.

"Through the string. The bond is normally entirely one way, but in order to cut it safely, you're going to have to slowly change it to something more symbiotic. For now, however, just relax and concentrate on the string and for a brief moment reverse the energy flow. Then send some of yourself to her."

"Won't that make me her slave?" Oceanvine asked worriedly.

"There is that risk," Geraint admitted, "but it's not much of one. The spell should revert as soon as you release your concentration. At least it has in every case Firefly and I tried so far."

"Okay. One more question. What do you mean, send her some of myself?"

"Quite literally you're going to lend her some of your will power for a while to help bolster her own which has been nearly bludgeoned into nonexistence. Just think encouraging thoughts at her and feel them from the heart. You can't hold back if you want this to work."

"What if it doesn't work?" she asked nervously.

"You'll have a slave for the rest of your life, or her life, whichever is longer. Come on try it. If Firefly can do this you certainly can."

Oceanvine sat down and closed her eyes, forcing herself to relax and consider the bond between her and this strange woman. Soon the image of the pulsating string of energy came to her mind and she

watched the energy flow to her from the prostitute on the bed. Hesitantly, she willed the energy flow to reverse and even without consciously trying to, she felt herself sharing her will with the woman.

For a brief moment their minds mixed. There was no clear exchange of information, but Oceanvine got the feeling that the other woman's mind was in great turmoil. Highly confused and revolted by the world around her. Then as abruptly as this insight had begun, it was over. The spell reverted as Geraint had promised and Oceanvine opened her eyes just in time to get her second view of the deep brown eyes of the Granomish woman in front of her.

"Where?" the woman asked hoarsely.

"You're in the palace," Oceanvine told her simply. The woman's eyes snapped back and forth across the room, her head hardly keeping up in her panic.

"Whoa!" Geraint told her calmly. "You're safe and a guest of his Majesty as well. No one can touch you here."

She was only slightly calmer when her eyes fastened on to Oceanvine's face again.

"Who?" she asked fearfully.

"My name is Oceanvine," she told the woman. "This is Geraint. We're going to help you. What's your name?"

"Ksana."

"Ksana?" Oceanvine repeated, getting the feel of the foreign name on her tongue.

"Of Northmarket," Ksana added the name of her neighborhood and then as almost an after-thought, "mistress."

"Uh uh," Oceanvine said quickly. "There'll be none of that. I'm just Oceanvine, or if you insist on being formal, 'my Lady.'" Ksana looked hopelessly confused. "Together we're going to get you off the Hook, and I'm certainly no one's mistress!"

"Yes, my Lady," Ksana replied. "May I eat?"

"Of course. You've been starving long enough, but you'll have to go easy at first. There's a pitcher of juice here. Start with that." Oceanvine poured a glass of juice for the starving woman who accepted it greedily.

"Oh, so she's up now, is she?" the physician asked from the doorway. "Wondered why you shoved me out the door so quickly. What did you do? Use magic? I thought so. Well, she's my patient now, and I'll thank you not to take any risky shortcuts with her well being. Out!"

"But," Oceanvine protested, "we need to talk to her."

"Later. This afternoon if I think she's ready. Later if I don't. Now go away and let me do my work."

"But," she protested again.

"Out," the doctor repeated pointing toward the door. Oceanvine looked at him then Ksana, then Geraint. Ksana was busily trying to fathom the situation and Geraint was smiling broadly. "If you want to try your miracle cures on someone, try that damned wizard. Maybe you can turn him into something with a sweeter disposition. Gran knows I can't. Now out!"

Oceanvine spared a glance for Ksana and gave the puzzled woman a smile and a wink before following Geraint out the door.

"What a nice fellow," she commented to Geraint as the heavy wooden door shut behind them.

"I don't imagine their Majesties keep him around for his stimulating conversation," Geraint chuckled, "so he must be very good at his job."

"Either that or he knows where all the skeletons are hidden," she replied darkly.

"Excuse me? That doesn't sound like you."

"I guess he just struck me the wrong way."

"I guess," he repeated. "Why don't we take his suggestion and see how our favorite grouchy old wizard is this morning."

"He's not all that old," Oceanvine objected loyally.

"No, but he is a grouch. Besides, I'm dying to hear what he threatened the doctor with." Oceanvine returned his anticipatory smile and they walked the few feet down the hall to Silverwind's suite. As they entered the sitting room just inside from the hallway, however, they were intercepted by the palace doctor's nurse, a large woman, even for a Granom, nearly as broad as she was tall.

"Best leave him alone," she warned them. "He's in a mood."

"He's always in a mood," Geraint replied.

"Fine," she retorted. "Don't say I didn't warn you. Magicians!"

The nurse was still practicing her monologue against mages as they entered Silverwind's bedroom. The wizard was sitting up in bed staring at a tray full of food before him.

"It's about time you two showed up. What do you expect me to accomplish, stuck in bed as I am?"

"About the same as Candle did," Oceanvine responded coolly. "Get some rest and try not to drain the harbor."

"Ha," he retorted dryly. "Ha, bloody ha! What took you so long? Did the meeting really take all morning?"

"No, it didn't. In fact it was shorter than usual, but we stopped to see Ksana on the way here."

"Ksana?" Silverwind asked. "Who's she?"

"You've met her," Geraint teased him. "Nice Granomish girl, staying just next door."



"Oh, the whore. She's up now, is she?"

"She's better. We gave her a little magical assistance. A little pre-treatment before Oceanvine starts to remove the Hook. Then the physician shooed us out of there before we could get any information out of her. We'll try again this afternoon. She'll need another treatment by then anyway."

"Yeah? Vine, you'd better hope the University accepts your application. Spells that directly affect the mind are restricted to the master level."

"I'm working with supervision," Oceanvine replied with a nod toward Geraint.

"That would still require an official inquiry if anyone found out and I don't care to put up with the imposition."

"Listen to you," Geraint scoffed. "Who's going to ask you? I'm the supervisory mage here. If anyone has to weather an inquiry, it's me."

"They'll bother me too. Vine's got a record. Don't you, Vine?"

"That's Oceanvine," she corrected him, retreating to her automatic defenses. "Besides, that was years ago. I've been above reproach ever since."

"Technically, anyway."

"Why?" Geraint asked. "What'd she do that was so bad?"

"You ever hear of a snot-nose noble brat called Kormac of Medda? She gave him a rather direct attitude adjustment."

"That was you?" Geraint asked, a mixture of horrified fascination and respect in his voice. Oceanvine nodded ashamedly. The incident had been a prime example of lack of control, one she had worked to put behind her for ten years. "Good for you, girl!" Geraint brayed. "That's wonderful. I hear he's still howling at the moon. Can't think of a more deserving bully."

"I was only defending myself," she claimed.

"There were less permanent ways to do it," Silverwind chided her.

"I didn't think of them. I just kept wondering what he'd do if he knew how I and the other girls felt. It could have been a gift."

"That's true," the wizard agreed. "It could have been. That's why you're still allowed to practice magic. Well, that's not at issue here, but I'd prefer if that blot didn't come to light, especially since you're trying for your master's here."

"It never came up during my journeyman's exams."

"No, but the examining professors all knew you and your history. Let's drop that for now and get back to business. So what new happened at the meeting?"

"Sandstone stormed out of the meeting," Oceanvine admitted. "It might have been my fault."

"I doubt it," Silverwind replied.

"Same here," Geraint agreed. "He was ready to walk yesterday but didn't have an excuse yet. Now he can claim that he did it because he refuses to work under a woman. His boss will understand, even if he doesn't want to."

"Then it is my fault," Oceanvine concluded.

"Not really. You didn't ask to be born a woman and if Sandstone can't get over his cultural prejudices, that's his problem, not yours."

"True enough," Silverwind added. "Besides, I haven't fully trusted Master Sandstone since we got here."

"What do you mean?" Oceanvine asked. "Sure he's been antagonistic and maybe a bit incompetent, but if he was really good, he'd be in private practice."

"Vine," Silverwind replied, "this whole case smacks of an inside job. Whoever the murderer is, he must know who we are, and what we know. How else would you explain why all those Hooked prostitutes died just as we were about to examine them?"

"Coincidence?" she tried feebly, not believing it herself.

"Not likely. Not the way the spell traces were nearly destroyed in the process. The timing was just too soon after we announced our intentions. No, the killer has access to the information and plans we've been discussing and is trying to erase his tracks. He may well have managed to do it."

"I'm looking into that today," Geraint offered. "I ought to be able to reconstruct the energy flow of the spell, especially using Ksana as a guide, although Oceanvine's act of saving the girl's life changed the spell a bit."

"It did?" she asked.

"Of course. You couldn't help it."

"Then maybe I shouldn't have shared my will with her this morning."

"That was necessary," Geraint disagreed. "The damage, if that's what you want to call it, was done the moment you saved her life, and if you hadn't she would have been no easier to read than any of the dead women."

"Any other news from the meeting?" Silverwind asked.

"Yes," Oceanvine responded. "It seems that the police have a suspect under surveillance."

"Someone with an inside line on any info that might leak out?"

"They didn't say."

"I'm not surprised," Silverwind yawned. "I must really be sick," he admitted. "I'm tired already after even

so brief a conversation. Before I nod off, Vine, what are your plans for today?"

"Well, I promised to go back to the Academy for a debriefing regarding my exams; the price of having free access to what my predecessors shared. Then I plan to have a long chat with Ksana, assuming Geraint is available if I need to modify the Hook spell."

"I should be back by late afternoon," Geraint confirmed. "We can check on her before dinner."

"Good," Silverwind replied. "Take Candle with you when you go out. He was in here just a short while ago and I think he's getting cabin fever. It will do him some good to get out of the palace." That said, the wizard slipped back to sleep.

Twenty-one

"Tell me again why you brought me along," Candle grumbled, following Oceanvine through the early afternoon streets of Querna.

Spring was now showing its true face. The recent spate of warm weather had coaxed the trees into bloom and first leaf. Oceanvine was delighted to see that the most common tree lining the city streets was the cherry. The profusion of pink blossoms softened the austere, stony look of the Granomish city. Still more color was to be found in pots and window boxes where the merchants and homemakers had planted pansies and other spring flowers over the last few days giving fine accompaniment to the crocuses that were already up on their own. The daffodils would make the picture complete, she thought, and although not yet in bloom, here and there she spotted a bud almost turned yellow. In contrast, Candle's griping cut through her reverie like a rusty sword.

"Silverwind thought you should get out of the palace for a while and breathe the fresh air," she responded.

"Great! So instead of sitting around the library in the palace I got to sit around the front hall of the Women's Academy." He stressed the word "Women's" with an unhealthy dollop of disgust. Still uncertain of Granomish custom, he had paused at the doorpost of the Academy's main building to recite the blessing Silverwind had taught him in North Horalia. The ritual was not a Granomish custom and several of the young ladies of the Academy had giggled at the quaint gesture, doing nothing for the boy's dignity. "Some change."

"You might find girls more interesting in a year or two," Oceanvine warned him, carefully crossing the cobble-paved street.

"I'd find them interesting now," Candle retorted, "if they were closer to my own age, and human," he added. "And why are we walking back? Why can't we ride?"

"I feel like walking. What's the matter? Grown so soft you can't bare a little stroll every now and then?"

"Look, Vine," he started.

"Oceanvine!" she corrected him menacingly. She might have to put up with Silverwind when he took

liberties with her name, but Candle hadn't earned that right yet.

"Seaweed, if you want," he countered daringly, but backed down at a glimpse of her stormy scowl. "All right! I was just kidding. Anyway, walking is for those who can't afford to ride."

"I walk for the enjoyment of the exercise," she told him.

"Rich folks!" he snorted. She was about to explain that she was hardly rich and had never been so, when she realized that compared to Candle, perhaps she could have been considered wealthy, or at least well-off. Then she caught a glimpse of something happening across the street.

"Candle," she caught his attention, pointing across the street. "Over there. What do you see?"

"Where? Oh, you mean the hooker and the gentleman trying to buy her? Seen it a hundred times. Haven't you?"

"Not really, no," she muttered.

As she stared fascinatedly, the young dandy, judging from his mode of dress, talked easily to two amazingly thin Granomish women dressed in what to Oceanvine were grotesque parodies of Orentan garb. Where the elves of Maiyim tended to prefer short skirts, sleeves and legs, at least during the day, in keeping with the tropical environment of their archipelago, the clothing the hookers wore were cut along essentially the same lines as that of more respectable women, but were tintured with the bold floral prints favored by the Orenta. However, unlike the respectable trollish ladies, these women wore their clothing partially open, exposing more neck and cleavage, and their skirts had been slit to reveal tantalizing glimpses of otherwise forbidden views of ankle and lower leg.

Finally, the dandy made his choice and slipping his arm familiarly around the woman's waist walked off with her and disappeared through a nearby doorway.

"That's all there is to it?" Oceanvine mused.

"How much more do you need?" Candle asked wryly, slipping back into his old vocal pattern. "She's got somethin' he wants and is willin' to pay for. They agreed on a price and now she's givin' it to him. Oh baby, oh baby," he concluded in a flat imitation. When Oceanvine stared at him. "What? I'm not supposed to know about that?"

"Never mind," she said darkly. "Come on. I want to talk to the other girl."

"Why? I thought you liked guys. Or at least a particular wizard. What?" he asked when she glared at him again.

"Shut up."

She looked both ways, and seeing no traffic, dragged Candle with her as she walked diagonally across. Their course was clear and the floral-clad woman saw them coming almost from the start.

"First time for your kid brother?" she asked as Oceanvine drew to a halt before her. Candle contrived to look uninterested, but was only partially successful.

"I really wouldn't know, and he's not my brother," Oceanvine retorted.

"You tell her, mommy!" Candle teased mercilessly. Oceanvine blushed furiously, but the hooker took it right in stride.

"He's not my son either and this has nothing to do with him."

"The other woman's eyebrows raised and she replied, "I'm not into the kinky stuff. Maybe you'd better wait for Gratsiya. She'll do anything."

"I just want to talk," Oceanvine replied, flustered at the turn of conversation. This was not going as planned.

"Sure. I can do that," the hooker nodded. "It'll still cost ya."

"How much?" The woman named a price.

"Go-won!" Candle suddenly butted in. "We didn' just fall off the apple cart, y'know. We're here to save yer life. If that ain't a few minutes of talkin' then you ain't smart enough to tell us what we want. C'mon, Vine."

The whore stared at the mismatched pair a moment before remembering something she'd heard - little more than a street rumor. "Who are you two, anyway?" she asked.

Oceanvine introduced herself and Candle, explaining briefly why they were in Querna.

"And now you finally decided to talk to one of the workin' girls, eh? Well, it's about time. Had a few cops askin' questions, but they wasn't really interested." She paused to consider Oceanvine, seeing her as a rich lady of the court. "Buy me a meal," she said at last.

"What?"

"You want to talk? Buy me a meal. We'll talk while I eat, lady. Please. It won't break ya." It was the pathetic quality of the "please" at the end that made up Oceanvine's mind so although she suspected it was just an act, she nodded and followed the hooker up the street.

"What's your name?" Oceanvine finally asked a few minutes later as they sat in a rough booth of a low-class tavern a block away. The small room was filled with greasy smoke from a fireplace whose chimney should have been swept years earlier and the floors were probably wood, although the grime and oil of years paved it as well as any city street. In all the tavern had a half-spoiled reek to it that was only accentuated rather than covered, by the incense burning at each table.

"Call me Edyta," the hooker replied. "It's not my real name, but it's good enough, right?" It wasn't really a question, but Oceanvine nodded regardless.

"Whatta ya have?" a large unkempt troll asked, wandering over to their table.

"Stew, Mika," Edyta replied. "Also some bread and sausage and a large beer. The good stuff, not the stuff with the rats floatin' in it, hear?"

"Yeah. I hear. It'll cost ya though."

"She's payin'." Edyta pointed at the blond mage. Mika just nodded.

"How about you?" he asked Oceanvine.

Her stomach rebelled at the thought of eating anything from this establishment, so she merely ordered, "Cider."

"That all?"

"It'll do. Candle, do you want anything?"

Candle looked around. Not too long ago the food here might have appealed to him, but a few months of living like a nobleman had changed his sensibilities and he just shrugged.

"He'll have a beer," Oceanvine concluded. Mika nodded and walked away.

"Really?" Candle asked, unable to believe his good luck. Silverwind and Oceanvine never let him drink alcoholic beverages.

"I don't trust the water here," she replied.

"Good thinking," Edyta agreed. "It's worse than the cheap beer. The good stuff is pretty good though. So what do you want to know?"

"Let's start with the missing women," Oceanvine began.

"Did I know any? Sure. Well enough to notice they weren't workin' the street no more. Everyone has their corners or doorways, ya know? Used to defend them against all comers too. You protect your own territory or someone else gets your business. Sometimes you team up with one or two others, but for the most part you work alone unless you got a pimp or work in a house. You got a pimp or a madame, they take care of you. Find the work for you."

"Sounds like a better deal." Oceanvine commented.

"They also take most of your money and keep you on opium and happy pills and what else." she stopped talking suddenly when Mika returned with their order. After Oceanvine had paid him and he moved away, she began again as though she had never stopped. "Drugs, so you don't give a shit what they do to you. Workin' independent is more risky, but at least you get to keep what you make and you can keep clean if you stay away from temptation. Most girls can't. Burn out in a year or two."

"Do you make much?" Oceanvine took a tentative sip of her cider and found it was more than half way to vinegar. Whoever brewed this batch was incompetent.

"Sour?" Edyta asked. "Sorry. I'd've warned you, but I never drink the stuff. I make enough," she admitted warily, dropping her voice a bit, "when I can put it somewhere safe before Waldek's boys find me. Wish I could save more. Like to open me a house sometime, but it's hard. Waldek's boys usually find me first."

"Who's Waldek?" Oceanvine asked.

"Local boss, I bet," Candle clarified. Edyta nodded nervously. "Like Adelulf in Northerton. Bet he hits

up all the people around the neighborhood for protection money. The police don't care as long as they don't actually catch him and I don't see all that many 'round here anyway."

"Lot of them are on the take too," Edyta admitted softly, looking around to make sure nobody was listening. "He takes a percentage from each of the girls. It's pretty high, but not as bad as a pimp would. He takes from the pimps too, for that matter. If you don't give it willingly, his boys just beat you up and take it all. Sometimes they beat you up anyway, but not too often and not too bad."

Oceanvine tried to say something, anything, but found herself at a loss for words.

"Well, that's the way it was a few months ago. Not quite like that now, though. Not with all those girls missin' or dead. Most of us are sharin' territory now, workin' as a team when we can, so we're hardly ever alone. Workin' days instead of nights. Too dangerous to go out at night. He might get you."

"He?" Oceanvine prompted.

"The Cardiokiller. You know. The one you're here to stop. Can't make as much workin' days, though. At least Waldek's been layin' off lately. I think these killin's are botherin' him too. Doesn't do his image no good if he can't control the neighborhood. You know?"

"But there are some girls working at night, aren't there?" Oceanvine asked.

"Fools!" Edyta spat. She stopped and looked wildly about the room, but nobody seemed to notice. "Or worse. Oh we all still work the night here and there, when we get too hungry, but only the stupid try it alone anymore. Got a friend, we work as a two-some sometimes when neither of us made enough daytime. If the john won't pay for or don't want us both, we generally go along anyway. It's not safe to be alone. Not in the dark."

"Do you know a girl named Ksana?" It was a stab in the dark and Oceanvine knew it, but a connection, however tenuous, would feel like progress.

Edyta frowned, then shook her head. "No. Should I?"

"Probably not."

"Look," a frightened note crept into Edyta's voice, "I'm takin' a big chance, talkin' to you. Especially after the other day. Word was that only us independents were in danger. Then all them inside girls up and died."

"They were on the Hook."

"Hook? What's that? Some new drug?"

"Worse. It's a very powerful magic. Totally enslaves the victim. Stay away from the pimps, Edyta. If you're as smart as you sound, find some other line of work."

"Don't know nothin' else," Edyta replied hopelessly. Oceanvine stood up and put her hand on the table next to Edyta's. When she lifted it again there were two Emmine gold sovereigns on the table. Edyta quickly covered them with her hand and asked, "What're these for?"

"You could have soaked me for the best meal in town," Oceanvine replied soberly. "I figure I owe you."

Come along, Candle." Edyta slipped the coins into a small pocket in the top of her boots and watched the pair leave the tavern.

Twenty-two

"Did you ever see the man who bewitched you?" Oceanvine asked Ksana as the next treatment to remove the Hook was applied under Geraint's guidance.

"No, mistress," Ksana replied dreamily, then corrected herself, "Oceanvine. Not really. He wore a mask and I could only see his eyes."

"That's not much, but it might help. What did they look like?"

"Just eyes. They were dark brown and large."

"Very large?" Oceanvine pressed.

"I don't know. After the first instant, each time he worked on me, they were all I could see. They seemed hollow, though."

"Hollow?"

"Empty. Like there was nothing behind them. They seemed..." she trailed off.

"What? How did they seem?"

"Sad. No. Emotionless. Like they felt nothing at all."

"That's enough for now," Geraint spoke up for the first time since Oceanvine had started Ksana's treatment. "You can't cure her in one session. It will take a week at least." Oceanvine closed her eyes and began the delicate operation of disconnecting the cure spell from the string.

"Only a week?" Ksana asked. "Amazing. And all I have to do is lie here?"

"Lie or sit. But it will get harder as you go along, girl, and the hardest part is cutting the string. You have to fight to be free of the Hook and you will have to fight as hard as Oceanvine does."

"I'm ready."

"Get lots of rest and eat more. You're over half-starved. It's not healthy for a Granom to be as thin as you are."

"I'm not likely to fatten up on the fruit juice and light broth they've been feeding me."

"I'll talk to the doctor and see if you're ready for something heavier. Done yet, Oceanvine?"

"Just," she replied.



"Oh!" Ksana gasped. "Now I'm tired all of a sudden."

"Not surprising," Geraint told her. "Get some sleep. We'll see you tomorrow."

"Is it me," Oceanvine asked after the door closed behind them, "or does she seem more intelligent than some of the other girls?"

"Maybe," Geraint replied neutrally. "You may be projecting a bit of yourself on her as you administer the cure. That's quite common."

"Even to the way she carefully pronounces words?"

"It's possible, but she may also have picked up some elementary education early on. Most of these girls are runaways, you know. Most are farm girls looking to strike it rich in the city, but some few are from moderately well-off families, running away from an unpleasant home-life, or trying to show their parents up. There are thousands of reasons for their being here. About all they have in common is ending up in the same hell. What do you say we join Silverwind for drink? He's been trying to administer the 'cure' to himself with shots of whiskey."

"Count me out," she replied, shaking her head. "I have just enough time to run over to the Tower of Justice and give them the name of Ksana's pimp. No need to keep him running around, and he might lead us to our killer."

"Going alone?" Geraint asked, noticing the darkening sky through a skylight.

Oceanvine's first instinct was to object over the fact that he obviously thought she needed protection, but remembering Edyta's fear of the night, she replied, "I'll take Candle. He's good at looking over his shoulder."

Finding Candle took a little longer than she expected because she failed to think of looking for him in the palace gardens where two of their Majesties' children of approximately his age were showing him around. To her surprise he seemed genuinely interested in the what they were showing him. She made a mental note to mention that to Silverwind, before dragging him off on her late afternoon errand. He wanted to stay, but had to admit that it would be too dark to see much in the garden in a short while.

At the Tower of Justice, they went directly to Lieutenant Toska's office. As it turned out he had news for them as well.

"We've caught the killer," he announced happily.

"Really?" Oceanvine asked.

"Caught him in the act. He a failed mage; just barely got his journeyman's degree, but wasn't good enough to get a job in either the government or private sectors. Calls himself Cobalt."

"Cobalt?" Candle asked.

"He likes the color blue," Toska explained. "Wears no other color."

"I'd like to see him," Oceanvine requested.

"Of course. He's still being kept downstairs."

"In a standard cell?" Oceanvine asked, worry creeping into her voice.

"Of course. Why?"

"If he's still there then he's not your killer."

"Our cells are very strong," Toska maintained.

"Apprentice Candle here could get out of one in under a minute."

"I find that hard to believe," Toska scoffed.

"Care to put money on it?" Candle asked slyly. "I could use a little pocket change. Silverwind doesn't pay worth a damn." Oceanvine giggled. The wizard had never failed to buy anything Candle needed or even expressed a desire to have.

"Maybe you're right," the lieutenant decided. "Let's make sure he's still with us." He led the way out of his office, stopping only to have the desk sergeant ask Sir Edus and Lord Miklos meet them downstairs.

"Well, he's still here," Toska said, relieved, after sticking his head through the door leading to the small jail.

"What's going on here?" Sir Edus demanded a moment later as he and the Royal Prosecutor joined them.

"Lady Oceanvine questioned whether a mage unable to escape from a cell of stone and iron bars would be capable of the magic necessary for the crime. Naturally I summoned you both immediately. Our suspect is still inside."

"Are you certain?" Oceanvine asked calmly.

"Of course I'm..." he trailed off as Oceanvine disappeared before his eyes. Then with a slight creak the heavy door opened to reveal her standing inside the cell block.

"Maybe it is me who is inside," she said. The three men rushed forward to slam into a closed security door, that suddenly appeared where the open one was. "But no," Oceanvine's voice said from behind. They turned to see her sitting cross-legged on the floor with her eyes closed. "I'm right here." She opened her eyes and allowed Candle to help her to her feet. "Gentlemen. That was a simple illusion spell. Convincing, isn't it?"

"Then our suspect may already have escaped?" Lord Miklos asked dismayed.

"If he hasn't, then I really doubt he's our man. Let's find out."

They opened the security door and filled into the small cell area. There were only four cells, two in each side of a narrow corridor and delineated by walls of vertical wrought iron bars set and mortared into the stone floor and ceiling. Three cells were empty and the fourth held a single Granom, who Oceanvine guessed to be only a few years older than herself. He was dressed entirely in faded blue clothing, that

may have been considered a suit of quality once, but now was a mere half step above rags. He lifted his unkempt and bearded face to look at them with hopeless eyes.

"Well?" Sir Edus demanded.

Oceanvine entered the open cell next door and sat down on the crude wooden bench. A moment later she had her answer. "No illusion. That's really him."

"He could be faking," Toska suggested. "Trying to make himself seem less than he is."

"I wasn't trying to hurt the girl," the man claimed. Oceanvine remembered that he called himself Cobalt. "I just wanted to... You know. Buy her for the evening. I don't know why she screamed. I only used a little light spell to show her the coins I offered."

"You'll have a chance to prove that in court," Miklos told the man unsympathetically. "There you see? He admits he's a mage. Who's to say what he can or cannot do."

"There is a test," Oceanvine replied. "Cobalt, look into my eyes. You know this game, don't you." It wasn't a question. It was the same contest of wills she had bested Master Sandstone at; the same game played by student magicians the world over.

Reluctantly, he met her gaze and the contest began. Oceanvine sensed immediately that this man, even with a journeyman's education had a very low magical potential. His mind just could not direct the power efficiently. There was a chance he was faking, however, so Oceanvine began a series of probes. One of her professors had once described how this contest could be used to measure a mage's abilities, regardless of whether he might let his opponent win, but she had never had the occasion to try the technique. She probed gently at first and then with more power behind her. Cobalt's defenses crumbled as soon as she increased her assault the first time, but locked in by her will he was unable to look away, admitting defeat. Slowly, methodically, she increased her diagnosis of Cobalt's abilities. There was almost nothing to him. He could not possibly be the murderer.

As she let him go he dropped to the floor and curled up into a fetal position. She sent him a tranquilizing spell and he uncurled after a minute, and began to recompose himself.

"Not a chance, gentlemen," she reported at last. "Frankly, I'm surprised he ever graduated."

"The University very rarely flunks somebody out once they accept him as a student," Toska commented. "They don't like to admit failure more than anyone else."

"Well, I'm still not convinced," the police chief huffed. "All I've seen here is a ridiculous stare-down contest."

"It was far more than that, Sir Edus," Oceanvine retorted, but realized that it would be pointless to explain.

"I'm afraid I must agree with Sir Edus," Lord Miklos commented. "This man is our best suspect so far and until either the killer strikes again or Master Sandstone verifies your findings, I believe we should keep him in custody."

"Do what you like," she replied, "but the only charge you have that'll stick is an attempt to hire a prostitute."

She and Candle left the tower a few minutes later and emerged on the dark, dew-moistened, slate sidewalk only to discover that there wasn't a cabriolet, or any other form of transportation in sight.

"Never around when you need them," Candle grumbled. "So we walk again?"

"Why not? We can take care of ourselves," she replied. They started off in the general direction of Wurra Palace .

The palace itself was even more visible on this night than it was in the daytime. The quartz-trimmed, pink granite spires were illuminated both from within and without, causing the glow from the entire palace compound to fill half of the night sky and be reflected back by thin wisps of mist, that by morning would coalesce into a thick fog.

"What's with all the light?" Candle asked.

"I don't know. Oh wait a minute, yes I do. The king is having a banquet and ball or whatever they call it here in honor of the refugees from the Isle of Fire. He was going to hold it last night, but another ship arrived yesterday so it was postponed one evening."

"The food and drink should make up for that tavern this afternoon," Candle suggested slyly.

"I suppose. Now that you mention it, I haven't eaten since breakfast. How about you?"

"I snuck off with a few bits before the twins started showing me the garden," the boy admitted, "but I'm still hungry."

"All right," Oceanvine replied, smiling. "The sooner we get there, the sooner you'll get fed."

They proceeded on, continuing to look for a taxi to hire, but they had no way of knowing that all the available cabriolets were busy ferrying nobles to and from the palace. Eventually they found themselves walking through an almost deserted business district.

"You know," Oceanvine commented when they stopped to rest under one of the flickering, yellow gas lights, "I think I walked through here the night I returned late from the Academy, but it wasn't this quiet then. There were just as many men walking about - maybe a dozen per hour - but I'd swear there were more hookers. Working in pairs, I'll admit, but so far I've only seen those two three blocks ago."

"You heard Edyta," Candle reminded her. "Only fools work the night alone."

"True. A girl on her own would be a prime target. Candle how'd you like to help me with an experiment?"

"Is it likely to keep us from dinner?"

"Only for a short while," she replied. "Come on. Let's duck into this alley. I have to set up a couple of illusions."

Candle followed her and a moment after entering the alley noticed that he seemed to be wearing the same rags he had worn months ago when they first met.

"How'd you do that?" he asked resentfully and then noticed that her clothing had changed as well. She was no longer wearing the demure clothing considered suitable for a respectable lady of Granom, but instead was clad in the cheap imitations of Orentan clothing that many Granomish prostitutes affected. A slit in the skirt flirted at exposing her well-shaped leg to the thigh and the loose fitting sleeves blew back in the night breeze to reveal her arms nearly back to her shoulders. Most daring, however, was the deep V-shaped neckline that cut deeper than any Candle had seen since arriving in the archipelago.

"It's just an illusion," she told him. "How do I look?"

"You look like a whore," he replied bluntly.

"That was the idea," she told him primly in stark contrast to her appearance.

"You still look human, though."

"Most of the girls here are very thin," she countered. "I think I'll pass."

"Better do something about your tan, though," he suggested. "Plenty wear blond wigs, I've noticed, but not one of them is tanned."

"Good point. I don't think Granomish skin can tan." She closed her eyes and her skin lightened to pale white common to Granomen. "Better?" she asked.

"Yes," he agreed. "You copied my clothes, but I've never seen an outfit exactly like yours."

"I just made it up," she replied smugly.

"Really?" He shrugged and told her, "You got a real talent there. Could've made a fortune in Tarnsa. You seem to be holding yourself the right way too."

Oceanvine felt herself blushing furiously. She did seem to be taking to the role all too easily. Oh well, it's just an act, isn't it? she told herself. Aloud she said, "Hush. Now I'm going to need your help on this."

"Oh? You mean the old 'Hey, Mister! How'd you like my sister?'"

"No," she replied quickly, blushing again. "Just stay in the shadows and watch my back, so to speak. It's not likely anything's going to happen, but an extra distraction if we do run into the killer should give me the edge no matter how good he is. Understand?"

"Sure," Candle shrugged. "I can always throw rocks at him. Don't imagine it's all that easy to concentrate when that happens."

"Good boy."

Twenty-three

"Where did they go?" Silverwind, sitting up in his bed, demanded of Geraint and Zakhar. They both

stood at his bedside, formally dressed for the party going on in the main keep.

"We don't know," Geraint replied. "They came back in the middle of the afternoon. That was when Oceanvine and I interviewed Ksana again. We didn't get a whole lot out of her, just the name of her pimp, really. and then they went to see to having him arrested."

"They were supposed to be back for dinner," Zak added. "I had planned to ask her if she'd like to eat out this evening, but when I went looking for her, I learned that she had dismissed the cabriolet they took to the Justice Tower. Most likely she forgot the king was honoring his guests from the Isle of Fire tonight and that every cab in the city would be queued up here at the palace."

"So they're walking through the city at night?" Silverwind asked.

"To the best of our knowledge," Geraint confirmed.

"Damn!" the wizard swore. "We'd better go find them."

"Are you sure you're in any shape to do that?"

"I'm not all that sick," Silverwind replied disgustedly before dissolving into a coughing fit. "Sound worse than I feel," he continued gamely. "Besides I'm our best shot at finding them quickly."

"How do you figure that?"

"You forget that Candle's my apprentice. We can follow his string."

"You used that old spell?" Geraint laughed. "Silverwind, you old conservative you! I didn't think anyone, except maybe a few old codgers set up in the sticks, was using that archaic bit of magic."

"Candle was a special case," Silverwind replied getting out of bed. "When I found him he was making what passed for a living as a thief. The apprenticeship spell was a good bit of insurance, and it came in handy once like this when I had to find him. Besides, Oceanvine expected it of me. She was apprenticed to old Sunbear on Kern with a similar spell, so don't tell her it's mostly used only by hicks." He selected an informal tunic and trousers of Emmine-style, but covered up with a Granomish-style jacket and overcoat. "This should be warm enough," he muttered.

"Maybe too warm," Zak warned him. "Weather's been unusually warm the last couple days."

"Prevention," Silverwind replied. "I'd hate to have a relapse. Also this outfit should pass for the gala downstairs. Odds are we'll have to sneak through in any case."

"You could use one of your illusions," Geraint suggested.

"I'll be too busy following Candle's string and my concentration isn't exactly at peak right now. No need to take chances."

"Have it your way, but you'd better wear something sturdier than those slippers."

Silverwind looked down at his feet to see the thin leather shoes Geraint referred to. "Oops," he replied sheepishly and reached into his closet for a pair of boots. When they were on he stood up and said, "Let's go."

"Aren't you going to pull in the slack?" Geraint asked as they walked briskly down the corridor.

"Already did," the wizard shot back, "as I was putting on my boots."

"Nothing wrong with his concentration," Zakhar commented dryly to Geraint. The quondam mage grinned and nodded.

They managed to get out of their wing and through a side door of the keep without running into anyone, but the main courtyard was filled with carriages, cabriolets, and, more to the point, people. Smiling inanely and occasionally nodding their heads at various noblemen and women, they were halfway out to the main gate when Silverwind suddenly froze in his tracks.

"What's wrong?" Prince Zakhar asked, alarmed.

"What the hell is she doing here?" the wizard asked staring directly ahead at a beautiful human lady just getting out of one of the royal carriages and directing two servants regarding the disposition of her luggage. She was short for a human, but about the same height as the Granomish ladies of the court and her long red hair fell in loose curls to just below her shoulders. She was wearing a formal green satin gown topped with a dark jacket similar to those worn by the Granomish ladies, showing her devotion to high fashion.

"Emtos save me," Geraint whispered. "She's as beautiful as ever, isn't she?"

"But what is she doing here?" Silverwind insisted.

"Who is she?" Zakhar asked.

"Lady Ysemay of Rallena," Geraint informed him when it appeared Silverwind was temporarily at a loss. "Although you may have heard of her pen name - Astil of Randona."

"Oh!" Zak nodded, suddenly understanding. "She's here as a special guest of their Majesties. I heard she arrived on board ship this morning. She must have decided to make a grand entrance this evening."

"Sounds like her," Geraint agreed.

"But what is she doing here?" Silverwind repeated slowly, stressing every other word.

"Ksaveras wants her to chronicle your exploits against the killer," Zak informed him.

"Aritos take his soul to picnic!" the wizard hissed. "Like we don't have enough problems already. Quick, she's headed this way. I don't want her to see me."

Geraint noted that Silverwind's appearance had suddenly changed so that he now looked like Zak's twin sister. "I doubt she'll recognize you like that. You look sweet," he teased his old friend.

"Shut up!" Silverwind snarled, "or I'll make you look like this."

"As it is, friend Geraint," Zak added, "you make a fine figure of a Granom."

"Terrific," Geraint grumbled.

"Maybe we can snag that carriage," Zak suggested as they passed the oblivious Lady Ysemay. "It's roomier than the cabs and we'll have Oceanvine and Candle with us when we return."

"All right," Silverwind agreed, looking over his shoulder hesitantly. As he did so, Ysemay stopped in her tracks and began to look around. Then she shrugged and continued on. "But I'd better sit up with the driver," he concluded.

The driver was amenable to Zak's suggestion of a ride around the town. He was on duty anyway and this seemed more pleasant than standing around and watching others have a good time, although he showed a great deal of disappointment when what had seemed to be a comely Granomish lady was transformed into a grouchy wizard.

Silverwind concentrated a moment. Then he pointed in a direction and they rolled out into the night streets.

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Oceanvine, leaning suggestively against a lamp post, was too deeply involved in an internal battle between her emotions and her intellect to notice the man's approach. It bothered her that she had slipped into this sleazy mode of behavior without a moment of hesitation and had taken to it as though secretly born to it. Candle was right; she did seem to have the moves, or at least she knew, almost instinctively, that merely standing around was not enough. Posture was everything. What would Silverwind think?

No sooner had that thought crossed her mind when a dozen other far more erotic ones followed it. True, she loved the man. She admitted that to herself even if she wouldn't come right out and say it to him, but the anticipation of sex had rarely, if ever, accompanied those feelings, except as an idealized expression of love. There was none of that here, however. These new thoughts involved sex as its own end and that bothered her deeply for they directly assaulted her self image.

Instead, she forced herself to keep to the matter at hand and considered the mechanics of prostitution. A wave of revulsion swept over her followed by an undertow of resignation. This was an ugly business, she knew that from the start, but had never suspected her feelings had run that deeply. Still, she had started this masquerade and would follow it to its conclusion.

A bird whistle could be heard - the morning call of the fiery wren. Soft, not loud enough to carry for even a block, and definitely out of place. Candle was signalling her to be attentive. She exaggerated her posture still more as she tried to determine which way those not-too-distant foot steps were coming from, but the gas light blinded her to anything beyond a fifteen foot radius.

Candle stayed quietly crouched near the mouth of the alley while keeping an eye on the approaching man. The man was dressed in what seemed to be a standard Granomish business suit except that it was entirely black and topped off with a charcoal gray cloak. On his head he wore a black wide-brimmed hat with a bright red band, but pulled it down over his face so that no identifiable features showed. All that was certain about him was that he was a Granom. His dull, black boots clicked softly and rhythmically against the smooth slate sidewalk as he approached. Here was a man who obviously had dressed with being hard to see at night in mind. Candle went on guard immediately.



The man paused by the mouth of the alley and watched Oceanvine's posturing by the lamp for a few moments. He chuckled softly; an empty, humorless sound that sent ice water shocks through Candle's nerves.

"Well, what have we here?" the man said so softly that Candle, near as he was, had trouble catching the words. "How rare and delightful." There seemed to be a great sadness infused with an intense joy in the man's voice. "Yes. How appropriate that it should be her." The man started forward and Candle reached slowly toward his belt and loosened his small dagger in its sheath.

As he continued to watch, the man made a small gesture and Oceanvine, caught unaware, slowly relaxed from out of the exaggerated posture she had been holding herself in. The man slowly approached her, all the time making small gestures with his hands. Candle continued to watch fascinated. Silverwind had told him that magic was done completely by the power of one's mind, but Oceanvine had also admitted that some lesser talents used incantations and gestures to help keep their concentration.

Candle heard the clip-clop of approaching horseshoes. Two horses, he thought to himself. Under the sound of metal on stone, he also detected the low rumble of iron-tired wheels. Carriage coming in fast, he concluded. He turned to watch the man in black and saw he was only three yards away from Oceanvine, who was now standing still with a blank expression on her face.

"Face me," the Granomish man in black commanded her. Candle drew his knife and readied himself to charge the rogue mage.

"Vine!" a voice shouted from up the street, cutting through the night air like a bolt of lightning.

Oceanvine blinked and took a step away from the man in black. Startled, the Granom turned to see the royal carriage with Silverwind sitting next to the driver rapidly approaching. He hastily turned back to face the rapidly recovering Oceanvine and prepared to cast a desperate spell.

Candle saw the black-clad Granom gather himself up to cast his spell and, without pausing to think, the boy burst out of the alley, running toward the Granomish mage intent on breaking his concentration long enough for Silverwind or Oceanvine to handle him.

"Away!" the Granom shouted, reaching out to grab hold of Oceanvine. However before he could touch her, Candle crashed head-on into him and they both disappeared with a flash of light and the roar of thunder and wind.

Twenty-four

A flash of light and the roar of thunder and wind.

The two perfectly matched palomino horses drawing the glossy black carriage screamed their fear and attempted to run in every direction except straight ahead at once, while the half-blinded driver did everything he could to calm them down.

Simultaneously Silverwind cried out in great pain, stood up in his seat, and was promptly thrown off the

carriage. He fell, unconscious, to the cold, damp cobblestones.

Oceanvine stared blindly, seeing only the after-image of the light flash. She flailed her arms around until she found the lamp post. She clamped her hands firmly on the post and waited either for her sight to return or for the furor to die down.

The carriage rocked wildly, throwing Geraint and Zakhar hard against the walls and each other. In spite of the bruises, however, they were still the first to recover and were out the doors before the carriage had been brought to a complete halt. Geraint spotted Silverwind lying dazed on the pavement and rushed to his aid even as Zakhar headed toward Oceanvine.

"Stay back!" Oceanvine warned him, a ball of fire forming in her hand. She did her best to feign aiming it at the approaching sound, but her blinded eyes gave her away by failing to follow Zak's quick but quiet side step.

"It's Zak," he told her, with only a small nervous tremble to his voice.

"Oh," the menace dropping out of her voice immediately. "Where's the killer?"

"Never saw him," he admitted, keeping his eyes firmly on the ball of fire that continued to burn coldly without harm in her hand. "He must have disappeared in the flash."

"Then I won't need this," she said, tossing the ball lightly over her shoulder. It shot up into the half-clouded sky and exploded some hundred feet above the rooftops, dissolving into a thousand tiny red sparks.

"Can you see anything?" he asked concernedly.

"Nothing that counts," she admitted calmly. "Just a lot of lights. When did you get here?"

"Just now. Missed the main show, it seems, although Silverwind seems to have caught it."

"Silverwind is here?"

"Geraint is seeing to him. He fell off the carriage when the horses panicked, I think."

"Oh dear. Is he hurt? No. Stupid question. Of course he is. What's he doing out of bed so soon and where's Candle? Candle! You can come out now. Candle?"

"He doesn't seem to be here. Let me help you into the carriage."

"Candle!" she called. "Damn! I can't see a thing."

"It'll probably take a while," Zak suggested uncertainly, "for your vision to return."

"Can't wait," she replied. Her eyelids snapped shut and she sat gently down on the damp sidewalk. "Cold down here," she remarked wryly and then became quite silent. A few seconds later she opened her eyes and said, "That's better. Everything's still a bit fuzzy but it'll probably clear up on its own and at least I'm not blind now." She let Zak help her back up and hurried over to see the stricken Silverwind.

"You'd better see to the healing spells," Geraint told her, his voice grating with psychic pain. "He suffered

a concussion when he hit the street, but I don't think that's the main problem. He was in pain before he fell. I'll check the driver and the horses." He got up and stumbled down the street.

"Healing's not really my specialty," she admitted, "but I'll do what I can." She concentrated for several minutes until the wizard began to come around.

"Where am I?" he asked.

"I really expected something more original from you," Oceanvine remarked, covering her own deep concern.

Silverwind blinked, looked slowly around and said "Candle. Where am I?"

"Candle's not here," Oceanvine informed him hesitantly, no longer able to hide her emotions.

"I know. Saw him disappear, but where did I go?"

"You didn't go anywhere," she told him, patiently irritated. "Just fell off the coach and landed on the street."

"I know that. But when I disappeared where did I go?"

"He's confused. Maybe you need a stronger spell," Zak suggested.

"I don't think so. Who are you?" she asked Silverwind. He thought for a long moment and she repeated the question.

"Candle?" he asked uncertainly. Then, "Silverwind. I am Silverwind."

"Thought so. Suffering from spell shock," she explained. "Can you sense Candle?"

Silverwind frowned. "No," he replied at last. "The apprenticeship spell's been broken. We have no way to track him now."

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Candle had none of Silverwind's identity problems. He also had not been blinded by the flash of light. That was a by-product of the spell, and he and the Granom in black were already elsewhere when the fireworks occurred. Instead, Candle had problems of his own.

He ached all over, feeling chilled to the bone. Sitting up, he noted that there was rapidly melting frost on his clothing. He had no time to ponder that mystery before several others presented themselves.

First of all; why was his knife sticking in the polish oak planks of the floor? Then; what was that odd smell? Penultimately; who is that on the floor next to me? Finally; Where the hell am I?

Candle tabled the knife question, quickly yanking it out of the floor board and returning it to its sheath.

The smell he realized was not unlike what he might have smelled out behind the butcher's shop in Tarnsa, although why that should be confused him. He realized that his mind was not functioning at top speed, but knew the reason must have something to do with the black-clad man. He was in the process of rolling the Granom over to get a look at his face when Candle suddenly remembered what had happened and concluded just where he must be.

So this is how killers live, he thought sarcastically, looking around the room. Not bad, but he needs another brand of incense. He took another look at the man. His face was still turned away, but Candle saw that the full head of salt-and-pepper hair was only a wig that had fallen partially off. The hair underneath was straighter and dark brown. Whoever he was, he was much younger than he wanted anyone to believe.

It occurred to Candle that he could be a hero by identifying this man and reached once more to turn him over. Before the lad could touch him, however, the Granom groaned and started to move ever so slightly. Startled, Candle jumped back and tried to figure out which of three doors led outside. That would be just as good. He could lead Silverwind and Oceanvine back here later.

Guessing right on the first try, Candle ran out into the damp, fog-enshrouded night. It hadn't been foggy when Candle and Oceanvine were baiting the killer and he wondered just how much time had passed. A deep, cutting, almost sub-sonic bell note sliced through the fog in every direction and Candle had his answer. That was the Midnight Bell from the singing tower at the University. It was obviously midnight and three or four hours had passed.

Candle turned to study the house behind him. It was a three-story brownstone town house, part an identical row. He stepped closer to determine the address, but sounds from inside informed him that the killer had recovered sufficiently to be walking and Candle, wanting none of that, stepped away once more and crouched in the shadow of a neighbor's stairway. The man appeared in the doorway and looked up and down the street before fixing his glare in Candle's direction.

"I see you, boy," he called. "Come back here. I want to talk to you."

Candle felt a strange compulsion coming over him, but was able to fight it long enough to find a large pebble on the ground and throw it at the man. He missed and the stone thunked loudly on the doorpost, but it was sufficient to break the mage's concentration allowing Candle to run for his life.

Candle ran without regard to direction. He heard footsteps behind him for the first two blocks so he turned the corner twice and kept going with escape his only objective. On the third block the night air carried the sounds of heavy breathing and he knew his pursuer was rapidly losing ground. Candle ducked down a narrow breezeway between two buildings, but instead of following it completely across the breadth of the block he turned left on a carriage house alley that ran the length of the block.

Hiding behind the first carriage house, he saw the Granom pause, and then charge on. Emboldened, he stood up and walked quietly on.

His growing feeling of success was abruptly shattered when he reached the next street and a fireball sizzled past his head and splashed to the pavement several yards away.

"Found you!" the killer shouted, engendering another long chase.

Candle, frightened out of his wits, was running on instinct and adrenaline. He bolted back down the carriage house path and then back up the breezeway. After that he turned every time he came to a corner

or an alley that was not a dead end. He soon lost the killer, but the fireball had been one shock too many and he likely would have just kept running blindly until he collapsed if a pair of rough hands didn't suddenly scoop him up off his feet and hold him in a vice-like grip.

"Gotcha!" a hoarse voice crowed. "Don't know where ya was runnin' but yer all mine now."

Candle looked at the thick-bodied Granom. His scarred, slightly twisted face gave ample testimony that this was not the same man he'd been fleeing from, but the stench that erupted from his body told Candle that he may have just stumbled into an even worse situation.

The boy struggled to get free, using his feet since they were all he could move. He connected once with the man's stomach, driving the wind out of him. Candle fell to the ground and scrambled to get up, but a second Granom, as bad as the first caught and held him more effectively.

"Kick me, will ya?" the first one grunted and promptly battered Candle about the head and chest until he lost consciousness.

The world was dark and bumpy now and through his pain, Candle could hear the groan of badly tended cart wheels. Sitting up, he realized that his hands and feet were chained. The dim light that streamed in from passing street lamps informed him that he was in a large box with a door of iron bars and evidently on the back of a horse-drawn cart. No, the sound was wrong for horses, the rhythm was different. Mules probably. Also he was not alone.

Sitting around him, staring hopelessly, were three Granomish children; two boys and a girl. All three, he guessed, were younger than him, although the girl may have only been a year his junior.

"Where are we?" Candle asked in a normal voice.

"Shaddup in there!" a shout came from on top and in front of them, "or yer'll get some more." Nobody had to ask "More what?".

"They's slavers," the girl whispered to Candle.

"Slavery's not legal any more," Candle replied. His thinking was still fuzzy or he might have realized what the girl meant.

"Not that kind," she explained. "They's gonna sell us to a workhouse. Four kids in one night's a good haul. They'll live it up for a fortnight now."

"I'm not going to no workhouse," Candle replied rebelliously.

"Oh?" the girl countered. "Who'd ya think yer are? Silverwind the Great?"

Candle smiled; more evidence of those stories that the wizard detested so much. He must really get around to reading some of them. "No, just his apprentice."

"Right!" the older of the two boys laughed. "Now pull the other one."

"Shaddup!" This time the shout was accompanied by loud banging on the cage. "Next time it'll be yer heads!"

Candle paused to consider his situation. The locks on the manacles and ankle chains that held him were large and crude. So simple it was hardly worth using magic to open them and the key holes were nearly big enough to fit his fingers in, but since learning the spell, he had stopped carrying his picks around with him.

Closing his eyes, he forced himself to relax. It was difficult and every bump from the wheels rolling over a cobblestone shot pain through his bruises. Now he knew why Silverwind insisted that he practice in noisy court-yards and onboard ship, whenever possible. In real life you couldn't always choose the conditions you worked under. It took several minutes, but finally, he brought himself into the proper hypnotic state and went to work.

Thought became action and the locks that held him and the others opened as one. The three Granomish children stared at their wrists in shock, unable to believe what had just happened, but Candle quickly rid himself of the confining iron. Still unbelieving, the others followed suit while Candle studied the door of the cage. There was a large, heavy hasp and a crude handle, but their captors hadn't bothered to use a lock, trusting to the manacles to do their job.

"You really are Silverwind's apprentice?" the girl asked quietly.

Candle nodded. "Now, when we hit the street," he whispered to the others, "scatter. There's four of us and only two of them. At worst two of us have to be able to get away and if we run fast enough we all will. Ready?" They nodded. "Let's go."

He pushed the iron door open. Like the cart wheels, it had been poorly maintained and squeaked as it turned on the hinge, but the men driving the cart did not seem to notice and in a moment all four were out of the cage and running for the shadows.

Perhaps running was not the right word. Limping was far more accurate. The irons had restricted blood flow and the cramped positions they had kept had stiffened up their limbs painfully, but luck was with them and the cart rolled on and out of sight without the drivers ever noticing that their cargo had deserted them.

Candle made for the nearest alley and crouched there until the cart was out of sight and hearing.

"You were wonderful," the Granomish girl said from behind him. Startled he turned around. She was just standing there grinning at him. Long and unusually light brown hair framed the pale white skin of her face. It was a typical Granomish face, square and heavy featured. It was also smudged with dirt and her unusual hair was badly tangled. However, there was still something about her, maybe the way the smile transformed her face, that made her seem pretty and he thought that her dark eyes were looking at him rather strangely.

He hadn't realized she'd followed him; the other two had at least followed orders and scattered. He was about to tell her how foolish she had been when she suddenly flung her arms around him and kissed him squarely on the mouth.

Had he had a more normal life Candle might have had a dozen innocent trysts by now, but having spent most of his time just trying to survive, he had never kissed a girl, human or otherwise, before. The feelings - intermingled shock and pleasure - shot through him as he stood helplessly in the girl's firm grasp. Finally, she let him go. It had only been for a moment, but one that had seemed to last for hours, and it left Candle pleasantly bemused.

"Thank you!" she whispered, hugging him fiercely. This time he returned the gesture. Then she suddenly broke the embrace and ran off into the foggy night, leaving Candle to ponder thoughts that had never occurred to him before.

Eventually he realized that he was cold and hungry as well as badly bruised. Wishing he'd thought to ask the girl how to get back to the palace, he started walking. He didn't know where he was nor for how long he had been on the cart, but he thought that most of the trip had been uphill. Based on his limited experience in Querna, that implied they had been heading away from the harbor and probably south or east. In any case, he reasoned, it wouldn't hurt to go away from where he'd last seen the slavers' cart.

An hour later, too tired to continue, he practically crawled into an alley and found a wide pipe sticking out from a building that was spewing out warm and pleasantly fragrant air. Just before falling asleep, huddled in the warm breeze, he realized that he must have found the exhaust from the ovens of a bakery. Very good. He still had a few small coins, maybe he could buy his breakfast. He drifted off to sleep while armies of pleasant thoughts involving warm bread and butter with the possibilities of cream-filled pastries battled heroically against the dreaded fear of gruel.

Twenty-five

She looks as bad as I feel, Silverwind thought as he stumbled into the kitchen that morning and spotted Oceanvine in her usual place. Their meetings in the pre-dawn kitchen had become a semi-regular part of their day in Querna and he suddenly realized that they had been meeting here every third morning since their arrival. No more or less.

"You ought to be in bed," she snapped at him without preamble.

"Yes. It's nice to see you this morning as well," he returned pleasantly. Somehow there was nothing that could snap him out of a foul mood in the morning better than seeing someone else miserable.

She didn't reply. Instead she took a savage bite out of one of half a dozen pastries on the dish in front of her.

"So you couldn't sleep either," he concluded. Wordlessly, she looked at him. The tears were at high tide in her eyes and threatened to flood. "Vine, it wasn't your fault."

"Oh?" she asked, louder than she may have intended. "Then whose fault was it? If I hadn't been so sure that I could handle him, Candle and I would have been safely back and at last night's party."

"Or out on the town with Zak," Silverwind amended. "He was hoping to use you as an excuse to duck out on the festivities."

"Then I owe him an apology as well, but will I ever be able to apologize to Candle? Damn it, Silverwind! I was the one the killer was trying to snatch, not Candle."

"And if he had succeeded, you would probably be dead," the wizard told her bluntly, "right now. Candle, on the other hand was not under his spell when they disappeared. He has a chance. He'll probably come wandering in anytime now demanding his breakfast."

"Do you think so?"

"I don't think he's dead," Silverwind replied.

"How can you know? The string between you is cut."

"I don't know for sure," Silverwind admitted, "but after several months of having Candle as an apprentice, I've gotten to know him quite well. Have you ever been the subject of a translocation spell?"

She shook her head. "Until recently I thought the only case one was used was by Crossreed at Carlifa."

"Most of us who know better try to encourage that belief," Silverwind replied. "Actually there are two or three deaths each year caused by someone trying to translocate himself. It's a shock to the old system, let me tell you. Tried it myself once and knocked myself out for hours. One thing I've noticed is that the younger and healthier the subject, the faster he recovers. Candle's young and strong. I think he will wake up before our killer. What happens next, we'll just have to wait and see, but I personally wouldn't be surprised if he ties him up and calls the cops."

"Candle would love to solve the case for us, wouldn't he?" Oceanvine smiled for the first time in hours and Silverwind nodded.

"And even if he just runs, he'll eventually make it back here and with the address of the killer's home. That should tell us something."

She agreed, and feeling a little better left to freshen up before the daily breakfast meeting. "I'd also better check in on Ksana and give her the morning treatment," she added.

Washing and straightening came first. Oceanvine knew that the link between Ksana and herself was too intimate to hide her worries about Candle, but there was no need to distress the girl who was rapidly becoming more than a friend. As she splashed water on her face, Oceanvine wondered anew about that link. She was giving Ksana the benefit of her strength, but was she getting anything in return? Given her performance under the street lamp, she felt it was all too possible. She would ask Geraint about it later.

Ksana was up with the sun that morning and almost terminally bored. She complained about that almost as soon as Oceanvine stepped through the door.

"Can't I at least have something to read?" she asked.

"You can read?" Oceanvine countered, surprised.

"No," Ksana admitted after a confused pause. "I don't know why I said that. Maybe I could draw though. I used to draw all the time when I was a girl." Cleaned up and with some hope of a clean life, Ksana seemed much younger than she had at first. Oceanvine's first impression was that the girl was about her own age, but now it seemed doubtful that Ksana was over twenty.

"All right," Oceanvine smiled. "I think I can manage that much and if you want, maybe we can find someone to teach you how to read." Ksana smiled back at Oceanvine and then the blond mage went to work.

By the time she was done, Oceanvine was finally ready to sleep, but it was almost time for the morning



meeting and she didn't feel that her presence was optional this morning. The meeting room was a fifteen-minute walk from the Garden Wing where Silverwind's party was staying if she stayed completely inside, but the weather was warm this morning and she chose to take a shortcut through the garden that the wing was named for. So far it was a bright and sunny day, in contrast to her current mood, but there was a thick line of clouds moving in from the west that threatened to turn the pleasant weather to storm. If Silverwind was right, she devoutly hoped that Candle returned before the rain started.

A stand of white and yellow daffodils caught her eye, and she made a note to pick some for Ksana. Her room was rather dark and a splash of color might cheer her up a bit. Then she continued on briskly when she saw Silverwind and Geraint talking at the far end of the garden. She had just caught up to them when another woman's voice could be heard just entering the area.

"Silverwind, darling!" Ysemay called out delightedly and throwing her arms around the startled and reluctant wizard. "It's been years. Simply years!" Silverwind tried to unwrap himself from what he felt was a stifling embrace, but the harder he tried, the harder she held on to him.

Meanwhile Oceanvine fumed. Who was this bitch poaching on her territory? Her territory? Realization of that thought set the pretty mage back. She loved the wizard, but had never thought of him as her own. Not yet anyway.

"Ysemay," Silverwind tried to distract his ex-wife, "You know Geraint."

"Hm?" she said, almost curiously, then disinterest crossed her face, "Oh, Hi, Windchime. Nice to see you again, I guess."

"And my," Silverwind paused in what he hoped would sound like a meaningful way, "newpartner Oceanvine. Vine, myex -wife Ysemay of Rallena. I believe I may have mentioned her and her literary efforts," he concluded.

"Lady Ysemay," Oceanvine murmured, keeping her eyes on the woman as though prepared to defend herself against physical attack.

Lady Ysemay finally disentangled herself from Silverwind to study the blond young lady. "How nice to meet you, Oceanvine." It was apparent that Ysemay felt it was anything but nice. "We must get together sometime and," she too paused as though searching for the correct word, "talk."

"My pleasure," Oceanvine replied in tones almost as catty as Ysemay's. Somehow, Oceanvine realized, she was never going to be friends with this lady.

"Of course," Ysemay duplicated her tone. Then she spun back to face Silverwind, grabbed his arm and dragged him deeper into the garden. "Silverwind, dear, you must tell me absolutely everything you've been doing these last few years. I'm practically running out of ideas for my stories."

"Really? I hadn't noticed," he replied.

Ysemay laughed charmingly - a totally insincere sound. "Oh, Silverwind. As delightfully funny as ever. How have I ever managed without you?" Silverwind's sarcastic reply was lost in the distance.

"Oo!" Oceanvine came within a hair's breadth of losing control and screaming out her rage.

"I've been wondering what would happen if you two ever met," Geraint laughed. She turned on him,

incipient murder in her eyes. "Whoa, girl! I'm on your side. She's hasn't got a chance with him anyway. He knows her all too well. It's rather sad actually. I think she still truly loves him, but he'll never forgive her for divorcing him while he was on his hermitage."

"I want to claw her eyes out," Oceanvine confided.

"That doesn't sound like you."

She paused and took a deep breath. "I know. I've been having a lot of strange thoughts lately. Last night I seemed to know instinctively how to act like a whore, and every time I think of Silverwind, I have the most naughty thoughts. Does this have something to do with the treatments I've been giving Ksana?"

"More than probably. I warned you the bond was a very intimate one. If it's any consolation, she's probably learning how to act like a refined and well-educated lady. Remember Master Firefly in Keesport? He tried to treat four or five girls a day at one point until he caught himself having an argument with one of the girls over the relative merits of various styles of make-up. Don't worry, these unconscious emotions and involuntary reactions will fade rapidly after the treatments stop. That is unless you consciously try to perpetuate them."

"Why would I want to do that?" she asked disgustedly. "I know how Ksana feels about what she does. She hates it utterly, but it's only way she knows how to make a living, if you can call it that."

"Well, perhaps we can find another occupation for her, before we leave," he suggested. "The feelings will fade in you, but quite a few of Ksana's new reactions may become permanent for her. They're more positive, so she'll probably want to keep them. Elewys was far less refined when I first met her."

"Ksana was complaining that she didn't have anything to read this morning, and she doesn't even know how."

"There, you see. We'll have to teach her how, of course, or find someone to do it for us. That sort of positive reinforcement is invaluable. Maybe that young prince and princess I saw Candle with yesterday can do it or Candle himself," Geraint caught himself before he said anything more. He didn't have Silverwind's optimism on that count. "When he gets back," he concluded uncertainly.

The morning meeting was less of a trial than Oceanvine expected. Still feeling miserable about the loss of Candle, she didn't think she could bear the smug lectures she expected. However, the only department chief to appear that morning was Sandstone and when he started to berate her for her foolishness, others swiftly came to her defense.

"It was a worthwhile gambit," Toska maintained.

"Here! here!" Sir Kharald agreed.

"And one we should have thought of before," Toska concluded.

"Yes, the idea of baiting the killer is a good one," Kharald remarked, "but we obviously need more than an apprentice mage for back-up. Lady Oceanvine, will you consent to act as the bait again? Perhaps if Lord Silverwind and Master Windchime were on hand we could catch our man."

"I will," Oceanvine replied simply, her worry and guilt feelings over Candle renewed by Kharald's reference to the boy.

"Where is Snowfall this morning, Sandstone?" Silverwind asked.

"He sent word that he was running late this morning," Sandstone replied stiffly. "Elsewise I wouldn't be here."

"Oh?"

"Oh!" the Granomish mage mimicked Silverwind. "You have yet to establish the usefulness of these meetings and I can certainly enjoy my breakfast more at home."

"Feel free to leave anytime," Silverwind replied. From what you've accomplished in the months before I took this case, I think we all can survive without your assistance."

"Now look, human," Sandstone grated viciously, "I don't care who hired you. The responsibility for the magical end of this investigation is mine and I will not be forced out of it!"

Silverwind was tempted to do just that, but another, more immediate problem suddenly showed her pretty head, arriving as she did just behind the servants carrying in the breakfast.

"Ah ha!" Lady Ysemay said from the doorway. "This is where you got to. What's this? A war council? Good! I'll just take notes."

"What the hell are you doing here?" Silverwind demanded.

"Oh, didn't I tell you? His Majesty wants me to novelize this case, and what better way to do my research than to come to all your meetings."

"No," he replied flatly. The door opened and a wary Snowfall entered the room, aside from trying to be inconspicuous, however, he seemed unusually awake and chipper. He looked around and, seeing the argument between the wizard and his former wife, decided to walk quietly to the table and find a seat.

"And I'll accompany you in the field," Ysemay was saying

"No."

"Oh, Silverwind! It'll be just like the old days!"

"No!" Silverwind fairly shouted. That finally got her attention.

"But, dear, why not?" Ysemay asked, feigning innocence. "His Majesty thinks it is a marvelous idea."

"No!" This time the objection came from Sandstone. "Silverwind is right."

"Never thought I'd hear him admit that," Geraint said in an aside to Oceanvine. Even in her depression, Oceanvine had to smile at that.

"This is no place for an amateur," Silverwind told his ex-wife.

"I am not an amateur," Ysemay maintained. "I am a professional writer."

"And this qualifies you for police work?" Sir Kharald asked pointedly.

"Many of my stories are mysteries," she replied with dignity, "and based on real life. One picks up things after a while."

"Things?" Toska asked. "You pick up things? Lady, have you ever been out on extended surveillance? Or in on an arrest? We're dealing with a very dangerous criminal who would no more balk at killing you than he has all his other victims."

"Oh pooh! You men always make more of these things than absolutely necessary. Aren't I right, dear?" Ysemay asked Oceanvine. The wizard's assistant, however, never got the chance to rebut Ysemay's arguments. Geraint beat her to it.

"Maybe you are capable of helping us," he suggested, using an open hand to signal the others to hold off their protests. "Oceanvine's worn out from last night's adventure, so perhaps you can fill in for her tonight. It doesn't require a mage after all, so I think you qualify."

"Certainly," Ysemay replied smugly. "What do I have to do?"

"Act like a whore." Geraint smiled tightly. Some of the others were not so restrained. "She can do that, Silverwind, can't she?"

"Don't you dare say anything!" Ysemay shouted at the wizard, blushing furiously, while everyone else laughed. "Not one word!" Silverwind looked at her and then silently pointed at the door. Ysemay, finally taking the hint, got up from her seat and stomped toward the door. "King Ksaveras will hear about this!" were her parting words.

"Good," Silverwind replied quietly to the empty doorway, knowing full well from experience that Ysemay was standing just out of sight, "it's about time he took a more active part in this affair." Then he flipped his hand casually at the door and cast a spell that caused it to slam shut. There was a muffled shout of indignation and the sound of Ysemay's footstep rapidly fading away. "Now, shall we continue? What's all this I hear about a suspect you arrested yesterday?"

"Well, perhaps we were a bit hasty about him," Klim admitted reluctantly.

Toska nodded his agreement but added, "We did catch him in the act, and don't believe his story about merely wanting to get laid. He pulled a knife on the hooker he accosted. We even have witnesses to the crime."

"A copycat," Silverwind commented then saw the confusion on the Granomish faces before him. "Sorry, that's an Emmine term. I'm not sure of the Granomish equivalent, but it's not an uncommon occurrence, unfortunately, especially when there's been a series of seemingly successful crimes that have been getting a lot of publicity. I'm not sure of the rationale behind the actions, whether it's an intentional emulation of a supposedly successful maniac or a calculated attempt to get away with something and have the blame laid on someone else or maybe it's caused by something else. Psychology is too new a discipline nor is it mine, so I'll leave the detailed explanations to those who know better. The point is it happens. That's all I really know about it. What I also know is that the real killer is still out there somewhere."

"In here?" a familiar voice asked from outside. The question was followed by a soft knock on the door. Silverwind nodded at the door and it swung open smoothly and silently to reveal a bedraggled but very much alive Candle.

"Candle!" Oceanvine cried, jumping out of her chair to hug the lad. "I was so worried." Silverwind also got up, but Oceanvine continued to hug the bewildered boy fiercely, tears streaming out of her eyes, so the wizard had to content himself with tousling the boy's already unkempt hair.

"Where have you been, lad?" he asked after Oceanvine partially released Candle. She still held on to him as though trying to convince herself that he was really back.

"I'm sorry it took so long, sir," the apprentice apologized abjectly, thinking he was in trouble. "I, uh, got lost."

"Sounds reasonable," Silverwind admitted. "You had no way of knowing where you were. Tell me about it."

Candle told about how he woke up in the killer's front room and the ensuing chase. "Anyway, I woke up when the baker tried to chase me out of his alley. He got friendlier when I bought some of his bread. I think he overcharged me, but his directions back to the palace were good. It was a long walk, though. Took me hours."

"So you never actually saw his face?" Snowfall asked him.

"It didn't seem like a good idea to stick around at the time, sir," Candle retorted, "but he was wearing a gray wig. I think he's trying to look older than he really is."

"And you don't know where you were?" Toska asked.

"No, sir," Candle replied dejectedly.

"What do you expect, Toska?" Sir Kharald chided his colleague. "The boy lost his bearings twice in one evening and in a strange city. Frankly, I'm impressed by the way he escaped the collectors, and the way he made it back here so quickly. Well done, boy!" Candle ventured a smile at hearing the praise. The others echoed the sentiment, but Candle still hadn't heard from the one man whose opinion he valued. He looked hesitantly at Silverwind.

"Of course you did well," the wizard assured him, "I would expect no less. But you probably want to rest now, don't you?" Candle nodded. Oceanvine wanted to second that motion. "All right? Anyone have any questions before Candle gets some well-deserved sleep?"

"Just one," Toska spoke up. "Candle, if you saw the killer's house again, would you recognize it?"

"It was one of a long line and I didn't see the number on the doorpost, but I think I would recognize the street."

"Good enough for me. Lord Wizard, may I suggest that we send Candle out with someone - say you or Lady Oceanvine or Master Windchime - and see if he can find that street again?"

"Good idea," Silverwind agreed. "Vine, you'll take Candle with you when you go out. All right?" She nodded. "Candle, get yourself off to bed then." Candle smiled and left the room. "Any other business this morning? No? Very well, I'll see you all tomorrow if not sooner. Thank you for coming."

Twenty-six

"Dear Miss Oceanvine'," she read aloud to the others in the palace's small social room they had taken as their own. Silverwind and Geraint were drinking the bright red Granomish ale they preferred and Candle was trying to make do with the flavored seltzer that was all Silverwind would allow him. "'We regret to inform you that there are no openings in our master's program at this time. Thank you for your kind interest in our university. Yours truly, Master Frostglow'. Any comments?" she asked challengingly.

"No," Silverwind almost drawled, "I think the expression on your face says it all."

"What the hell do they mean by 'no openings'? If there were no openings, why didn't they say so from the start."

"I suspect," Geraint conjectured, "that they hadn't thought of that excuse yet."

"Yeah," Candle added. "This is probably their way of saying that you did better than most."

"But I still don't get to stand for my master's," Oceanvine pointed out.

"There's always Randona," Silverwind told her, "or would you prefer to try Merinne next?"

"I would prefer to do it right here and now," she snapped. "Damn! It took months to work myself up to the point where I felt I was ready. It will be still more months before I can try either of the other Universities."

"Maybe," Silverwind suggested, "if we find the killer we can convince Ksaveras to put in a good word for you."

"I thought the University was autonomous from the Crown."

"Only in theory. In practice over half the University's grant money comes from the Crown so if the king asks a little favor of the deans, they're almost bound to agree. Oh, they'll do everything they can to worm their way out of it and when they can't they'll give you the toughest set of exams anyone has ever stood for - make the entrance exams look easy..."

"They were easy," Oceanvine interrupted him.

"They didn't think so. I guarantee it. However, in the end they'll make it sound like it was their idea to enroll you and give you the degree."

"Aren't you skipping a stage or two?" Geraint asked. "Like she might not pass the killer tests that ate Randona." Silverwind looked at him as though he had just spoken heresy. "All right," Geraint laughed, "but you have to admit, it isn't a foregone conclusion."

"It isn't?" the wizard countered.

"Right!" Oceanvine replied regaining the full measure of her own self-confidence. "I'll blow them away! Besides, if I have the same examining board the only real problem will be Frostglow. Quartzvein was open-minded and I think Bowsprit kind of likes me." She smiled warmly.

"Watch out for Bowsprit, Vine," Silverwind.

"Oceanvine!" she corrected him automatically.

"Whatever. I don't doubt old Bowsprit's taken a liking to you, but that wizard is toughest on his favorites. He was on my exam board too and put me through hell before passing me."

"I'll keep that in mind," she replied lightly. "Now let's get back to business. Don't you think it's time we tried to set a trap for the killer again? It's been several days since the last time and I'll be cutting Ksana's string tomorrow; I think she'll be ready."

"And you want to do this while her influence on you is still fresh in your mind, right?" Silverwind asked.

"The instinctive stuff will fade within hours once they cut the string," Geraint commented seriously. "She's right, tonight is our best chance."

"And no women have been reported missing in days," Oceanvine added. "He's due to try again."

"Unless he skipped town," Candle commented.

"You think so?" Geraint asked, considering the possibility.

"I would," the boy admitted, "but then I'm not a looney either. It's a shame I couldn't figure out which street I was on, though."

"It's not your fault that area is so big. At least we have it narrowed down to a three-block radius and most of the killed or missing women were known to have worked within ten blocks of there. So shall we try again tonight?"

"Why not?" Silverwind shrugged. "If he's gone there's no harm done, other than lost sleep. This time, however, you'd better disguise yourself as a Granom. After the other night he's bound to recognize you and suspect a trap."

"No problem," she replied. "I'll make myself look like Ksana. If that doesn't look natural, I don't know what will."

"We'll have to do something to help you resist that mesmerism spell of his," Geraint commented. "From what I could tell it was a variant of the Hook. A much faster one at that. We're lucky he didn't have time to completely set it since he managed to get you."

"What do you suggest?" Oceanvine asked.

"Since we know the nature of the spell I can fashion an anti-spell. I can't promise it'll be proof against his spell, but it should help you resist long enough for us to take the man."

"I'm going too," Candle insisted quietly.

Silverwind was tempted to say no, but instead said, "All right, but this time throw that knife rather than try to stab with it. I don't want you going off on any unscheduled journeys."

They set their trap two blocks away from where Oceanvine had tried the trick before, but on a direct line between there and the neighborhood Candle had fingered as the killer's home.

Oceanvine was disguised by an elaborate combination of illusions so that she looked even more like Ksana than Ksana herself did at the moment. On Ksana's advice, Oceanvine made her illusory clothes to include a white, skin-tight sweater and a long woolen skirt, slit to the thigh. It was a more traditional sort of outfit for Granomish hookers. The fad for ersatz Orentan, she told Oceanvine, was relatively recent, but the higher-class johns were, at heart, still conservative.

"Querna's tits! Make your boobs bigger and your hips wider," Ksana had repeated for the third time to Oceanvine's acute embarrassment. "I'm a big girl, in case you hadn't noticed!"

Oceanvine chose a convenient corner at the intersection of two major streets, fending off the aggression of two other women and a pimp, all of whom saw her as competition. The women she appeased by telling them the truth. They were all too happy to let her face the killer alone. The pimp, on the other hand, she gave a hot foot to. He threatened to come back, but made the mistake of passing Geraint on his way for reinforcements and spent the rest of the evening sleeping in an alley. When he awoke, some hours later, he discovered two broken ribs, a broken arm, a dislocated leg, and a missing wallet.

Silverwind and Candle, like Geraint, were watching from concealing alleys so that they were able to cover three out of four exits from the intersection.

The evening started out warm and humid, but fairly clear, but an hour after they set up the temperature dropped a few degrees and the city became blanketed by dense fog. Silverwind could still see Oceanvine clearly but was unable to see the other side of the intersection where Candle waited. He wondered whether Geraint's and Candle's views were any better.

Several men approached Oceanvine, but Ksana had coached her on subtle ways to discourage a john for when one wasn't so desperate as to take on anyone, and she used all of them. Oceanvine was surprised at how easily some men were discouraged. A few persisted even when she quoted outrageously high prices, preferring to dicker on what was obviously superior merchandise. Her final defense in three cases was to tell them she was a cop and that they were under arrest. One man hurried off into the night, but the other two shocked her out of her wits by agreeing when she suggested that they go turn themselves in. She learned later that they had, indeed, done just that. The people she knew would have laughed at the idea, but these Granomen seemed to think the idea of personal recognizance was as natural as rain. They'd been caught fair and square and were willing to pay the small fine.

"Different people, different cultures," she sighed when the second one had thanked her for her trust and walked briskly off to turn himself in.

After a while, the evening quieted down as fewer and fewer people went abroad into the fog-veiled city. The fog also became thicker making it harder for Oceanvine's protectors to see her. Silverwind and Geraint held their places, but Candle ventured out of his alley for a better view. Because of that, it was Candle who saw the approach of the man in black first.

The fog did little to muffle the sound of his hard leather boot-heels as he strolled toward the intersection in a deliberate, casual pace. It was late and Oceanvine was expecting to hear the Midnight Bell - the prearranged quitting time - at any moment, but the appearance of this Granom meant they would play this



out now for as long as it took.

There was nothing particularly unusual about his clothing, except that it was the same outfit the killer had worn several nights earlier. The wide-brimmed hat still shaded his face so that no identifiable features were visible, but as he came within Oceanvine's sphere of visible space, she noted that his posture and unconscious mannerisms marked him as the same man she had encountered before.

She chose to wait until he came to within two yards of her position before acting. Consequently, when he began his magical assault on her soul at a distance of three yards, she was completely free to resist the compulsion of his variant of the Hook. Even with the aid of Geraint's protective spell, it required the entirety of her will and effort to keep from succumbing to the spell. The only signal she could give to her protectors involved her gradually relaxing posture, feigning the results of her last exposure to the killer's spell.

Silverwind could barely see what was happening and started forward cautiously, and Candle couldn't throw his knife for Oceanvine stood between him and the killer, so it was Geraint who reacted first. Closing his eyes, he concentrated on an offensive spell - a simple but powerful impeller designed to push the dark-clad Granom violently. In gathering the necessary energy, however, he discovered that he had been reaching for higher-level magic far too often lately. Even as he prepared to cast his spell, he could feel the nightmares as their chilling tentacles wrapped round his soul. The spell, when he forced himself to hurl it to Oceanvine's defense, lacked most of the force he had intended and he became immersed in a war for his own sanity against those demon-spawned nightmares that had afflicted him since the debacle on the Isle of Fire.

The intended stunning blow, merely pushed the rogue mage slightly, but succeeded in breaking his concentration temporarily and in blowing the red-banded hat off his head.

Oceanvine, no longer under siege, opened her eyes to view the killer's face for the first time. His hair was a salt and pepper gray, but she knew from Candle's report that was a wig. He also wore a full beard that disguised most of his face, but there was something familiar about his eyes. The Granom recovered faster than Oceanvine expected and as she reached out to remove his beard, he shoved her back violently against the lamp post. Her head struck the wrought iron pole and she slumped to the sidewalk, dazed by the impact.

With Oceanvine out of the line of fire, Candle excitedly threw his dagger at the Granomish mage. In his haste, however, his aim was less than accurate and the dagger succeeded only in tagging the edge of the killer's voluminous cloak. The killer whirled around and, seeing the boy across the street, hurled a spell similar to the one Geraint had used, but with greater force, throwing the boy several yards back. From out of the fog the killer heard the sound of Candle's body crashing noisily into a pair of trash cans. It was a satisfying sound of victory. The killer laughed - a frighteningly humorless sound, utterly devoid of anything resembling sanity.

"Next!" he shouted triumphantly, his madness convincing him that he could stand against all comers. It was unlikely, however, that he truly believed there was anyone else waiting for him in the fog, for he spun around, startled, by Silverwind's quiet words.

"All right, if you insist," the wizard almost whispered. With casual ease he constructed a binding spell to hold the murderer in place, but that man's madness gave him strength and it was obvious that he would soon break free again. If they wanted to bring the Cardiokiller in alive, he would have to be subdued and the obvious way to the wizard meant engaging this Granom in a mages' duel of wills. Grimly, Silverwind murmured the almost ritual challenge, "Try me!" and the two men locked eyes in a contest as old as all

magic.

This, however, was not the simple stare-down of college freshmen, nor was it even the higher-level duel that Sandstone had lost to Oceanvine where the stakes would be nothing higher than the loss of one's dignity. This was a battle in which Silverwind's life was at stake, made all the more lethal, because he, himself, could only win by fighting to submission.

Although Silverwind issued the challenge, the first aggression was committed by the killer. Instantly the wizard found himself mentally transported to a plain of closely cropped grass, except that the grass was colored black and red and divided up into two-yard squares under a stark, metallic silver sky. A great black orb hung in the sky - an unholy parody of the sun or was it Midbar - Maiyim's dead moon? The wizard decided that it didn't matter.

A chess board, Silverwind mused silently. I'm standing on a chessboard of infinite dimensions!

He looked around, but there was nobody else in sight - nothing to base a counter-attack on. Shrugging, he attempted to step from the black square he was on and into a neighboring red one, but as soon as he entered it he heard a loud noise above him. Looking up, he saw nothing, but his ears told him that something dangerous was coming at him at a screamingly loud rate from out of that black sun. He caught a slight sign of motion and jumped out of the red square and into the next black one just as something very large and heavy struck the surface behind him.

The impact threw him haphazardly into the next red square and once more he heard that noise. Lacking the time to get to his feet, he rolled out of the red square just in time once more. This time, however, he was able to keep himself from being thrown out of his square.

There was a pattern here - rules to the attack. It was very unusual and Silverwind wondered idly whether the same rules of encounter applied to him as well. They probably did, but the question was whether or not he would learn them in time. So far he had learned that he would be attacked each time he attempted to enter a red square, or at least he thought that's what had been established. It was probably not a safe line of investigation to test that hypothesis too often. Intellectually, the wizard knew that he and the rogue mage were still standing face-to-face on a street corner in Querna, but his opponent had gotten the drop on him and so had been able to set up whatever elaborate rules to this duel he desired. In this imaginary world absolutely anything could happen and Silverwind had to quickly learn how to operate here or use his own will to change the rules. That, too, was possible, but in most cases it was easier to use what you were given. The only constant was that the rules could not be party-specific - both contestants had the same powers and restrictions. With sufficiently superior will-power Silverwind could change the rules, but the effort involved could well cost him his life. Better for now to work with what he had. If the killer thought he could defeat the wizard, then the reverse was also true.

Silverwind experimented. Reasoning that since the attacks were coming from the orb in the sky, he decided that his opponent was up there. He tried casting a simple impeller spell of low intensity at the black sun, but it came out far stronger than he intended. He heard the roar of a great wind blowing straight up from where he stood and felt the immense suction. Then a second or two later, the wind reversed itself and came back at him, blowing him back into the previous red square which was now a shallow pit.

The screaming sound began again immediately and Silverwind barely managed to scramble back into a safe black square and stay there when the impact deepened the pit still further. He sat there thinking for a moment. Perhaps it was the moving from one square to another that set off the attack, but why did his own spell bounce back on him?

Carefully, he devised a far-seer spell and used it to study the great black orb in the sky. That proved useless and only provided him with a detailed look at a featureless sphere. He stood up once more and decided to test his movement theory. Stepping into an adjacent black square, provoked no attack, but a quick single step into a red one did.

"So I'm only vulnerable on a red square. Might I also only attack from a red square?" he asked aloud. There was no reply, not that he'd expected any.

He prepared another spell, similar to the first and cast it only as he stepped into a red square. Once more the effects appeared to be far greater than he expected and once more the force of the spell rebounded on him, blowing him out of the red square just before his opponent's spell arrived. The combined force was derived by multiplication rather than addition and Silverwind was flung out dozens of square-lengths through the air before landing. He rolled as he struck the odd, checkerboard landscape, passing through several squares before coming to rest, by sheer chance in a black square. Oddly, the only blast spell that accompanied his roller-like progression occurred in response to his entrance into the last red square he passed through.

Silverwind paused and caught his breath. The landing had been painful, but not as crippling as it should have been in the real world. Sufficient pain, he realized, would cause him to lose concentration and leave him vulnerable to physical attack. The blasts from the sky probably couldn't harm him directly, but their distraction value was lethal. He decided that nothing further could be gained by experimentation. It was time to go on the offensive.

Suddenly the globe in the sky turned blood-red. Had the rules been reversed? Silverwind tensed for another attack, but nothing happened and the orb turned black again a moment later.

That's it! he thought. That orb represents the color square he's on. Probably has the same vista I do. How disappointing. He was probably hoping to take me in the first few minutes while I was still confused.

The trick probably would have worked on the average mage, but Silverwind's powers of concentration were greater than most. Oceanvine had remarked sourly on that often enough.

The rules of this illusion did not allow for levitation or flight, but Silverwind had had enough of playing by the rules. He mustered every erg of will power at his command and went to work. Slowly, as his will began to be exerted on the basic laws of this illusion, he started to rise above the landscape. Gradually he mastered the illusion, adding his own addition to it and he flew higher and with greater ease. The checkerboard world beneath him began to recede and assume the shape of a sphere. Every so often, a bolt of magical energy would sizzle past him, but now that he was aloft, he was no longer on a direct line between the black orb and whatever red square he might technically be over.

Once, as he rose above the black and red world, the orb he approached turned red and he quickly cast a fireball at the globe. The blue-white ball sizzled toward the red orb and was absorbed. Then the globe turned black again and stayed that way.

Far sooner than Silverwind expected, he reached the surface of the black globe. It was solid and featureless and seemed to have no gravitational attraction. He circled around it, wild shots of energy bursting forth and shooting past him until the black orb was between him and the red and black world he now orbited.

Stalemate! he thought. Unless the rules are changed again, he can't hit me and as long as he stays put, I

can't hit him. Then an idea crossed his mind. Yeah, he thought, "hit him!" The rogue mage was physically within arm's reach and although a physical assault was, technically, cheating, this was no polite game to decide who was to buy the next round of drinks. Silverwind made a fist and drew it back, careful to be certain that his physical body was performing the same act as his illusory one. Before he could throw his intended punch, however the entire illusion world exploded into a burst of pure white light that faded to the black.

Silverwind realized that he was looking at the lining of his eyelids, so he opened them to realize that he was floating about eight feet off the ground and facing head down at an obtuse angle. As he corrected his yaw and pitch he noticed that the Granom in black had crumpled, unconscious to the pavement and that Oceanvine stood over him with a stout stick in her hands.

"You shouldn't have done that, Vine," Silverwind commented. "While locked in a contest, you might have hurt me too."

"You said to hit him," Oceanvine shrugged, looking up at the wizard, "so I did."

"Oh," he replied wonderingly. "Didn't realize I'd said that out loud. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Would you like to come on down now? Gravity doesn't appreciate scofflaws." Silverwind smiled and allowed himself to settle lightly to the pavement whereupon the pretty, blond mage threw her arms about him, kissing him soundly. The wizard was dazed for a moment, but recovered quickly and returned the gesture at least in part before she released him. "There!" she said smugly.

"Very nice," he managed, but not without allowing surprise to creep into his voice. "What was that for?"

"What was that for?" she repeated. "Silverwind, I am sorely tired of waiting for you to notice me. Damn! We've been working together for years and it's about time you realized that I love you!"

"You do?"

"Have for a long time now even if I am just another piece of laboratory equipment to you," she added bitterly.

"Vine, I never thought you cared for me that way. I'm old enough to be..."

"You're a year and a half older than Dad. Is that what you're trying to say? It doesn't matter. Really. But if you don't feel the same way, forget it. Just forget it. Chalk this foolish outburst up to my recent attachment to Ksana. That girl has no control over her emotions whatsoever." Oceanvine turned her back to Silverwind, not wanting to see his rejection of her advance. She'd really blown it this time, she thought. No proper young lady would ever throw herself at a man that way. Even now the excitement that led to her emotional outburst was passing and the embarrassment was rising along with a full-body blush. Consequently she wasn't able to see the odd look on the wizard's face as he finally understood what was happening.

"Vine, I love you too," he said at last. "Maybe not at first sight, although I must admit to a certain attraction from the start." She turned back to face him, hope flaring in her eyes. "To tell the truth, though, I never thought you might feel the same way." They stared at each other for a few moments, an oddly gentle version of the contest Silverwind had just been through, although one in which there was no loser. Without being consciously aware of their action, they fell into each other's arms and kissed once more.

"Bloody well about time, you two," Candle commented tartly from a few yards away.

"Hush, boy," Geraint told him softly, "The miracle's that it happened at all. I've never known two such stubborn asses." Oceanvine and Silver turned, still holding each other to see Candle and Geraint helping each other approach.

"Good Gods!" Silverwind swore as he and Oceanvine rushed to their friends' sides. "What happened to you two?"

"I over-extended myself," Geraint replied wryly. "You know what that means." Silverwind nodded. The Nightmares. "The boy here had a flying lesson. We're both a little sore in our own ways but we'll survive."

"Yeah," Candle nodded. "Let's have a look at that guy."

"I'd nearly forgotten him," Silverwind commented mostly to himself.

"Oh good!" Geraint said sourly, "Good thing he didn't wake up and get away. We'd probably never have another chance at him."

"On the contrary," Oceanvine replied smugly, "we could have arrested him tomorrow morning."

"You know who he is?" Candle asked.

"Obviously," she replied as Silverwind reached to unmask the villain.

"Who?"

"Master Sandstone, of course. That's why he recognized me the other night and why he's been giving us trouble all along."

"I hate to burst your bubble, Vine," Silverwind chuckled, "but you're wrong. Close, but wrong." She whirled to look at the murderer, still lying on the ground. Silverwind had removed his hat, wig and false beard.

"Snowfall!" she gasped. Not far away, the Midnight Bell rang.

Twenty-seven

"My sincerest apologies, Lord Wizard, Lady Oceanvine," Master Sandstone told them at the final breakfast meeting thirty-eight hours later. The master mage had eaten very little that morning and looked even paler than was normal for a Granom. "I never realized just how twisted a mind young Snowfall had. He was a very good magician. I knew that and thought his recent ineptitude had something to do with the idea of working with a world-famous wizard. Nervousness, you know."

"He fooled us all," Oceanvine told the Granomish master gently.

"I was grooming him for my position," Sandstone confessed hollowly. "I planned to retire in five years. Plenty of time for him to earn his master's. Never once did I think he might be anything besides the capable assistant he seemed to be. Did you know that he had been engaged to one of the missing girls? A young lady of high standing who attended the Academy. I think this all started when he learned she was a part of that prostitution ring Lady Anci of Talinca allegedly ran, although we'll never know for certain. That poor girl was the first victim reported missing, although we never found her body until yesterday."

"That was absolutely ghastly!" Sir Kharald shuddered. "Forty-three little jars, each one with the heart of one of his victims neatly marked and catalogued. And that one glass coffin in the basement. Gran preserve me from ever having to see something like that again!"

"No guarantees," the recently elevated Sir Klim of Querna told him, "but this is the worst I've ever had to deal with."

"Indeed," Sir Edus agreed.

Lieutenant Toska nodded vehemently, adding, "Congratulations on your promotion, by the way."

"Thanks," Klim replied. "I can't help but feel sorry for Lord Miklos though. If he hadn't been so distracted by the controversy his wife generated, he might still be Royal Prosecutor today. I'll have to keep that in mind if I ever get married."

"So, what's to happen with Snowfall, anyway?" Lord Natan asked.

"I imagine he's being buried this morning," Sandstone replied emotionlessly."

"Buried?"

"He was executed last night by his Majesty's command. It wouldn't have been safe to release him from that binding spell Silverwind had him in. There's not a jail in all Granom that can hold even an apprentice mage, you know."

"But he never had a chance to defend himself!" Kharald protested. Sandstone merely stared emptily ahead.

"Master Sandstone defended him, Sir Kharald," Oceanvine informed the investigator, "and better than he could have defended himself."

"Still, it's a gruesome and frightening business," Toska commented.

"Yes it is," Silverwind agreed. "That's why we try to be so very careful about choosing apprentices. Still his record showed him to have an unusually stable mind."

"Learning that the love of your life is a whore is enough to unsettle any mind," Lord Natan commented. "Especially if you're Granomish. We set such a high value on purity and propriety. No doubt, he was enraged when he learned what his lady was doing and then suffered from such great remorse over killing her, that he started killing other women, hookers, as well. I'm sure that to his twisted mind that must have in some way justified his actions. It is all so sad.

"My Lord Wizard," he continued, "please allow me to thank you for your assistance and that of your

company," he nodded especially to Oceanvine, "in this case. I'm certain we would have never solved it without you." The others signaled their agreement and the meeting broke up soon afterwards.

Master Sandstone stayed seated until the others had left and only then got up to walk toward Oceanvine and Silverwind who still stood by the open door. "Where is Master Windchime this morning?" he asked uncertainly.

"Recovering," Silverwind replied simply.

"Oh. From those nightmares you told me about?"

"No. I think he's past that, but just in case he was up late last night, doing his best to drink his Majesty's beer kegs dry," Silverwind laughed.

Sandstone smiled tightly and then turned to Oceanvine and said, "Good luck, girl. Your thesis had better be as good as your forensic work." Then without waiting for a reply, the Granomish mage hurried away.

"Huh?" Oceanvine asked.

Silverwind shrugged. "I guess he never heard that your application wasn't accepted."

"I want to check in with Ksana this morning," Oceanvine said a few seconds later. "She should be out of bed today. Maybe I'll take her for a walk in the garden."

It was a warm and sunny morning, so they decided to take the shortcut through the garden and so were somewhat surprised to see Ksana already in the garden, escorted by Prince Zakhar.

"Oceanvine!" Zak greeted her. "I must thank you for finding this rare treasure." He glanced at Ksana and for a moment their eyes held each other. "Where ever did you find her?"

Oceanvine was at a loss for a polite reply and Ksana beat her to it. "Oh, he knows," she said conspiratorially.

"True," Zak agreed, "but it wouldn't do to make it public knowledge."

"Oh, Zak," Ksana protested with affection, "people are bound to find out sooner or later."

"We won't deny it," Zak told her warmly, "but there's no need to publicize either. We plan to marry quietly next week and then I'll be accepting an ambassadorial post in Merinne. The really good part is that this will remove me entirely from the line of succession," he informed them, "after all no heir to the throne may marry a commoner. I suppose I should have thought of this sooner, but then I might never have met Ksana."

"This is all rather sudden, isn't it?" Silverwind asked.

"Maybe, but I've been visiting Ksana on the sly for days now. Somebody had to keep her company after all. You two were busy."

"Congratulations and good luck, both of you!" Oceanvine told them while hugging them both.

"What about you two?" Ksana asked. The way she said it, reminded the wizard forcibly of Oceanvine.

"I saw you holding hands just now, Silverwind, and I know how my sister feels about you."

"Your sister?"

"We decided that was the closest term to the relationship we developed," Oceanvine explained. "This afternoon I plan to file an official document of adoption, so she really will be my sister."

"Right," the former hooker nodded, "the cure for the Hook seemed to do a lot more for me as well."

"I think you got the better of the deal," Oceanvine told her.

"So do I," she agreed, smiling at Zak, "but you haven't answered my question."

"We haven't actually discussed it yet," Silverwind replied. "We might just decide to go on living with each other."

"I doubt it," Ksana replied, studying the two of them. "I mean, Zak and I still have a lot to learn about each other, but for you two marriage would just be a way of recognizing something that's already there."

"Really!" Oceanvine insisted, even as Silverwind was about to say the same thing. "We honestly haven't set a date or a place yet, but we are going to Bellinen next."

"Oh?" Zak asked. "More business?"

"No," Silverwind replied. "Vacation. We've been working without a break, unless you count ocean voyages as a break - I don't - for well over half a year. After a demon and a serial killer - not to mention three years of almost non-stop research before that - I think we can both use some time off." Zak nodded.

"That's wonderful!" Ksana replied. "We can travel to Merinne together." The two mages agreed and continued on through the garden.

"I think I know what he sees in her," the wizard whispered to the pretty blond on his arm.

"Oh?" she asked.

"You. As Geraint predicted you had a far more noticeable and lasting affect on Ksana than she had on you. I notice that it's only been one day and you've already stopped walking like a whore."

"I'm still having some very naughty thoughts about you, dear," she told him.

"Most of those are quite normal, Vine. The only lasting effect I predict that you'll gain from Ksana will be that you probably won't repress those feelings so much in the future, but you've gotten me off on a tangent. Zak is so enamored of Ksana because she's turning out so much like you. He was smitten by you from the start, you know."

"Really? He was nice, but he never so much as hinted that he wanted a relationship that was more than friendship."

"He's a Granomish prince," Silverwind reminded her. "He can marry a common Granomish woman and the only penalty is that he'll never be king. Well, he never wanted to be king anyway, but his sons will still



be in line for the throne. They'll be a bit lower than they might have been, but they'll still be eligible and his daughters will be considered princesses and acceptable brides for any noble or royal man. So by law he is restricted from marrying a human or an elf. The union wouldn't be fertile and the penalty would be death. Still he couldn't help but want to be around you, until he met Ksana. Then he had the only Granomish woman who was even remotely like you."

"There is the possible scandal of her past," Oceanvine pointed out.

"That's probably why they're going to Bellinen. Elves don't really understand prostitution - there aren't any Orentan whores - and will not consider it a scandal if it ever comes out. Most likely they'll congratulate her for her clever means of making a living. Ksaveras is all for the marriage, of course. It will get his 'lazy cousin' out of the capital and into a respectable job at last." Silverwind laughed at the thought and Oceanvine found she had to join him. "Now, if I can just avoid Ysemay until we leave Querna, everything will be perfect."

"Oh? What will she base her story on if you won't give it to her?"

"She'll make something up. Actually, she'll do that anyway. By the time it finds print, we'll hardly recognize ourselves."

"Me especially," Oceanvine smiled. "You know, she actually snarled at me this morning."

"That's a healthy sign," the wizard assured her with a squeeze of her hand. "It means she knows we're meant for each other, but she doesn't want to admit it."

They were nearly out of the garden when Master Quartzvein from the University met them, coming out of the nearby wing of the palace. Oceanvine performed the polite introductions before asking what they could do for the professor.

"You have it the other way around," he assured her. "We've had cause to re-evaluate your entrance exam. You scored higher than anyone in the last ten years, maybe in history, but we don't keep exam results any longer than that. Old Bowsprit and I wanted to accept you right off, but Frostglow vetoed us."

"Silverwind," Oceanvine asked archly, "did you have the King speak to him?"

"I'd planned to, but hadn't gotten around to it," the wizard replied.

"It was Master Sandstone," Quartzvein informed them. "He spent three hours in Frostglow's office last night, threatening to have the RBI check the University's records for fraud."

"I'm not sure if that's within the Bureau of Investigation's jurisdiction," Silverwind commented with a smile.

"Neither was Frostglow, nor did he care to find out. Bowsprit and I were summoned to Frostglow's office this morning to go through the farce of a re-evaluation. Anyway, as I said, your scores were high enough to exempt you from taking any classes, so all you need to do is submit a thesis. You have four years to complete it, of course."

"It's already finished," Oceanvine replied easily. "I thought I needed it before applying so I paid one of the ladies in the Prosecutor's office to type four copies for me. The fourth arrived yesterday."

"We only need three, one for each member of your committee. If you like, I can take them with me."

"That'll be fine," Oceanvine replied, somewhat dazed by the turn of events.

"If you come by my office, this afternoon," Master Quartzvein continued, "we can arrange for your written comprehensives and thesis defense - next week perhaps, unless you think you'll need more time."

"I've been studying for months. Might as well get right to it," she shrugged. "Which day?"

"All week," he laughed. "Well, four out of five days anyway."

Oceanvine ran to her room and brought back three copies of her thesis before she and Silverwind walked Quartzvein to the main gate of the Palace compound, so it was only after the professor was well out of ear shot that she moaned, "Four solid days of testing?"

"You didn't know?" the wizard asked.

"I thought the comps were a one-day affair, like the entrance exam."

"You're half right. They are like the entrance exam, just longer." She looked at him, horrified at the prospect. "Vine," the wizard assured her, taking her into his arms, "If you could survive these last few weeks, your master's exams will be a snap." Then they kissed and, for a brief while, she put such concerns completely out of mind.

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# About this Title

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