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Island of Fire

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Note

This book took me ten years to write. It also only took about three months, depending on how you want to figure it.

After I finished my ninth novel I found that I was starting to run out of money. I had really enjoyed the previous two and some odd years trying to make a living at writing, but in spite of a few nibbles by interested publishers I still had not sold anything and it was time to go back to work in the mundane

world. I tried a part-time job, figuring that I could still write on the days I wasn't working. Well, that was a stupid idea! I was always on call not just at the one store I had been hired to work in, but in another store in the chain when the manager there discovered there was someone who actually appeared to work when asked. (I did not think that was so unusual at the time...) My routine had been shattered and because I was always on-call, there was no way to establish a new routine. I definitely need a routine when I'm writing. It doesn't have to be much of a routine, but...

So about a month or so after I started the new job, I sat down to start writing again. Over the next month I managed to knock off the Prologue and the first chapter, and then that was it for the next ten years. Every once in a while, I would sit down and look at what I had written and polish it up a bit, but somehow I never got beyond what I had written. I had gotten out of the writing habit. And polishing the first two bits didn't really improve them. I don't kid myself into thinking I write sterling prose; it's silver plate at best. And if you polish silver plate too much you eventually expose the stuff underneath.

Time passed and two things happened to get me started writing again. I eventually started my own business – computer systems and network integration services. I enjoy working with computers and I especially enjoy learning how to use new technologies as they come along. One of the new toys I got to play with was a Pocket PC with the first Microsoft Reader built in. That was great! I immediately converted my novels to .lit format and loaded them in. I found some publishers offering free e-books for download and even bought a few e-books. Reading on the Pocket-PC felt like reading a paperback and the notion of carrying a library in my pocket was the stuff of the science fiction I had grown up with. That was what first got me thinking about posting these books on a web site. By the way I use a Pocket PC (have a new one these days) to proof read the books).

The other thing came about because of my involvement with the Society for Creative Anachronism, Inc. I was at a large event a couple of years ago and was up late with some friends from the Cleveland area. I used to regularly write SCA-based satirical fan fiction and earlier in the evening I came up with an idea for another such story. We laughed about it and several friends threw out ideas for possible inclusion. By the time I wandered back to my tent, my head was swimming with ideas and I knew I'd get no sleep until they were on paper. So I was up very late that night, writing out the first passages of the new story and then scribbling down all the ideas we had bantered about that I could still remember, trying to make a complete story out of it. The sun was starting to lighten the horizon before I stopped writing and I realized I was experiencing a rush that drugs couldn't touch. The amazing thing was not that I was writing again, but that I had ever managed to stop.

I was also re-reading the first two Maiyim stories at the time so when I got home I took another look at the start to *Island of Fire*, and what do you know? I picked up where I'd left off!

I work very much full time these days and often late, but I can usually write an hour or three each night and I'll also do a bit in the morning before I go into the office. That's my new routine and it seems to be working.

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 John n y Cake Hill, New Bedford, MA 02740 -6398 Tel. (508) 997-0046 <http://www.whalingmuseum.org/>

Jonathan E. Feinstein

Westport, Massachusetts December 4, 2003

Prologue

Only minutes earlier Detective Lieutenant Amanser Amaniev had been the bravest man in the Department of Security and Justice of the Republic of Rjalkatyp . He had never known the taste and smell of fear. That was all he knew now.

He ran pell-mell through the New Forest , heedless of the dense underbrush, in a vain attempt to flee horrors, real and imaginary. He wanted to scream, but his throat would not relax enough to produce sound. It was all he could do to continue breathing. He tripped over rocks and stumbled into heavy branches and tree trunks. Never once did he pause to check on his pursuers. He knew they were right on his heels. No matter how fast he ran they would still be there. Maybe forever, just as what he had witnessed would never leave him.

Amanser almost never worked alone. Department regulations insisted that each operative have a partner and Amaniev did everything by the book. He never kept partners long, however -- most could not keep up with Amanser's intense zealotry. Consequently he always chose to work with the new men. If they managed to get through a case or two with him without wanting out, Amanser figured they must be all right.

His latest partner had been a young Orentan woman, a recently graduated journeyman mage who called herself Mace. Amanser was never sure whether she chose her name for the spice or the antiquated weapon. He was not interested. Later, if she proved out, he might want to know more about her as a person, but at first he had only cared how good a cop she was.

Together, they had been working for the missing persons section these last three weeks, following leads in several different cases. Each case involved a missing child, ten to fifteen years in age. By the fourth such case Mace had seen a pattern, even before Amanser had. She had impressed him further by finding the link between those missing children and acts of vandalism that had been committed at various shrines in the New Forest . Vandalism was not normally a concern of their section, but Mace had found a unifying element. Some sort of mystic sign, she said, but when pressed refused to explain.

Amanser had wanted quits with her right then. Partners share their information, but Chief Rostik intervened. The nature of Mace's knowledge was such that only another magician should be consulted, so Amanser had to content himself with Master Ironblade's assurance that the actual nature of the sign had no bearing on the case.

Ironblade did, however, perform some sort of protection spell on Amanser. "Just a precaution," the old mage muttered without further explanation. Perhaps that protection was why Amanser was still alive even now. For a certainty Mace was not.

She and Amanser had rushed into the clearing that held a desecrated shrine of Wenni, the Orentan daughter goddess. The altar that had once held only flowers and sweet-smelling herbs now supported an offering far less wholesome. The worshippers wore bright red robes. Red, the color of blood -- the color of Aritos the Evil God.

As Mace prepared herself to cast a spell, her body twisted violently. Amanser could still hear the sickening crack of her bones. She was dead before she hit the ground.

Then Amanser saw the cause of Mace's death. All capability of rational thought was ripped from him in that instant. In unreasoning fear he sought to escape, but was surrounded by hideous blood-red demons. Their inhumanly long dark tongues licked the air in lizard-like fashion and their fangs dripped corrosive green saliva. Amanser ran unthinkingly in circles around the shrine as they attempted to drag him down.

Suddenly there was an opening and he sprinted through it, followed by the gruesome creatures. He did not care where he might be going; all he wanted was to get away.

As he ran the trees themselves tried to catch him, reaching out with their long, flexible limbs to grasp him to drag him into large gaping maws in their trunks. It was the stuff of nightmares. Somewhere within, Amanser knew he was the victim of a ghastly illusion, but that knowledge was well buried. He could see, hear and smell these horrors around him and through it all fear propelled him forward.

Soon he was beyond the forest and still running down the road that led into the City of Rjalkatyp. He looked behind him and saw no pursuers and sanity began to assert itself. He thanked all the good gods for deliverance as he paused to catch his breath. He knew he had to get back to the Hall of Justice. He needed to report and then go back with reinforcements.

The city was just ahead and he moved on. Already he was passing a few isolated houses; the homes of prosperous merchants who preferred not to "live over the shop." A home outside the aged city walls was a sign of prestige.

He started running again; not the terrified sprint that had sent him crashing through the woods, but a purposeful jog that would get him to the Hall within the hour. It was late and there was no one on the streets until he was deep in the heart of the city. Ahead he saw a pair of uniformed peace officers, walking patrol. He approached them and called for help but as they turned around he saw that their skin was covered with bright red scales and they looked at him through slitted yellow eyes.

The terror took hold of him again and he ran away. There were other people in sight, but they all turned out to be similar grotesqueries. Even the soft yellow lights of the gas-fired street lights took on menacing shades.

Amanser's panic became complete. He began to run in various directions at random. Anything for even a moment's respite. Then he heard singing coming out of an inn ahead. Dimly, he realized that he was in the

port district of the city. The song was an old favorite among the human sailors of the Emmine Archipelago. Real people. And the light, the heavenly light of reality beamed out through the open doorway. Amanser plunged through the portal and into the brightly lit taproom. Safe at last!

He fell to the satin-smooth planks of the floor in relief as the music came to a sudden halt. Amanser picked himself up, smiled at the faces around him, and suddenly screamed. Demons! They were all demons!

Part I - Merinne

One

Someone was singing a sleepy little song in the distance, but Oceanvine could not make out the words. The singer was on the far side of the nearest dune and she was obviously singing to an audience of one. Oceanvine listened for a few more seconds before smiling lazily and taking a deep breath of salt air.

"Better turn over or you'll burn," the slender Orentan woman stretched out next to her advised. "The sun's very intense this close to the equator and human skins aren't as tough as Orentan, Vine."

"Oh, Airblossom!" Oceanvine laughed easily. "I've been here for months now. If my skin still can't take a little tanning there's always magic to protect it."

Airblossom thought about that a moment and had to agree. "Well," she tried another argument, "you ought to give your back a chance to catch up."

"You think so?" Oceanvine tried to look over her right shoulder. She shrugged and rolled over in the warm black sand.

"I think you finally got rid of that tan line," Airblossom noted, looking at her friend's back.

"Took long enough." Oceanvine glanced over at her friend. "You know, I think you looked better with blond hair."

"Really? This is my natural color," Airblossom replied, indicating her gold-streaked brown tresses. Her hair was not as long as Oceanvine's, only shoulder length and her pointed ears were too long to keep from protruding through the hair.

"Until I arrived, I never knew that."

"Some friends of mine got me drunk the night before I left Nimda. They bleached it after I passed out. After that I decided to keep it that way for a while. Vine, you ought to know there are no naturally blond Orenta."

"But we lived together for four years," Oceanvine pointed out. "In all that time I would have noticed the bleach."

"Vine, I may be just a journeyman, but I'm still a mage. Hair color is an easy spell. You should try it sometime."

Oceanvine's hand went to her head, instinctively shielding it from such changes. "I like it this way," she replied a moment later, letting her hand drop at last.

A few minutes later Airblossom broke the silence again. "We ought to be going soon in any case. I, for one, like to keep my tan natural. Waterfall can tell the difference."

"That reminds me. When am I going to meet this mysterious fiancé of yours? I've been in town for over two months now and I still haven't seen him."

"How about tomorrow night?" Airblossom countered. "You and Silverwind can come for dinner."

"For real this time? No excuses?"

"Vine, it wasn't his fault several trees in Mizzebawa's illuma grove stopped glowing," Airblossom replied a little too defensively. "If Fall hadn't stayed up with them that night they would have died and the rest would have been infected as well."

"Sorry," Oceanvine apologized contritely. "I didn't mean that the way it came out."

"That's all right, Vine," Airblossom shrugged. "I shouldn't have taken it so seriously. You will come over tomorrow, won't you?"

"Of course," Oceanvine assured her.

"Well, here you are!" a young voice surprised them.

Oceanvine instantly snapped out of her relaxed mood. The voice belonged to Candle, the young ex-thief and Wizard Silverwind's current apprentice. It had been a year since they had caught the youngster rummaging for valuables in their wagon and Oceanvine had as much to do with his subsequent training as Silverwind himself. Candle was like a younger brother to her and like many younger brothers he was often an irritant.

"What are you doing here?" Oceanvine demanded. "I thought you hated the beach."

"I guess I been missin' something," Candle commented dryly, looking at Airblossom. Like the other sunbathers in sight, both she and Oceanvine wore nothing from the waist up and precious little elsewhere. Candle wasn't staring at Oceanvine, however. That wasn't the sort of attention one gave a sister, and he very much saw Oceanvine as an older sister. It was one of the few things they actually agreed on. For her, he had an entirely different comment, "Can't you ever dress decently?"

Oceanvine reached calmly across the sand and picked up a loose silk robe, Orentan in style, with a bold floral pattern printed all over it. Standing up, she put it on while Airblossom did likewise. "Is that better?" Oceanvine asked tartly.

"Slightly. Those colors make my eyes bleed."

"Doesn't keep you from wearing them," Airblossom pointed out. Candle's own clothing was no less

colorful. In spite of his prejudices, he wore a sleeveless tunic over short trousers, both hued in the same bright colors so favored by even the most conservative Orente.

"I have a choice?" Candle complained. "Everything else I own is too warm for this jungle."

"Jungle?" Airblossom countered. "Looks like a beach to me."

"This whole archipelago," Candle retorted, showing off his recently expanded vocabulary, "is one big, bloody jungle! Overgrown, hot and sticky! I don't know how you can stand it."

"Candle," Oceanvine explained patiently, "we're practically on the equator. You have to expect it to be a little warmer here than in Tarnsa."

"I don't have ta like it, though. I wish you and Silverwind would teach me those cooling spells you use."

"You're not ready for them yet."

"Why not?" he demanded. "I got enough power to do them. You said so yourself."

"You do not yet have the control," Oceanvine explained as she had so many times before. "The way you release power, you could freeze yourself solid in the blink of an eye. Then where would you be?"

"So I should keep picking locks and juggling pebbles?" Candle asked. Those simple tricks had fascinated him not too long ago.

"Candle, you haven't been apprenticed a year yet and already you want to do wizard-class magic."

"That ain't wizard-class. You do it." Actually, Oceanvine was fully capable of many feats of magic some wizards would find difficult to duplicate. But Candle was right; that spell could be accomplished by any journeyman. Even a senior apprentice could probably manage it. Candle might be able to cast the spell too, but as simple as the spell was, it tapped into some very basic energies. It would be dangerous to teach it to Candle just yet; literally like having him play with fire.

"That may be," she finally allowed, "but you're going to have to wait before you do." She hoped that was true. Candle might take it into his own head to try the spell without instruction. As precocious as he was, he could well come up with it on his own, and last time he tried a spell on his own he nearly drowned. Oceanvine briefly thought about that. Candle had been sick and woke up thirsty. In his feverish state he tried to bring some water to himself. Unfortunately he tried too hard and materialized many gallons of brackish water from an old well. Until now, however, she hadn't realized how much discipline that must have taken in his state. Most wizards would not have been able to work the simplest spell, unable to concentrate while so sick. Well, except for Silverwind, of course.

"You still haven't told us what you're doing here," Airblossom pointed out.

"Hmm? Oh, yeah. Silverwind wants to see you," he told Oceanvine.

"Why?"

"How should I know," Candle countered, "but he said it was important. Airblossom can come too if she wants."

Two

"Well, it's not a pretty sight," Silverwind had to admit, running a hand through his graying black hair. He was referring to the corpse of a young Orentan man lying on a cold porcelain table in the Disease Research Laboratory of the Biology Department of the University at Merinne. The Orentan wizard, Compass, head of the department, had requested the aid of his fellow wizard.

If anyone could help, Compass had reasoned, the great Silverwind was the one.

The victim had been about twenty years old, almost seven feet tall but delicately built, whose face held the usual features that caused most humans to refer to the indigenous population of the Bellinen Archipelago as elves. His skin, where the angry rash had not spread, was nearly as light as a human's, indicating that his had been a protracted illness. Orentan fashion included a penchant for tanning so this individual must have been away from the rays of the hot tropical sun for several weeks.

"What are these marks around his wrists?" Silverwind asked a few minutes later.

"Rope burns," Compass replied. The two wizards were a study in contrast. While Silverwind wore a loose, light gray shirt and dark blue trousers cut in the style favored in the Granom Archipelago, Compass was garbed in a long silk robe covered with one of the vivid floral prints, fashionable in Bellinen, but nowhere else in the world. "I understand he became quite violent in his last few days, and it was necessary to restrain him. Merrine have mercy on his soul," Compass added reverently. "Have you ever seen anything like this before?"

"Many times," Silverwind sighed, "and never before. In many ways it appears to be just another one of a hundred infections and yet this is the first I've encountered that is fatal. How many deaths so far?"

"Twenty-five reported so far, but there are hundreds showing symptoms and there have been no recoveries."

"But the infection spreads less quickly in some than others?"

"Correct," Compass replied.

"Do you have any notion of how the disease is spread?"

"I am not sure. It may be airborne, carried by an insect or by direct contact with an infected person. We have not been able to ascertain the exact means. Infection does not seem to spread evenly either. Sometimes it affects only one member of a household, other times entire families come down with the disease."

"Incubation time?"

"Also unknown."

"Could be that it too is very uneven," Silverwind suggested, "taking a few days in some and weeks or months in others. If that's the case there are whole populations already infected."

"Emmine protect us! An epidemic?" Oceanvine gasped from the doorway.

"Oh there you are, Vine," Silverwind replied, turning to greet her.

"Silverwind," the pretty mage countered coldly, "I love you dearly, but stop calling me Vine." Behind her, Airblossom looked at her friend strangely, saying nothing. Candle, however, caught the exchange. He did not know why Airblossom reacted as she did, but if it had something to do with Oceanvine's name, he would find out. It might be something even more fun than calling her "Seaweed."

"I'll try," he replied, although his manner suggested this was the one request he would never honor, not consistently anyway.

"What sort of epidemic?" Airblossom asked.

"The usual sort, I imagine," Silverwind replied with a quick grin. "A deadly disease that spreads quickly over a large portion of the population."

"And you're affianced to this one?" Airblossom asked Oceanvine sourly.

"One grows used to him in time, Blossom," Oceanvine answered dryly.

"I doubt I'll live that long." Orentan life expectancy was around one hundred and twenty years.

"Disease?" Candle asked. "Like I had in Querna?"

"You," Silverwind chuckled at his apprentice, "had a bad cold. So did most of the palace for that matter. Nobody died of it. This is different."

"Epidemic might be a bit too strong a word just yet," Compass told Oceanvine. "The disease is cropping up in scattered locations across the archipelago, mostly in port towns. There appears to be a disproportionate number of cases in those regions, but I would hardly call it an epidemic."

"Yet," Airblossom added.

"Ahem, yes," Compass agreed reluctantly. "I don't believe we've met, Ora."

"Airblossom," she introduced herself. "I'm a Masters candidate in the College of Magical Studies."

"Do you have a thesis subject yet?" the Orentan wizard inquired politely.

"Not yet, Or. I had thought to continue and expand on my senior project; the recent evolutionary tendencies of certain magical species."

"Compass," the Orentan wizard introduced himself. "Didn't Larksong cover that in his dissertation last semester?"

"Unfortunately, yes," Airblossom agreed, "and he did it excellently. So I'm currently in search of a new topic. I still have another year of class work to complete, however, so it shouldn't slow me down too much."

"Actually that's why I asked you here," Silverwind told her. "If you're interested, this plague ought to be quite acceptable for your thesis."

"Really?" Airblossom was suddenly fascinated. "What are the symptoms?"

"It starts out as a low-grade fever, often accompanied by a mild under-arm rash. This by itself tends to be ignored by most victims as it doesn't appear to be anything to be concerned about. However, the rash gradually spreads and worsens. Most victims also suffer chronic dizziness by this stage. Nausea soon follows and after a couple weeks some victims are displaying signs of dementia. Did I get that right?" Silverwind asked Compass.

"As far as you went, yes," Compass allowed. "At the moment we have centers of infection on Killarn, Tissa, Ponar and Sa. Reported cases are scattered as yet, but given the mildness of the initial onset, we fear the problem may be far more widespread than reports indicate."

"Yeah," Candle piped up. "Who goes to a doctor just 'cause they itch a bit?"

"Exactly," Compass agreed, looking around to see who had said that. Candle had an unconscious ability to be inconspicuous. Going unnoticed had served him well in the years before his apprenticeship and it would take him still more years before he'd be able to overcome such hard-won lessons. He was not at all shy, but when not actively asserting himself, he tended to blend into the background.

"Any idea of where the initial outbreak was?" Oceanvine asked.

Compass steered her attention to a map of the Bellenin Archipelago. "Here," he replied, pointing at one of the larger islands, "on Killarn, although incidents were reported on Sa and Ponar almost immediately."

"Killo or Fanna?" Airblossom asked as she approached the map.

"Killo. What made you think it appeared in one of the cities?"

"Plague is more often found in centers of population, at least at first. Diseases spread more easily when there is a plenitude of potential victims.

"True, but why not Notis or Kornt?" Compass knew the answer but was interested in how the younger, less experienced mage had come to her conclusions.

"They aren't ports, wizard. Diseases don't just happen, or, at least, so I was taught. They have to come from somewhere. Usually some isolated community where the inhabitants are immune or at least highly resistant."

"Then you do not accept Bowsprit's theory?"

"Of course I do," Airblossom admitted, "Wizard Bowsprit's Evolutionary Theory of Natural Selection has been proven at least a dozen times now, both in the fossil record and among the extant creatures of Maiyim."

"Then wouldn't you think that new diseases could evolve anywhere in the world, even in one of our own cities?"

"I suppose, but even then they'd have to evolve out of a strain already present and could therefore be

traced to that point of origin, at least theoretically," she hedged.

"Quite," Compass agreed. "So a new strain could evolve in a land-locked city. True?"

"True, but most mutations aren't viable and the record shows that most new diseases are spread through the world via the shipping industry."

"The shipping industry?" Compass asked pointedly.

"Well, not the ships themselves, but the people on them, or their pets or even the vermin that inhabit even the best kept ship. Any living creature has the potential to be a disease carrier."

"What a cheerful observation," Silverwind remarked sourly.

"Ahem, yes," Compass muttered. "Young Airblossom here is correct. The disease does seem to be following the usual pattern. Judging from the initial points of introduction I would guess it originated somewhere in the Northern Hemisphere - Granom, most likely."

"Why Granom?" Candle asked.

"The majority of the incoming ships to those ports arrive directly from Granom. Emmine ships usually do business in Direford, Ninda and Merinne."

"For their first stops in any case," Silverwind amended. Compass nodded. "Ships from Ellisto can be found most often in Sannoport and Merinne. But Fanna isn't a very common first stop on the way in from any part of Granom. It's too far out of the way. Ships from Rjalkatyp, however do make their first landing there as often as not."

"I didn't know that," Compass admitted.

"After a few years of travel you tend to pick these things up," Silverwind shrugged. "Most of the rest of the ships from the Isle of Fire prefer to land in Pense, although individual captains have their own preferences. I know a human captain who deals almost exclusively on Tinse when he comes to Bellinen. Superstition, I think."

"Well," Oceanvine concluded, "wherever it came from, it's here now. Our job is to keep it from spreading any more than it has already."

"Easier said than done," Candle muttered.

"True enough, but Master Oceanvine is correct," Compass agreed, using the masculine title that mages of that level used regardless of gender, "or rather it is my job, but I hope I can recruit your services. The Senate has granted emergency funds so we can afford Silverwind's usual rates, high as they are."

"Do we have usual rates for disease control?" Oceanvine asked Silverwind after quietly pulling him aside.

"Same as with any other job," he grinned in reply. "Whatever the market will bear."

"You've been listening to Geraint too much," she scoffed. "You sound like a merchant."

Silverwind chuckled. "You can always judge a man by the company he keeps." Then he noticed

Compass was waiting anxiously for his reply. "Of course we'll take the job," he told the Orentan wizard.

"Good," Compass replied, obviously relieved. "Because I have to leave on the next tide to study the outbreak in Sanno and there's just barely enough time to finish briefing you before then.

Three

"Why?" Candle demanded.

Silverwind sighed. "Candle, I told you months ago you had a lot of catching up to do. This is part of it." They were sitting in the front room of the beachside guesthouse Silverwind had been granted by the University of Merrine. Unlike the schools of Emmine and Granom, which were situated in urban environments, the Orentan university reflected the society of the Bellinen Archipelago where large cities were sprawling park-like affairs and many smaller ones were situated lengthwise along the many sandy beaches. Being centered on the equator, tropical storms were not uncommon, especially at the northern and southern extremities of the island group, so shore-side houses tended to be built on stilts so that storm waters would roll by underneath in most cases. The guesthouse stood proudly above the white sand of the beach with an excellent view of the Wenni Ocean.

"Why?" Candle repeated. He knew he really wasn't being fair. If there was one thing he'd learned about Silverwind since becoming his apprentice it was that the wizard would never just answer a "Why?" with "Because."

"You'll need to learn this before you can attend University and you'll never be a journeyman without attending University."

"I know that," Candle admitted, "but why can't you teach me? You have so far."

"Mathematics and philosophy are hardly my specialties, lad."

"They sound horrible," the apprentice muttered.

"You'll love them," Silverwind tried to assure him, not entirely convincingly.

"Right."

"Really. They'll open up whole new worlds to you."

"New worlds?" Candle sounded interested then. Going to another world might be fun.

"New ways of thinking," Silverwind clarified. Candle's expression fell again and Silverwind continued hastily, "Exciting new ways. Just wait! And Serabawa is the best in his field. He doesn't agree to teach just anyone, you know."

Candle didn't know. "Serabawa? Doesn't sound like a mage's name."

"It isn't. Serabawa is the most respected philosopher in Bellinen. In the world probably. Nobody studies math and philosophy like the Orenta, Candle. Believe me, this is an opportunity you just can't miss and one your classmates will envy. I'd have started you on this earlier if I knew we were going to be here

more than a few weeks.”

“What is math and phil...” Candle stumbled over the term.

“Well, Mathematics is the study of numbers,” Silverwind said after a brief pause to compose a simple answer. A full answer with all the explanations concerning relationships and all would take the rest of the day. “Arithmetic, you’re pretty good with that already but we haven’t had a chance to really delve into geometry, algebra, calculus. Well, maybe not calculus. I doubt we’ll be here long enough and that’s a university subject anyway. Too bad, though. And philosophy? Well, you’ll explore the various answers to questions about existence and knowledge and ethics. Pretty heady stuff, and if that was magic, Serabawa would be a wizard!”

“Really?” Candle asked skeptically.

“Really!”

Candle stared at his master for a bit then finally nodded and mumbled, “Oh, all right. I’ll try.”

Silverwind nodded too, “Good. He should be here in a few minutes.”

“What? Right now?”

“Of course,” Silverwind replied, chuckling. “No time like the present!”

“But...”

“And be sure to be polite, Candle. Instead of ‘sir’ say ‘Or’ here.”

“I know that,” Candle said dismissively.

“Ah! And here he comes. Serebawa! Up here, Or!”

An elderly Orente approached the house and climbed the stairs. He was dressed in a long silk robe with a bold floral pattern printed on it, a conservative outfit in Bellinen.

“Silverwind, my old friend!” he greeted the wizard. “You are well?”

“Quite so, Or. And you?”

“I’ve a few good years left in me,” Serabawa replied, his eyes twinkling.

“Thank you for coming,” Silverwind said.

“Your letter said you had a student for me. I came. And this must be him,” Serabawa concluded spotting Candle. “I hope he doesn’t turn out to be as much trouble as you were, old friend.”

Silverwind coughed a bit in embarrassment. “Probably more so.”

“Hard to believe,” chuckled Serabawa. “What is your name, lad?”

“Candle, Or.” Something about the old elf made Candle naturally respectful.

“Candle?” Serabawa showed surprise. “Sounds like a mage name. Surely you aren’t yet a journeyman at your age.”

“S’mmy name,” Candle replied simply.

“Candle’s an unusual case,” Silverwind informed the Orente. “He used to make his living, if you call it that, as a thief. It’s actually a street name. Not too unusual in parts of Emmine, really”

“It’s the only name I have,” Candle elaborated.

“True,” Silverwind agreed, “though someday soon, when we have the time I intend to look into that. Somewhere, probably in Tarnsa, there must be some records. We didn’t have the leisure to go looking last time we passed through there.” Silverwind looked at his apprentice and winked.

“Ah, a street urchin?” Serabawa mused. Candle waited for the condemnation that often came when strangers learned about his past. “Now that should be interesting! I imagine you may teach me as much as I teach you, Candle. Does that surprise you?”

“You want to learn how to pick pockets and locks?”

Serabawa laughed. “No, I’ve done that. It’s been a long time, but I was a bit of a colorful character in my youth too. Although in my case I didn’t do those things for a living. Well, enough of me. Let’s find out how much you already know so we’ll know where to start.” Serabawa reached in a bag he had slung over his shoulder and pulled out several sheets of paper. “You can read and write, of course?”

“I would not have asked you to teach, Or, if we hadn’t covered that much at least,” Silverwind cut in. “I believe you’ll find that Candle is amazingly advanced in some subjects, though there are some grievous holes in his education. That’s why I hoped you would agree to teach him. Oceanvine has given him some basic tutoring in arithmetic, which he grasped with amazing speed, but...”

“No.” Serabawa stopped the wizard. “Let’s let Candle show me what he knows.” Silverwind nodded and Serabawa gave the paper sheets to Candle. “Answer as many of these questions as you can, lad. Don’t worry about the ones you cannot. Use this writing stick. Have you used one before?”

“No, Or,” Candle replied.

“It’s an Orentan invention,” Serabawa explained. “We put a rod of carbon, graphite specifically, that has been mixed with a little clay inside a sleeve of wood. That rubber bit on the end can be used to erase marks made with the carbon end, at least if you don’t make them too dark. I think you’ll find it better for mathematical work than a pen. At least I do.”

Candle took the writing stick, sat down at a nearby table and started working.

“So you’ll teach him then?” Silverwind asked quietly as they stepped outside to the deck that surrounded the house.

“Oh yes,” Serabawa replied. “Of course. Why would you even doubt it?”

“I thought you might be too busy with your regular students at University.”

“We’re on break this month and I’ve only been working on a book. Nothing I can’t put aside for a few weeks. Teaching a single student appeals to me. Sort of like old Takamawa’s ideal school.”

“A log with a teacher at one end and a student at the other,” commented Silverwind.

“Exactly. Besides I trust you wouldn’t recommend a student who wasn’t worth my time.”

“I have been pleasantly surprised by Candle’s abilities several times.”

“And at your wit’s end at other times, I’m sure,” Serabawa chuckled. Silverwind joined him.

“Then it will be all right if I get back to the Medical Center? I’m supposed to meet Compass’ chief assistant this morning.”

“Go,” Serabawa told the wizard. “Candle and I will start getting to know each other.”

Silverwind left and Serabawa turned to watch Candle hard at work with the test. The elderly Orente didn’t really care whether the boy could answer any of the questions. The test was as much a gauge of his personality as it was of his knowledge. His determination to finish as many of the questions as he could told Serabawa how serious a student Candle would be.

After a while Candle looked up and said, “I don’t know what some of these words mean.”

“Which ones?”

“Um... Prosentential? Deontological? Transcen...”

“Ah!” chuckled Serabawa. “Don’t worry about them. Just make a note of the words you don’t know. I didn’t expect you to know everything on this test anyway.”

“Then why did you put them there?” Candle demanded.

“If you could have answered all the questions, you wouldn’t need me. Unless you were looking for a student.”

“Huh?” Candle looked at him, completely baffled.

“Lad, I can’t answer some of *those* questions!”

“Then why ask me?”

“Because maybe you can. Go ahead and finish.”

“Okay.” Candle went back to work. Sometime later he got to the end and looked up again. He was alone. Picking up the test, he walked out on to the deck and found Serabawa sitting on one of the wooden chairs.

Serabawa’s eyes were open and he was staring out at the beach below. Candle paused to look in the same direction, trying to figure out what held the old elf’s attention. There were a few people on the beach sunbathing. Had this new mysterious illness not come up, Oceanvine and Airblossom would have been among them. And out on the water a pair of young Orenta were surfing. It was an activity that

interested Candle but until a few weeks earlier he had never even been swimming. Oceanvine had thought that unusual for a boy who not only lived on a world that was predominantly covered with water, but who also had grown up in a port town. But the simple fact was until he'd met Silverwind and Oceanvine he never had the opportunity. He took to swimming easily enough, but Oceanvine had convinced Silverwind that it would be too dangerous for the boy to ride a surfboard until he had more swimming experience.

"Done already?" Serabawa asked, startling Candle who had become transfixed by the sight of the surf.

"Uh, yeah. I did the best I could," Candle replied. He felt he had to say that, having failed to answer nearly half the questions.

"Not too bad on some of the math," Serabawa commented. "You seem to have had some basic training in geometry and algebra."

"I have?"

"Haven't you? How did you know how to calculate the area of a rectangle?"

"That just sort of made sense; to multiply one side by the other."

Serabawa took a second look at the exam sheet and noticed that Candle had made some marks on the sample rectangle on the sheet. Yes, he had figured out that for himself. *Very impressive*, he thought to himself. "You didn't quite figure out circles or triangles though, did you?"

"No, Or," Candle admitted. "Some of them were obviously half the area of a rectangle. The ones with a..." he fumbled for the word.

"A right angle?" Serabawa prompted him, making a similar angle with his hands.

"Um, yes, I think so, and some with two sides the same length I could sort of split in half then do the same thing, but others I just had to make a guess. Same with the circles."

"You made some close guesses though," the Orente admitted, "And you seem to understand how to balance a simple equation. I don't think you'll have much trouble picking up the parts you don't know." *No, indeed! he thought. If he can deduce the area of a right triangle, he'll have no trouble with other areas and volumes once I show him the formulae.*

Candle's grasp of philosophy, however, was another matter. His answers to those questions were shallow, not too well thought out and in many ways reflective of his former life on the streets. Here was a boy who for a long time had live only in the present. Thoughts of the future were much akin to thoughts about other worlds; strange and alien. Serabawa concluded he'd have to start at the very beginning with him. He would have started that way anyway, but concepts like morality might turn into more interesting discussions than normal.

"So shall we start?" Serabawa asked putting aside the completed test.

"Okay," agreed Candle.

"Very good," Serabawa nodded getting out of his seat. "Let's go."

“Go?” Candle asked as they headed for the stairway down to the beach, “Where are we going?”

“Out there,” Serabawa pointed to the ocean. “Surfing.”

“Surfing? You surf?”

“Of course,” Serabawa chuckled. “Candle, if you learn nothing else from me, learn this. Never trust a philosopher who doesn’t know how to surf!”

Four

On leaving Candle and Serabawa, Silverwind returned directly to the Biology Department of the Merinne University. In the Granom or Emmine universities, Medical Studies would have warranted their own departments, but the Orenta did not organize their magics in quite the same way as the rest of the world. Silverwind had no problems with that. It had always seemed reasonable to consider medicine a special case of biology. Of course, his special studies had centered on the physical magics and he hadn’t studied biology since his undergraduate days, excepting various cases he and Geraint had taken much later, so it was only natural he would lump all life studies together.

The Orenta interest in biology was excelled only by their love of philosophy so it wasn’t surprising the Biology Department was housed in one of the larger buildings on the campus. Most Orentan buildings were only two stories tall, but this one had four floors and, quite atypically of Orentan architecture, a basement storage area. The ground floor of the yellow stucco building was mostly taken up with Compass’ administrative office and a large lecture hall. The upper floors held an assortment of faculty offices, laboratories, closets and a few smaller classrooms.

He climbed the stairs to the second floor where Compass’ chief assistant, Master Hyssop, had her office. He found the door open, but knocked lightly on the doorframe before walking in.

“Come in,” a voice said shortly from somewhere out of sight, “and have a seat I’ll be with you in a few minutes.”

The office had few decorations. There were no posters, amusing drawings, bits of artwork, nor even pictures of loved ones. The only wall hanging of any sort was a plain, utilitarian calendar.

Silverwind sat down on a straight-backed wooden chair next to a too neat, almost empty desk. He had a suspicion that the drawers of that desk must be completely filled with the papers, pens and other paraphernalia that littered the top of his own desk. Idly, he tried to remember if he had bothered to neaten his desk up before letting Lord Jason whisk him and Oceanvine off to North Horalia nearly a year earlier. He couldn’t remember but decided that it was probably still covered with his notes from whatever it had been he’d been working on at the time. He was both amazed and amused that he couldn’t recall what it might have been.

“No problem,” he whispered to himself. “My notes will still be there when I get back.” Oceanvine, if she had heard that and known what he was referring to might have added that he was laboring under the assumption that it wouldn’t all spontaneously combust. He chuckled thinking of that.

“What’s so blinding funny!” a deep female voice demanded. “Who the hell are you?”

Silverwind looked up to see a short female Orente with medium length black hair tied back severely. Unlike most Orenta her clothing was not decorated with a blindingly garish floral pattern. Her robes, in fact were what a human might have called a respectable beige, and most elves would call hideously unfashionable. Horn-rimmed corrective lenses added to her aura of hostility.

“Master Hyssop?” Silverwind inquired. She glared a bit and gave an almost imperceptible nod of her head.

“Look! I don’t care who you are or what he is to you, I don’t change grades for anyone.”

“Glad to hear it,” Silverwind agreed. “Flunk him.”

Hyssop blinked at that, then asked, “Who?”

“How should I know? Whoever you thought I was here to plead on behalf of.”

“Who are you?” she asked again.

“Silverwind,” he replied blandly. “From Emmine. Compass asked me to work on this mysterious disease.”

“Yes,” Hyssop drawled, raising an eyebrow. To Silverwind’s surprise she still sounded hostile. “He told me to expect you. Your… assistants are working in the lab next door.”

“Oh good. Someone ought to be.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, I need to dive in and get going too, but it seemed polite that I come by and introduce myself.”

“And do you have any experience in epidemiology?”

“Not as such. Just some related field experience.”

“About what I expected. So why did Wizard Compass leave you in charge?”

“Am I in charge?” Silverwind asked. “I promised Compass we’d keep looking into the matter and asked him who was best person to work with. He told me you were the best epidemiologist in the department.”

Some of her hostility drained out as she sighed and replied, “Faint praise. I’m the only epidemiologist in the department. Oh, very well. What do you want to do first?”

“Actually I was going to ask you that. Do you know what Compass has done so far?”

“Yes, he did brief me before he left. Actually he briefed me on his way to the ship. I just wonder what he may have forgotten to tell me.”

“Do you have his notes?” the wizard asked.

“Yes, I was up most of the night trying to make some sense of them.”

“Were they all that incomprehensible? Compass didn’t seem the sort.”

“Oh I can read them well enough,” she replied, “but the combination of symptoms doesn’t make any sense.”

“Why not? I don’t see that any of the symptoms are all that unusual.”

“Each by themselves, no. It’s the combination that doesn’t match up to any known family of diseases. It’s like giving a child a toy building kit with which any sort of device might be simulated and watching him put it together with all sorts of different parts, but which don’t all work together.”

“Do you mean someone built this disease with spare parts?” Silverwing chuckled.

“Of course not,” Hyssop replied disgustedly. “Maybe we should perform autopsies on more victims. So far we just have the one you did with Wizard Compass. That may not be representative.”

“Good idea. Do we have more bodies to look at?” Silverwind asked.

“I can arrange that and we can start in the morning.”

“I’ll go easy on breakfast,” Silverwind sighed. “So what are Oceanvine and Airblossom working on?”

“Let’s go find out,” Hyssop suggested.

Hyssop led the way to the next room where Airblossom was seated at a table before a large stack of reports, while Oceanvine sat across from her working on a large chart. Airblossom would look at each report, summarize it aloud to Oceanvine who would then enter the data on her chart. There were several blackboards on the walls of the room on which they’d been making notes, although they had covered the closest one with a map of the Bellinen Archipelago on which they had been marking what Silverwind concluded were areas in which outbreaks of plague had been reported.

Oceanvine looked up and said, “Oh, there you are. What took so long? Was Candle’s tutor late?”

“Not at all,” Silverwind replied. “Serabawa was punctual as ever.”

Airblossom looked up, a horrified expression on her face. “You hired the Dean of Philosophy as a tutor for that...” She stopped abruptly searching for a more polite word than the first few that crossed her mind. “Uh, apprentice?”

Silverwind chuckled. He knew full well how Oceanvine’s erstwhile roommate felt about Candle. “Well, I wanted the best,” he replied blandly. “Actually Serabawa was one of my teachers when I attended this university. So I asked him.”

“But he’s a Dean,” protested Hyssop, siding with Airblossom. “I doubt he’s taught any classes in years.”

“Yes,” Silverwind agreed. “I believe he may have mentioned that. Actually he seemed quite interested.”

“Candle will be more interesting that he’s bargained for,” Oceanvine remarked with a smile.

“Could be,” Silverwind shrugged. “In any case, the school will be on semester break for a few weeks yet and Serabawa thought this would make for a vacation.”

“Vacation?” all three female mages asked.

“A change of pace then. Speaking of changes of pace,” Silverwind segued, “what have you two found so far?”

“So far, not much more than we already knew,” Oceanvine reported. “Incubation time still appears to be wildly varied, but we’ve verified that it has been spread by sailors and other travelers. Until now that was really no more than an educated guess. But port towns on each island are almost invariably the first places the disease occurs.”

“Almost?” Hyssop asked.

“Well, in two cases - Lillo and Mir – the first reported cases were from inland towns, but not so much before port-town cases that we can discount the probability that the initial infections on the two islands occurred at their ports. That uneven, almost unpredictable, incubation time. We’re not finished getting through all the reports though, so the hypothesis may still be proven wrong.”

“It probably does not matter all that much,” Hyssop remarked just ahead of Silverwind. “The question is whether the vector of infection is from Or to Or... or human,” she added nodding to Silverwind and Oceanvine, “or if the vector is insect... well, perhaps it is truly random. I tend to discount any possibility of it being random.”

“So do we finish sifting through these?” Oceanvine indicated the remaining reports.

“Yes,” Silverwind decided. “We won’t know what we may have missed otherwise and that could turn out to be deadly. But Hyssop and I have decided we should conduct more autopsies.”

“All of us?” Oceanvine asked. It was plain it wasn’t something she wanted to do, although from her grim look of determination, Silverwind knew she would do it if necessary.

“For now, just Master Hyssop and myself. I’d like you two to finish going through those reports. Hmm,” he muttered looking over Oceanvine’s shoulder at the chart, “This chart is mostly location-based. Have you been tabulating the symptoms and in what combinations they occur?”

“On this chart,” Oceanvine answered, lifting the corner of the chart in front of her to reveal another chart beneath it. “As Compass expected, not all victims displayed the same symptoms. We’re tabulating how many had which symptoms.”

“How about percentages of various combinations?” Hyssop asked.

“Working on it,” Oceanvine replied. “So far we’ve just been quantifying them of course, but we are noting the combinations of symptoms as well as where they occur, just in case it turns out we’re not dealing with the same disease on every island.”

“The gods forbid!” Hyssop muttered quickly. “Still, you’re right. There is a very good chance that not all cases are this particular disease.”

“I’m sure most of them are,” Oceanvine commented.

“Likely,” Silverwind agreed, “but we don’t actually know that yet.”

“So have you had a chance to actually work up some actual percentages yet?” Hyssop pressed.

“No, not yet,” Oceanvine replied. “We wanted to finish the tabulation before we tried to analyze what we have here.”

“Reasonable,” Hyssop admitted reluctantly.

“We should have some preliminary numbers for you in the morning,” Airblossom offered, earning herself a glare from Oceanvine. “Well, you were the one who suggested we work late tonight,” she added defensively.

“Whenever,” Hyssop sighed.

“Is there anything we can do to speed you along?” Silverwind asked.

“Oh I think we can handle it,” Airblossom replied.

“But you could bring in lunch if you’d like,” Oceanvine suggested sweetly.

Silverwind grumbled and led Hyssop out of the laboratory. “So how soon can we start looking at more victims?” he asked as they left the building to walk across the campus.

“I was thinking tomorrow morning,” she replied. “It would take that long to have bodies delivered, but I suppose we could work at the coroner’s office morgue and start this afternoon. We’ll have to ask, of course, but actually, we can work faster there with less bother to the people who have to transport bodies too, since that is where the victims are being kept. And I’m sure he’ll agree.”

“How many victims do we have to examine?”

“Only five,” she replied. “There haven’t been any cases here on Orent as yet, though it is probably just a matter of time.”

“Sadly, yes,” Silverwind agreed. “I don’t suppose Wizard Meadow is available, do you know?”

“Wizard Meadow? His specialty is with animals not people,” Hyssop pointed out.

“Yes,” admitted Silverwind, “but you were the one who pointed out this disease may be not be spread person to person.”

“Good point. Unfortunately Wizard Meadow hasn’t lived in Merinne in a few years since he left University to take up private practice. He usual makes his home in Lann on the north side of the island, but he isn’t home now in any case.”

“Really? Where then?”

“Ellisto. He was invited by the Lords Council of Sonatrie to study the Sand Walkers.”

“What’s to study? They’re large desert-dwelling reptiles,” Silverwind commented. “I’d have thought we knew pretty much all there was to know about them by now. Especially considering how many others have studied them over the last century or so.”

“Their population is down and the Lords are concerned.”

“Then maybe they should stop hunting them.”

“That’s what Wizard Meadow said. He stopped by University on his way south. Talked to Wizard Compass and me over dinner before his ship left.”

“If he knows that, I’m surprised he took the job. He certainly doesn’t like wasting his time.”

“Well, he isn’t sure the problem doesn’t go deeper than that and if you know him at all, you know how he hates to let any detail get by him.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Silverwind agreed.

Later that afternoon Hyssop was sorry she suggested working in the coroner’s morgue. “It’s cold here, isn’t it? How in the world does anyone work in here.”

“Cold?” Silverwind asked. “I find it comfortably cool. Can’t say I adore the smell of embalming fluid though. I suppose one might get used to it after a while.”

“That doesn’t bother me as much. I deal with formalin preserved specimens all the time.”

“You should have specialized in flowers. They smell better,” Silverwind remarked.

“Too many allergies,” Hyssop replied. “Actually that’s why I usually wear these plain robes. Most of the dyes used in more fashionable wear irritate my skin.”

“Really? I had wondered.”

“Why didn’t you just ask?”

“It didn’t seem polite. No matter how I tried to phrase the question it would have sounded like I was accusing you of dressing in colors even a Granomish woman would call dowdy.”

“Dowdy?” she asked, affronted.

“Well that’s a bit too strong a word, but even though most Granomen wear plain colors, they aren’t quite as monochrome as your robe. On the other hand they do wear more layers for the most part. It can get quite cold in Granom, especially in the winter.”

“Well I do sometimes indulge in fashionable clothing, but only for a party when I’ll only have to wear such for a few hours. If it were all day I’d get a rash all over. Not a pretty sight...”

“I can imagine. You know, this is going much faster than I expected it might.”

“Well, we’re cutting more than a few corners. We already know that most of the visible symptoms can be seen from an external examination. The general internal deterioration so far seems to be universal, at

least according to the reports I've read."

"That seems to me the strangest part."

"You mean the odor?" Hyssop asked.

"The lack there of, actually," Silverwind clarified. "Shouldn't there be some sort of strong smell from internal organs that are this badly deteriorated, especially in bodies this long dead?"

"Yes," admitted Hyssop thoughtfully. "There should be. I wonder why nobody has noticed that before? Maybe," she continued answering her own question, "it is because most autopsies are done much sooner after a death, when they are done at all."

"Could be. Still in this case it's something we need to note."

"And a reason to stop taking short cuts," she replied decisively. "What else have we been missing?"

"Hopefully nothing, but I take your point. So much for getting through this quickly. So what have we skipped?"

"You won't like this," Hyssop warned him.

"So far I haven't liked anything about this since Compass asked for help."

"You've done amazingly well so far. Most who haven't done this before get sick, at least they do if they don't faint."

"This actually bothers me less than some of the things I've had to do on various jobs. And Meadow and I performed similar examinations on several deer just last year. They didn't smell this good, I assure you."

Well, we'll need to expose the ribcage and remove the chest plate. We'll need to remove each of the internal organs and examine them. Also the brain, it will be too delicate to handle immediately, we'll need to use some of that formalin and pickle it for a fortnight."

"A fortnight! Do you really think we have that long?" Silverwind asked.

"No, not really," Hyssop told him, "but that's how long it takes to do the job correctly."

"There must be a way to speed the process up."

"None I'm aware of, wizard, but I think I can co-opt a couple of grad students starting tomorrow morning. I'll give them a copy of our notes and a list of items to look for. That will free us up for other aspects of the investigation."

"Good."

Five

“Master Hyssop?” Airblossom called from the office doorway.

Hyssop had fallen asleep at her desk. The autopsy had run into the evening and then she had returned to her office to prepare notes for the graduate students who would continue that line of research. Those notes were now scattered all over the normally empty desktop and some sheets had fallen to the floor.

“Uh? Oh, Wenni! Is it morning already?” Hyssop held her head in her hands and moaned.

Oceanvine wisely caught herself before she said, “Wakey! Wakey!” realizing she was picking up too many bad habits from Silverwind. Instead she said, “We finished organizing the data.” Airblossom held up a roll of charts.

“Oh good,” Hyssop replied tiredly. “What have you learned?”

“The distribution of symptoms appears to be without any discernable pattern,” Airblossom reported. “However, incubation time has a definite correlation to the combination of symptoms, for whatever that is worth considering there don’t seem to have been any recoveries. There are some terrible gaps in the data, though. There’s so much the reports just don’t tell us. Um... do you feel up to hearing all this?”

“I’ll recover,” Hyssop replied uncertainly. “Go on.”

“Why don’t I go get something for breakfast,” Oceanvine suggested. “I only had a cup of tea and a piece of toast this morning, how about you?”

“Tea sounds good and some pastry perhaps,” Hyssop replied. “Do you know where the cafeteria is?”

“Fifth building down on the quad, yes. I’ll be back soon. Airblossom can show you what we found.”

“Maybe she should go fetch breakfast while you fill me in,” Hyssop suggested.

“No,” Oceanvine countered Hyssop’s academic snobbery and continued, “This is going to be her thesis after all and she can explain some of the analyses better than I can, since she was the one who did most of the work.” She shrugged, “After four years of playing wizard’s assistant, I’m pretty good at second fiddle.”

“As if that’s all you are!” Airblossom scoffed.

“Well, I’m a lot better at teamwork than I used to be,” Oceanvine replied. “You two talk, I’ll be back soon.” As she left the room she saw Airblossom starting to explain the data on one of the charts.

She strolled down the campus to the cafeteria, ignoring the paths, and threaded her way between a stand of palmettos. It would have been a bit shorter to keep to the path but it was a warm morning and sticking to the shade seemed a good idea. She stopped briefly to smell a cluster of startlingly colorful flowers only to discover they had no scent. That puzzled her since she had definitely smelled something floral on the breeze until she noticed some very small white flowers in the grass. The scent was released as she stepped on them.

When she entered the cafeteria, she found Silverwind sitting at a table entertaining a group of students. The school was on semester break, but there were always some students on campus, working on extra-credit projects, doing make-up work, or assisting professors on long term projects.

Silverwind hadn't noticed her so she walked quietly up behind him to see what he was doing. She was mildly surprised he wasn't showing off. In her experience, this was a prime Silverwind environment for that sort of thing. Instead he was quietly answering questions from the young Orenta at the table with him while eating breakfast.

Of course, she thought to herself. *He is a world famous wizard. Naturally he would attract the attention of young students, especially here at University.*

She made her way to the food tables and filled a tray with pastries and three large cups of tea and started back toward the Biology Building .

"Isn't that rather more than you regularly have for breakfast Vine?" Silverwind asked as she passed his table again.

"Oceanvine!" she corrected him testily. She turned to see him grinning at her. "It's too early, Silverwind," she muttered. Turning she found her way blocked by several of the students who a moment earlier were raptly listening to Silverwind.

"Are you really Oceanvine?" one of them, a tall Orentan girl with exceedingly long black hair, asked. "The Oceanvine?"

"Uh... I think so," she replied nonplused.

"Wow! Could I have..." The Orentan girl started shyly. Unable to finish, she held out a small paper-bound book and a pen.

"The ink is over here, Vine," Silverwind informed her with amusement.

Instead of replying to him, Oceanvine looked at the cover of the book. A typical "penny dreadful," it had a rather flamboyant cover that featured a fanciful painting of a powerful mage throwing bolts of lightning at a dark and indistinct figure while a scantily clad female with long blond hair cowered in the mage's protective shadow. The scene was set at night on a gaslight illuminated street, not dissimilar to those Oceanvine had seen in Querna. Then she saw the title of the book.

"Silverwind vs. the Cardiokiller?" she asked archly, looking at Silverwind. "By Astil of Randona."

"Ysemay's been amazingly busy hasn't she?" Silverwind replied, referring to his former wife. Lady Ysemay, using the *nom de plume*, Astil of Randona, had written a large number of such stories featuring Silverwind and his erstwhile partner Windchime who now went by the name Geraint. Most of the stories were the figments of Ysemay's imagination, though a few were loosely based on actual events. "I think that's supposed to be you there on the cover."

"Charming," Oceanvine said flatly. "At least the artist got my hair color correct even if nothing else bares any resemblance with reality."

"You feature prominently in the story too," he told her blandly. She rolled her eyes. "I don't think she likes you very much, but she seems to have made your character a bit more than the mere spear-carrier Geraint's usually is. I only wonder how she managed to miss Candle, but then it isn't any closer to the truth than any of her other books."

“You’ve read it?”

“Only the first couple chapters. You can have it when I’m done.”

“I can’t wait,” she replied, the tone of her voice saying anything but that.

“Oh, go ahead and sign a few autographs,” Silverwind suggested.

“I have to take breakfast back to Airblossom and Hyssop.”

“You know how to reheat the tea. It’ll only take a few minutes.”

Much against her own feelings on the subject Oceanvine stayed a while to sign a dozen copies of the new Silverwind book, answering questions as she did so. To her own surprise she found she actually enjoyed doing it and that gave her more insight on why Silverwind behaved as he did. Eventually, though, she made her way back to the Biology Department.

“Took you long enough, Vine,” Airblossom remarked. “What held you up?”

“It appears I’m famous,” Oceanvine replied and told Airblossom and Hyssop about the book and its cover. The three of them were still laughing about it after breakfast when Silverwind finally walked into Hyssop’s office.

“Is that it?” Airblossom asked, spotting the book in his hand. “Oh, may I borrow it when you’re done?”

“Oceanvine has first dibs,” Silverwind chuckled.

“No, that’s okay,” Oceanvine said with a warding gesture she hadn’t made since she was a young girl on Kern. “If I read it now, what will I have to look forward to on the voyage home?” she added when Silverwind laughed at her superstitious reaction.

“Shall we get down to work?” he suggested.

“What do you mean ‘get down to work’?” Hyssop asked tartly. “We’ve been working for at least an hour while you were amusing the students in the cafeteria.”

“Oh. Well, how about briefing me then. Have we any discernable patterns in the data Airblossom and Oceanvine analyzed?”

Airblossom and Hyssop looked at each other. Then Airblossom nodded at Hyssop.

“They did some remarkable work, especially considering how fast it was done,” Hyssop began, “but the only correlation that seems solid at this time is that between certain combinations of symptoms and the term of incubation. Low grade fever and the itch underarms together with no other symptoms initially are coupled with the longest incubation time and incidently the longest time between intial symptoms and death. Fever without the itch but with random hematomas seem to kill the victims fastest. With the itch a bit slower. Cases of contusions at the joints – must look strange, I haven’t seen them yet – and with the fever and all are a bit slower still. Cases with contusions around the eyes seem to incubate very quickly, but the victims manage to live nearly as long on the average as those who have just itching and fever. There are other symptoms and combinations, but those are far and above the most common comprising over ninety-three percent of all cases.”

“So we have some understanding, however rudimentary,” Silverwind concluded, “of how this disease behaves. Are there any indications of how it might be transmitted?”

“That remains unknown for now,” Airblossom offered.

“A pity,” Silverwind replied. “That would be valuable information. Still there’s no use crying over what we don’t have. We’ll just have to discover it for ourselves, if we can. More important, though, would be to find a cure.”

“Master Hyssop?” a young voice asked from the doorway. A boy no more than 12 years old stood there. He wore a bright red sash that marked him as a page in Merinne City Hall. He handed a paper envelope to Hyssop who reached into a drawer and gave him a small coin. “Thank you,” he said politely and left.

“From the Coroner’s Office,” Hyssop told the rest as she broke the seal on the envelope. She opened it and pulled out a single sheet of paper. “Oh no!”

“What is it?” Oceanvine asked just ahead of the others.

“There has been a death from the disease here in Merinne. Also we now know of several cases of people with the disease here as well.”

There were five known victims in Merinne and the Bellinen Senate, fearful of spreading infection, had put aside an estate in which they could be quarantined. The quarantine estate personally belonged to the President of the Senate who had donated it for the duration of the crisis. He and his family had another home in the center of town, so the loan of the estate on the edge of town was at most a minor inconvenience to him, but a sacrifice as the head of state in Bellinen he was expected to make.

Like most such in the archipelago, the manor house was a thin-walled structure surrounding both roofed and unroofed open areas within. Most of the walls themselves were removeable, in fact allowing breezes to pass completely through the house, helping to cool the inhabitants.

As Oceanvine and Airblossom approached the house a voice rang out, “Stay away! This is a sick house!”

“We know!” Oceanvine replied.

“We’re here from the University,” Airblossom added. Silverwind had sent them to see the patients while he oversaw the graduate students as they undertook their first autopsy. Hyssop hadn’t had time to finish her notes the night before, so she stayed in her office to finish them up. If all went as planned she would go home and get some sleep.

“Very well,” the person at the door said at last. “You know the risks, I guess.”

Airblossom introduced herself and Oceanvine.

“Doctor Rehamawa” the Orente replied. He was in his mid-fifties, the prime of life for an Orente, with dark brown hair and beard which he kept closely cropped. It was an unusual hair color in Bellinen where most natives’ hair was black, but not completely unknown. He looked tired though and Oceanvine noted that there were heavy bags under his eyes. The fact that he use the title “doctor” and did not take a mage name indicated that his specialty was in medicine but without a deep knowledge of magic. A few decades earlier that in itself would have made him unique, but more recently, purely physical medicine had gained respect. That did not mean he had no experience in the magical sciences, nearly all such doctors were also journeyman mages, but in their graduate studies they had opted to become physicians. It was fashionable among those who had chosen this path not to use a mage name, however, even though they were entitled to do so.

“May we come in and study your patients, Doctor,” Oceanvine asked politely.

“Are you certain you want to take the risk?” he countered. “They have an entirely unknown disease and a deadly one.”

“Not entirely unknown,” Oceanvine told him, “though I’ll admit we don’t know much just yet.”

“That’s why we’re here,” explained Airblossom. “We’ve already examined data from some of the other islands and we’re here to see how these patients’ symptoms correlate to those of victims elsewhere. We’ve learned a bit about the incubation time and how long patients may expect to live after contracting the disease and now we need to start looking into cures.”

“I thought the Wizard Silverwind was coming here,” Rehamawa said.

“Silverwind is currently cutting up dead bodies,” Oceanvine remarked.

“Ah,” Rehamawa nodded, understanding what the blond mage was lightly referring to. “Autopsies. Terrible but necessary, I’m afraid. But why is he doing that instead of examining live patients?”

“He lost the coin toss,” Oceanvine replied, with a grin. To her surprise the Orentan doctor laughed a loud, healthy, robust laugh.

“Good one,” he admitted at last. “Well, come on in. I’ll introduce you around.”

“Actually,” Airblossom went on, “Oceanvine and I were the ones who actually analyzed the data, so it was only natural that we’d be the ones to make the first trip out here. I’m sure Silverwind will want to come out here himself.”

“That’s all right,” Rehamawa said, still smiling, “My question was poorly phrased. I didn’t mean to imply that you two were not qualified to examine my patients, nor that Silverwind would be more so. I just meant that I was told he would be visiting. No offense was intended, I assure you.”

“None was taken,” Oceanvine replied. “What sorts of treatments have you been trying so far?”

“I’ve tried a variety of approaches,” the doctor replied. “I can make my patients more comfortable easily enough. The itching can be relieved by a number of compounds. I have a mixture of marsh-mallow, isinglass and olive oil that does the job well enough, although it eventually loses its effectiveness. Then I need a stronger regimen. At the moment on a fairly advanced case I’m trying careful applications of burgundy pitch, turpentine and mustard, but these can damage the tissue if used too long or too often.”

He led them through the house as he continued, "Two of my patients are having chest pains. I'm trying dragons blood to treat that, it helps in similar cases."

"Dragons blood?" Oceanvine asked, startled.

"Not from dragons, Vine," Airblossom told her. "It's a resin obtained from a rattan palm that grows here in Bellinen."

"Oh," Oceanvine replied. "Good."

Rehamawa chuckled. "We aren't barbarians. No one has thought the blood of a real dragon has had a beneficial effect, magical or medicinal in generations."

"How are you treating fever?" Airblossom asked.

"Cool water applied with cloths mostly. And quinine tonic seems to help overall, for a while." He paused for a moment then continued with what seemed like a change of subject. "Have you heard of a healer in Emmine called Colochicum?"

"Master Colchicum? Airblossom asked. "Didn't he teach advanced healing at University in Randona?"

"Still does as far as I know," Oceanvine replied. "Keystone passed through Renton about a year and a half ago and stayed a couple days. I think he mentioned that Colchicum was still teaching. Why?" she asked Rehamawa.

"I read a paper of his recently. Most fascinating. It is his hypothesis - or maybe it is a theory, he does claim to have proof - that diseases are caused by foreign agents that he calls germs."

"Sounds like another way to say demonic possession," Airblossom remarked.

"Oh no!" disagreed Rehamawa. "These germs aren't supernatural, but very tiny living creatures that cause infections. He believes they can be carried on the air or passed from person to person by touch."

"Or by insects or animals?" Oceanvine asked.

"Possibly," Rehamawa agreed. "Or, it could be a combination of the above. Colchicum has done some experimentation and by putting samples of swamp water under a microscope, he has observed very small creatures, some of which may cause disease."

"And you believe this plague might be caused by these germs?" Oceanvine asked.

"I don't want to count it out. I'll admit this germ theory is very controversial. There are many who don't believe a word of it. I'm sure most still agree that diseases are caused by an imbalance of the four humours; Sanguine, Choleric, Phlegmatic and Melancholic. So tell me, how is the Germ Hypothesis being accepted at the University?"

"I don't know," Airblossom admitted. "What I remember from classes in Randona the humours are still fairly well accepted, and neither Compass nor Hyssop mentioned anything about germs."

"You know Hyssop did briefly mention something about vectors of infection," Oceanvine pointed out, "and I think she was about to mention the possibility it could be carried by insects, before she suddenly

changed the subject. Could be she was thinking about these germs, and if it isn't a widely regarded theory yet, she may have been hesitant to bring it up."

"Especially if Wizard Compass, her head of department, doesn't accept it. We'll have to ask her," Airblossom replied. "I'd hate to fail to find a cure just because we were exploring the wrong path."

"All my patients are on the shady part of the inner courtyard," Rehamawa told them. "I think the fresh air may help them, but they don't seem to be able to tolerate direct sunlight, not for long anyway."

"That's something we didn't know," Airblossom commented. "Is that universal?"

"I only have five patients so far, and I'll be happy if the number doesn't grow, but all five have the problem," Rehamawa replied.

There were five Orentan men and women in the shady area seated in long comfortable chairs with adjustable backs, so that some were nearly lying down and others were sitting up. All were wearing very dark glasses over their eyes as well.

"Ocular sensitivity to light as well," Rehamawa commented, "although I understand that similar eyewear is becoming quite popular with youngsters lately."

"They make the light easier on the eyes too," a middle-aged Orentan woman told them, having overheard the end of the conversation. "I think they would be nice to wear even if I were healthy." The others agreed.

"May I present Koamashimi?" the doctor started the introductions. He quickly introduced the others as well and Oceanvine and Airblossom started examining and interviewing the patients.

Oceanvine started by talking to Koamashimi while Airblossom sat in front of two men with the doctor asking various questions. Immediately Oceanvine realized she and Airblossom hadn't actually prepared any questions, but she plowed ahead anyway.

"So do the glasses help a lot?" she asked, at a loss for a good place to start.

"Some," Koamashimi replied. "I still ache a little all over and the itchiness keeps coming back no matter how many times Doctor Rahamawa treats it. I'm a bit dizzy too and always a bit thirsty, but without the dark glasses the light, even here in the shade, would be much too bright and give me a really fierce headache."

"How long have you been sick?" Oceanvine asked, writing quickly.

"Only a few days, dear. But at least I don't have those horrid bruises Nerry has."

"Who?" Oceanvine asked.

"The man on the right there that your friend and the doctor are talking too. See? He has those terrible black eyes and his joints are bruised too, isn't that strange?"

"Yes," agreed Oceanvine. "May I ask what you do for a living?"

"Of course, dear, I weave and mend fishing nets."

“Fishing nets,” Oceanvine repeated, making a note.

“Something wrong with that?” Koamishimi asked suspiciously.

“Oh, no. Not at all. I’m just trying to figure out how that works into what we know already.”

“And how does it, dear?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it doesn’t. Maybe it doesn’t make any difference if you’re a net weaver or a duchess. We don’t really know yet. And maybe we don’t need to know all that to find a cure, which is even more important.”

After that Oceanvine had no trouble finding more questions to ask.

Six

“Now that’s just plain stupid!” Candle burst out suddenly during a lesson.

“Candle,” Serabawa explained patiently, “I don’t expect you to agree with every philosophical theory I teach you about.”

“You don’t?”

“Not hardly! I don’t agree with most of them myself. The people who formulated them didn’t agree with each other either. Why else do you think there are so many different ones?”

“Then why do I have to learn all of them?” Candle asked. “Why don’t you teach me the one that’s true.”

“Ah!” Serabawa replied with a smile. “What is truth?”

“Oh no! Not that again.”

“That’s what philosophy is all about, Candle. It’s a search for truth. Each set of beliefs we’ve discussed has been held to be true by the ones who formulated them and those who followed them, whether they were Stoics, Cynics, Hedonists or Monophysites.”

“That was really stupid,” Candle interrupted. “Everyone knows there are nine gods.”

“You know that for certain?” Serabawa asked. “You’ve met them?”

“No,” Candle admitted and then very softly so Serabawa wasn’t sure he heard it, “Just one.”

“Candle, it has a lot to do with one’s view of the world. If you see the world like a stoic, then stoicism would seem right to you. On the other hand you, my young friend, are a materialist of the most basic sort for the most part, but you have some idealistic beliefs as well.. You have cynical tendencies, but can be a stoic sometimes as well. In short you will find in each philosophy there are some parts you agree with even if you find yourself opposed to the rest. But as I said you don’t have to agree with any of them, you just have to know what they are and understand them. In the long run you will find these different points

of view useful.” Candle didn’t appear convinced. “Well, that’s neither here nor there. It is time we moved on to more modern philosophy; the set of ideas that have made modern magic possible, for without new ways to see the world, our great wizards like your master Silverwind could not have invented the new spells systems we all rely on for a comfortable life in this world.

“Did you know that a mere century ago the pilots the larger harbors employ were not mages? They were people who just knew the channels and currents in the harbors they served and they used that knowledge to guide the ships in and out of the harbor. Have you ever seen a modern pilot work?”

“I’ve seen Silverwind and Oceanvine act as pilots,” the boy replied. “They used a propulsion spell to power the ship.”

“Right. That spell was invented when I was about your age, but without Markenawa’s analytic philosophy sometime before it, the physics behind the spell might not have been understood properly and therefore the spell itself would likely not have been devised.” He paused a bit to let that sink in then added, “Of course, even today there are those who do not agree even with that.”

“Oh, you mean they say that such a spell might have been invented without that philosophy?”

“In a sense. Actually they claim that Markenawa is basically wrong, that there is little or nothing that can be classed as analytic and... well, I suppose what it really comes down to is that there are few absolutes that all will agree on. But Markenawa’s theory did, indeed, contribute toward the development of the propulsion spell and, in fact, many other families of spells as well.”

“Then he wasn’t wrong?” Candles asked uncertainly.

Serabawa smiled then replied, “Not in the context in which those spells were devised.” He thought about that a bit. “I suppose that in its proper context no philosophy is actually wrong. It is only when you study it from another context that flaws may appear. Let’s go back to the first example we discussed.”

Candle groaned, “Oh not the tree in the forest again!”

“Candle!” Serabawa said sternly. He rarely did so but when he did Candle had learned to pay attention. “When I first asked you that question you replied that of course it made a sound when it fell regardless of whether there was anyone there to hear it. Why?”

“Because things falling always make sounds when they fall,” Candle replied.

“And I asked you to define what a sound was. And what did you decide?”

“That a sound is something you hear.”

“All right. So if there is no one around to hear it, is it a sound? No, we don’t need to go through all that again, but then you said that then there hadn’t been a sound, so we discussed the nature of sound. A few days later you decided to change your mind back to the belief the tree had made a sound because you now understood sound as a series of vibrations made through a material medium.”

“And also you had taught me that it is impossible to prove a negative,” Candle added.

“Ah! But just because you cannot prove something happened, it doesn’t mean it didn’t happen,” Serabawa replied with a laugh. “Philosophers hate that!” And Candle joined in the laughter.

“Still,” Serabawa continued, “proper thought deals with what can be proved, since one should never attempt to build a philosophy without a firm foundation of the proveable. If the basic tenets won’t hold up under investigation, then the rest of a philosophy won’t hold up either. But we are going off on another tangent here, Candle. That seems to happen more with you than any other student I’ve ever taught.

“Everything I’ve been leading up to is the difference between the magic of the ancient world and that of the modern one. Do you know what that is?”

Candle’s face screwed up in concentration. He knew by now that Serabawa never asked a question he couldn’t answer. That answer may not be the right one, or at least not the one Serabawa had agreed with. But it always turned out that Candle had an answer. This time he had to think for a while before saying anything.

“Does this have something to do with the Age of Faith?” he asked at last.

“In a way,” Serabawa allowed.

Candle thought a bit longer, trying to remember what Oceanvine had told him in their history lessons. “We test theories by experimentation,” he replied at last. The words had been Oceanvine’s, not his, but he could think of no better phrasing.

“Correct,” Serabawa told him, “but ancients also experimented. More properly, that is the difference between the modern era and the Middle Ages which are also called the Age of Faith, a period in which it was considered wrong to question the wisdom of the ancients. The Ancients themselves had other notions, but they saw the world in animistic terms, that is, they saw it as like a living organism. The modern view is mechanistic. We view the world and the way it operates as we world a highly complex machine. The physical world acts the way it does because it obeys the laws of physics.”

“And that is the right way to view the world?” Candle asked.

Serabawa took a deep look at his student. Just as Silverwind and Oceanvine had, he realized that Candle had an amazing mind. It was obvious he was struggling to comprehend everything Serabawa had told him about various forms of philosophy in the same way he had simply devoured every form of mathematics he had encountered so far. Idly Serabawa wondered how the lad would handle calculus in their next lesson, but for now he brought himself back to this day’s lesson. In spite of his confusion, Candle, without intending to, was teaching his teacher.

“That depends,” Serabawa replied at last.

“On what?”

“On you, of course, lad.”

Candle’s face screwed up again for a moment, then he smiled at his teacher. “You mean, we each need to decide what we believe and how to prove it?”

Was that what he meant? Serabawa was as uncertain as Candle was. Although it wasn’t his normal habit, he fell back on an old teacher’s dodge and assigned the question to Candle as an essay to work on between now and the next lesson.

“Should I start now?” Candle asked.

“As good a time as any.”

“Will we surf later?” Candle had really taken to the Orentan sport, and after some abortive attempts, had gained sufficient skill to keep from being the joke of the local beach. Candle, Serabawa had come to realize, had strong doses of pride and stubbornness in his make-up and once he attempted something, he would generally stick with it until told he was good enough, perhaps longer.

“Yes,” Serabawa replied, “but first you should work up an outline for the essay, then we will take a break.”

Candle nodded and left the deck where most lessons took place to sit down at the table just inside. He had been working a few minutes when Silverwind climbed the stairs to the house’s deck.

“Lessons going well?” he asked Serabawa.

“Quite well. At least I think so. There are times I’m not sure which one of us is the teacher.”

“That’s how I feel every time I try to teach him something,” Silverwind laughed.

“And how does your investigation proceed?”

“At a standstill, I’m afraid. We know the symptoms and can make victims as comfortable as possible, but as for cures... Well, so far we’re making no progress. Airblossom has come up with some amazing treatments though. All the more amazing since she has very little background in medicine. But her instincts are good. We even thought she might have been close to a cure, but unfortunately, it turned out that like the physical medicines that have been tried, she was only relieving symptoms, but not actually treating the disease.

“Well, that’s not entirely true,” Silverwind admitted a moment later. “She was able to cure the bruises the disease causes in some victims and that, in turn seems to extend their life expectancy.”

“So that by changing the symptoms, she changed the nature of the disease,” Serabawa concluded. “Interesting. I’m not trained in medicine, but isn’t that sort of unusual?”

“Very! It’s quite unheard of, in fact.”

“My friend, you appear to have a philosophical disease.”

“Philosophical?” Silverwind asked.

“Of course. If the nature of an object is determined by its representation, then you change the nature by changing the representation.”

“Sympathy!” Silverwind exclaimed.

“Indeed,” Serabawa agreed. “She changed the disease by utilizing the Law of Sympathy. Using a representation to perform in miniature what you wish to accomplish on a larger scale. Would it be possible to cure it in the same manner?”

“The common consensus says it wouldn’t. It certainly hasn’t been done so far on even so much as the common cold.”

“Then how do you explain Airblossom’s success?”

“So far I don’t. But it’s probably more likely that by curing the symptomatic bruises, she prevented whatever they indicated from killing the victims sooner. One of them still died, just a few hours ago, in fact. It’s just that otherwise he would have been gone at least two weeks ago, or so we think.”

“Yes, that could possibly explain reports by some of the ancients in which diseases were cured by sympathy. Of course it is always possible that they really did effect such cures.”

“I doubt Hyssop would agree with you. Not sure I could either, for that matter. I’ve never been one to set much store in so-called ‘Lost Arts,’ and this would definitely be a lost art, since we can’t seem to use sympathy in disease control now. No one really knows why, since Sympathy plays such a major part in modern magic.”

“That I could not say,” Serabawa told him.

“It does give me something to think about, though. Well, I only stopped by to see how you and Candle were doing. I had better get back to the University.”

“Oh, one thing before you go,” Serabawa requested. Silverwind turned back to face the philosopher. “Did you or Oceanvine have many discussions of modern philosophy with Candle before I started teaching him?”

“No, I didn’t,” Silverwind replied. “And I don’t think Oceanvine did either, except possibly how it may have pertained to certain historical events. Why?”

“Nothing important, I suppose. It just seems that he is better prepared to discuss some subjects we cover than others. That isn’t unusual in itself, but there are times when he seems to know some of the more advanced subjects quite well, but basic principals remain a mystery to him. I was just wondering how that may have come about.”

Silverwind grinned, “I’ve seen that too. I think Candle is just an unusually deep thinker for a boy his age and he seems to have a knack for thinking below the surface of what he is told. There have been quite a few times when I gave him a basic exercise to perform and he perceived and started working on the next lesson or the next once removed before coming to show me what he had done. It can be a bit disconcerting at times, I admit.”

“Yes, that’s probably it,” Serabawa agreed.

“Well, back to work for me,” Silverwind said and left.

“And me as well,” Serabawa to himself as he saw Candle put down his writing stick and start toward the deck with a sheet of paper.

Oceanvine looked up as Silverwind entered the laboratory. She and Hyssop were working on yet another chart at one of the long lab tables.

“Anything new?” both Silverwind and Oceanvine asked in unison.

“Not much,” Oceanvine replied first. “All we’re managing to do here is verify patterns we’ve already suspected. How about you?”

“Have you ever heard of a disease being cured by a sympathetic spell?” Silverwind asked.

Oceanvine shook her head, but Hyssop replied, “No. Medicine doesn’t work that way. I’d have thought you knew that.”

“I do, but Serabawa and I were just talking and he pointed out that some of Airblossom’s treatments were having sympathetic results.”

Hyssop repeated the same explanation Silverwind had used then added, “There have been a few attempts to heal wounds by sympathy. They have not been consistently successful, so we know that such cures are possible, but there are evidently some complicating factors we do not yet understand.”

“Airblossom and I,” Oceanvine said to Hyssop, “have been meaning to ask you about Master Colchicum’s germ theory.”

“What about it?” Hyssop asked guardedly.

“Doctor Rehamawa mentioned it during our first visit to Quarantine House. He seemed to think it might have some merit and asked our opinions. We’d never heard of it so we really couldn’t venture an opinion. But from what you said we thought you might think it has merit. Does it?”

Hyssop looked at the other two mages and made a choice, “I think it may. It certainly explains much of what we do not understand. I think it is a better explanation than an imbalance of humours in any case, but it is not widely accepted, even within this department.”

“Compass doesn’t buy it, hmm?” Silverwind asked.

“Wizard Compass believes it is just a restatement of the ancient superstition that possession by malevolent spirits causes disease. I can’t say he isn’t completely wrong to remain skeptical. The proofs shown so far are not entirely convincing.”

“I thought Colchicum had observed germs in a microscope,” Oceanvine said.

“Maybe he did,” Hyssop allowed, “but all we really know is that he saw microscopic animals, some of which were single-celled. By itself, that was enlightening and an amazing addition to our biological knowledge, but we don’t know for certain if these microbes actually cause disease, and even if they do, how?”

“But you think the theory has merit?” Oceanvine pressed.

Hyssop sighed heavily. “Yes. Yes, I do, but please don’t tell Wizard Compass I told you that. We’ve had some pretty nasty arguments on the subject. Last time he threatened to recommend I be denied tenure if I continued to support Colchicum’s theory in classes. I have another two semesters to go before

I can get tenure and I would prefer not to take the risk this close.”

“That doesn’t sound fair,” Oceanvine opined idealistically. “This is supposed to be a center of learning where students should be exposed to all manner of ideas.”

“Even in University,” Silverwind commented, “there are politics. And rank has its privileges as well.”

“He is the head of department,” Hyssop replied, “and it is his job to pass judgment on the curriculum. And he doesn’t demand we not discuss the theory at all. I am allowed to teach it as a minority viewpoint. I’m just not supposed to give it any more credence than a number of other new hypotheses. He isn’t completely unfair. Why? What did I say that made you think I accept the Germ Theory?”

“It was when you mentioned vectors of infection and then changed the subject again quickly. At the time I didn’t think about it much, but later...” She left the sentence hanging.

“I had wondered if I had said too much. I really should watch that.”

“Oh I don’t know,” Silverwind disagreed. “In a case like this we need to consider all the possibilities. Does the department have any of these new microscopes?”

“Yes,” Hyssop replied. “We have two. I can have one brought to this lab. Why?”

“Why don’t we look for germs, if they exist in certain bodily fluids of the victims. Which would you suggest?” he asked Hyssop.

“Well, blood I would say for a certainty and I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to examine saliva and urine samples.”

Oceanvine’s nose wrinkled at that. “I never thought I’d look back to dealing with a serial killer with nostalgia. Definitely not my kind of case, this.”

“You’re doing well though,” Hyssop told her. “Especially for someone who is not an expert in Biology.”

“When you work with Silverwind here,” Oceanvine replied wryly, “you need to be an accomplished generalist.” Silverwind chuckled.

“Where is Airblossom today?” he asked.

“She’s back at Quarantine House again,” Oceanvine told him. “She had a few new ideas for treatments.”

“She’s been driving herself pretty hard, hasn’t she?”

“Yes, she has,” both Oceanvine and Hyssop agreed. Oceanvine continued, “I caught her in the library late last night. It seems she’s been spending most evenings there after spending most of her days with various victims.

“She really ought to take a little time off,” Silverwind commented. “She’ll wear herself out if she keeps that up.”

“We’ll be seeing her later anyway. Dinner with her and her fiancé, remember?”

“Oh, yes. We were supposed to have dinner with them weeks ago, weren’t we?”

“Yes, but Waterfall had to stay up late on a job. And then we got hauled into this plague problem. So we had better go this time!”

Airblossom’s fiancé, Waterfall, had just finished setting the table when he heard the gong by the front door ring. He started heading for the door but tripped over one of the chair legs and nearly crashed into the wall.

“Hon!” Airblossom called from the kitchen. “They’re here. Would you get the door?”

“Yes, dear,” he replied, managing to regain his balance, only to stumble over another chair. After picking himself up he made his way to the door.

“Waterfall, I presume,” Silverwind said by way of greeting as the door opened. “May I present Oceanvine and Candle,” He added, nodding toward each in turn.

“And you must be the Wizard Silverwind, sir!” Waterfall concluded enthusiastically.

“I suppose I must,” Silverwind replied wryly, “but let’s not stand on ceremony and titles, hmm?”

“Yes, sir. Thank you. Oh!” He clapped his hand suddenly to his forehead. “Where are my manners? Please come in! Airblossom’s busy cooking, but we have some appetizers. And would you like something to drink? We have several fresh fruit juices chilled.”

“I don’t suppose you have some wine?” Silverwind asked.

“Wine? Yes, of course, but you drink? I thought all wizards abstained from any alcoholic beverage.”

“I suppose there must be one exception to make the rule,” Oceanvine commented sharply. “Which way’s the kitchen? I’ll go help Airblossom.”

“That way,” Waterfall replied, pointing the way. “What sort of wine would you like, sir?”

“Just Silverwind, Waterfall, and whatever might go well with dinner.”

“A white or a green wine then, unless,” Waterfall paused to look at Silverwind to catch his reaction. “Well, I have a few bottles of spelled *als* from Marga...”

“Perfect,” Silverwind replied, “even if you don’t have the Kamo biscuits that are traditionally served with Margan brews.”

“Kamo biscuits?” Waterfall asked.

“A dark red, seasoned flaky cracker of sorts. Fried, of course. Each inn keeper on Marga has his own recipe and tourists making the rounds do so as much for the Kamos as they do for the beer.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Well, these should go well enough in any case,” Silverwind told him.

“Oh, good,” Waterfall said, showing relief, and started for the door. He looked back over his shoulder and said, “Have a seat, I’ll be right back.” Then he turned around and nearly ran into the door frame. “Oops,” he muttered absently and disappeared.

Silverwind looked at Candle, who had already started helping himself to some appetizers; small, crisp pieces of fried fish.

“What?” Candle asked suspiciously.

“Nothing,” Silverwind returned with a smile.

“At least I don’t trip over my own feet,” Candle remarked nodding his head in the direction in which Waterfall had disappeared.

“Shh, Candle!” Silverwind hushed him quietly. “I’m sure he’s not always like that. He’s just nervous is all.”

“You sure?”

“No, not really, but be nice, all right?”

“Yes, okay,” Candle sighed, biting back half a dozen other remarks.

Waterfall returned a minute later, carrying a tray with two bottles and a pitcher of a red liquid. He put the tray on a low table in front of the chairs in which Silverwind and Candle were seated and took three glasses out of a small wooden cabinet.

“I forgot to ask you, Candle,” Waterfall said, pouring the red liquid into a glass. “what you wanted, but I always liked this berry drink when I was your age. It’s both tart and sweet and very refreshing and if you don’t like it, I can get something else for you.”

Candle took the glass and sipped cautiously. “This is good,” he told Waterfall. Silverwind gave the boy a subtle signal with his eyes and Candle added, “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, Candle,” Waterfall replied. He opened a bottle of the Granomish ale and dew started forming on the glass as the spell on the beer caused it to suddenly cool down to the perfect serving temperature. In spite of his earlier clumsiness, he poured the liquid expertly into a glass and handed it to Silverwind, then did the same for himself.

“So, Waterfall,” Silverwind began, “what’s your field?”

“Trees,” Waterfall replied quickly. “Mostly, I work with cultivars - breeding, planting, disease control – but I also do some consulting in forest management.”

“Trees?” Candle asked. “What do you mean?”

“Sometimes trees will get sick just like people, Candle,” Waterfall replied. I had that problem just recently with a grove of illumina trees. They have leaves that glow various colors for several hours after sunset. Very pretty. Well, they were starting to wilt and I had to figure out what was making them sick.”

“What was it?” Candle asked.

“An insect. A sort of boring beetle had gotten under the bark and started eating the living fibers of the tree,” Waterfall explained. “I also invent new cultivars, that is, new breeds of tree.”

“Why?”

“Sometimes we need trees with special properties, say a tree that can tolerate brackish water that otherwise would be unable to. Or maybe you want a fruit tree that produces bigger more juicy fruits. See?”

“Yeah,” Candle replied, looking at the fruit juice in his glass. “Is this...?” He left the question hanging.

“The winberry juice? No, winberries grow in sandy soil on low vines. Silverwind, how goes your work on this new illness?”

“Not too well, I’m afraid,” the wizard replied, and he went on to briefly sum up what they had learned so far before concluding, “but surely you know all this. I assume Airblossom must have mentioned this from time to time.”

“Actually, we’ve barely seen each other these last two weeks. She’s spent all day in the field and all evening in the library, and I have only been home half the time as well. If you weren’t here tonight, I’m sure she wouldn’t have been home until well past midnight.”

“You live together?” Candle asked.

“Why, yes, of course,” Waterfall replied. “We are engaged, after all.”

“Candle,” Silverwind explained. “It is customary among Orenta who are engaged to be married to spend at least one year living together first, even though humans and Granomen do not usually live together until after the wedding.”

“Why?” Candle asked.

“There is no divorce among the Orenta, so they do not actually get married until they are absolutely certain it will be permanent. It’s a sensible means of addressing the issue, even if many humans and most Granomen find it immoral.”

“Is that why the trolls don’t like us?” Waterfall asked.

“Probably not,” Silverwind laughed. “At least it isn’t the only reason.”

“Dinner’s ready!” Airblossom called. She and Oceanvine brought out several serving dishes and put them on the dining table. Silverwind, Waterfall and Candle picked up their glasses and joined the ladies at the table.

“What are those?” Candle asked uncertainly, seeing a large plate full of pink objects.

“Prawns, Candle,” Oceanvine replied. “They’re sort of related to the lobsters we had in Querna, but smaller.”

“Oh.”

“I think you’ll like them, Candle,” Airblossom added. “This is a special Bellinen way of serving them. We like to eat them with a variety of different flavored dipping sauces.” She indicated a number of small bowls, each of which held a different sort of sauce. Some were thick and sweet, while others were thin, sometimes with bits of cut vegetables in them. Along with the prawns there were also bowls of steamed and raw vegetables, which Candle learned were to be eaten with the dips as well.

Dinner was well along when Silverwind brought up the subject of the on-going disease research again. Airblossom reported that she hadn’t really made much progress, although she had interviewed and examined nearly all the local victims.

“I did come up with a couple of new treatment techniques that Doctor Rehamawa says have been effective at alleviating symptoms and that he thinks have also been effective at increasing the life expectancies of some of his patients.”

“So maybe you’re close to a cure,” Oceanvine suggested, scratching absently under her right arm.

“Vine, are you itchy?” Airblossom asked with concern.

Oceanvine’s eyes widened as she realized what she had done. “Oh, Emmine!” she swore. “I have the disease!” She threw a panicked look at Silverwind.

“A little itch,” he pointed out, “but do you feel feverish yet?” She shook her head. “Then it may just be a normal itch. No need to panic yet.”

“Maybe, but I doubt it,” Airblossom replied coolly. “You see, I developed that same itch a couple hours ago.”

Eight

“How long have you been itching?” Silverwind asked Hyssop.

“Itching? I’m not itchy!” Hyssop retorted.

“Really?” Silverwind replied, unconvinced. “Okay. Obviously that’s just a random motion your right hand is making under your left arm. My miscalculation.”

Hyssop glared at him, then her shoulders sank in defeat. “Started last night,” she admitted. “I woke up in the middle of the night itching like hell!” Then something clicked in her mind and she asked, “And you?”

“Started yesterday afternoon,” he said easily.

“You seem to be handling it well,” Hyssop noted.

“What makes you say that? The fact that I’m not snapping at everyone in sight?”

“You’re right, wizard. I haven’t been behaving very well, have I?”

“We all handle this sort of thing in our own way, Hyssop. If it makes you feel better, actually I’m terrified. Oceanvine once told me about all the things she wants to do in her lifetime. I pointed out that it would take five lifetimes to do it all.”

“And she said?” Hyssop prompted him.

“That she would live five lifetimes,” Silverwind replied. Then he added in a much softer voice, “or die trying.”

“Or die trying,” Hyssop repeated just as softly. “I never felt that way. All my work. It’s all been done here in this building. I came to University ten years ago and never really left. Seems like such a waste now.”

“A waste?” Silverwind asked. “You’re being too harsh on yourself. I know a little about the work you’ve done here. Your research has helped to fuel some of the greatest advances in medicine in the last few years.”

“But I haven’t made those advances! I just wrote papers that others used to base their own work on.”

“And without those papers it is quite possible that work may never have been accomplished. You’ve contributed and in a significant way. Many scholars never have so direct an effect, you know. Some never make any real contribution at all. Writing papers is one thing, but to truly contribute to the sum of our knowledge you need to have what you write used by others. It does no one any good to write a paper, no matter how interesting, that doesn’t lead to something else.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” she admitted. “But look at you and Oceanvine. You’ve been all over the world. If the books are even half true...”

“They aren’t.”

“What?”

“The books are nearly complete fabrications by my former wife. A few of them are based on actual cases Windchime and I, and in this latest one that Oceanvine and I took, but beyond our names, very little actually happened. Actually I think this latest one may be the most accurate one she ever wrote, but then, she was in Querna at the time.”

“How convenient,” Hyssop commented dryly.

“Not really. King Ksaveras invited her at about the same time he requested my services. Trolls are evidently as gullible as humans and elves,” he added disgustedly, ignoring the wince and nasty glare from Hyssop at the word, “elf.” “I think he thought Ysemay followed me around like an official chronicler.” He laughed a bit ruefully at that. “If she had we might still be married. But, while I’ve been around a little...”

“A little! Okay, the books are hokum, but you are the only mage to earn a degree at all three Universities and the Wizard’s final is always held in the Five Demons which means not only that you’ve been there but must have at least passed through Ellisto, and have you ever been to the Isle of Fire?”

Silverwind flinched a bit, but replied simply, “Yes, once.”

Hyssop did not notice Silverwind’s reaction. “Then there you are, you have visited every major inhabited area on Maiyim!”

“But you over estimate Oceanvine’s experience. This is her first trip outside Emmine. In fact, before this, she had only lived on her home island at University in Randona and then at my home outside Renton .”

“Really? But she already seems to be following in your footsteps. A master’s degree from the University in Querna? Wow! Do you have any idea how amazing it is that a woman of any species could earn a degree there?”

“As a matter of fact, yes, I do,” Silverwind replied with a smile.

“Oh, Yes. You were there when it happened, weren’t you?”

“Well, I wasn’t on her committee. All I did was give my recommendation, for all the good that did.”

“I’m sure it did more good than you think,” Hyssop said.

“No, I know it didn’t, the present dean there is not a fan of mine by a long shot. Actually the one who made a difference was the Chief of Forensic Magic at the Royal Bureau of Investigation. He bullied the dean into giving her a fair exam.”

“A Granomish mage supported her?”

“Several did, actually. She’s a fairly amazing lady and much better than I’ve ever been at making friends. However, I’ve come to the conclusion that individual Granomen are not anywhere as conservative as the culture they live in.”

“What do you mean?”

“Only that most individuals there seem to be quite liberal in their social attitudes, able to accept someone like Oceanvine who breaks all the social rules of their culture. But at the same time they can be quite conservative when taken as a group. Any one of them will tell you how a woman could never have matriculated at the University there. In fact there is an entire Women’s Academy there whose ultimate goal is to get Granomish women into the University. It hasn’t happened yet. However, most people will tell you that they personally don’t agree with that situation and ‘isn’t it sad that it still exists in this day and age?’ In many ways Orenta are just the opposite.”

“In many ways we are,” Hyssop agreed. “Our culture is considered quite liberal compared to human and Granomish ones, but as individuals we are quite conservative in that we agree totally with the values of our culture. Is that what you meant.”

“Very much so, yes.”

“So how long has it been since Oceanvine passed her exams?”

“Just a few months. We left Quirna only a few days after they gave her the green mage-stone. Just as well, until she was forced to pack I don’t think she did much except stare at the green image inside it all

day.”

“I think I did the same thing when I got mine,” Hyssop admitted.

“Really? I don’t think I ever did much more than glance at any of my mage stones when I got them.”

“You’re strange,” she told him with a smile to show she didn’t really mean it.

“Have you just started noticing that?”

“I’ve known for years!” Oceanvine said from the doorway. She and Airblossom entered the room and each dropped a large stack of notebooks down on the lab table, then sat down tiredly next to Silverwind and Hyssop. They were both wearing the dark glasses that allowed the disease victims to tolerate normal light. “Anything new?”

“Not really,” Silverwind answered.

“Silverwind has been doing a good job to cheer me up, though,” Hyssop admitted.

Airblossom looked at Hyssop and realized why she had needed cheering up. “Oh no! Not you too?”

“It was only a matter of time,” Hyssop shrugged, “for all of us.” At that Oceanvine looked at Silverwind and he nodded. It was all the acknowledgement she needed.

“What about Candle?” Oceanvine asked, worried.

“He’s fine so far, so is Serabawa. I asked this morning.”

“Are you sure Candle isn’t trying to hide his illness again?”

“I’m fairly certain. Also I’ve been watching him closely ever since you developed symptoms.”

“And so far the disease doesn’t seem to spread to everyone in contact with a victim,” Airblossom noted.

“But everyone who contracts it has been in contact with a victim,” Hyssop pointed out.

“True enough,” Airblossom agreed.

“Excuse me?” a voice called from the doorway. They looked up to see a young Granom wearing livery in the royal colors of the Granomish throne. Oceanvine thought at first he was a herald before remembering that a herald would have worn a tabard with royal arms, but as he wore the royal livery, he must be on the staff of the Granomish consulate. “Wizard Silverwind or Master Oceanvine?”

“Here,” Oceanvine and Silverwind said together. The messenger entered the room and after a moment’s hesitation handed an envelope to Oceanvine, who was sitting closer to the door than Silverwind was.

“Thank you,” she told him.

“I was instructed to wait for a reply,” he announced, taking a step backward toward the door again.

Oceanvine offered the envelope to Silverwind but he waved her off, “You open it. Every time I open

one of those things, it's bad news." She broke the seal on the envelope and pulled out a folded letter.

"Unto the Most Honorable Wizard Silverwind, Marquess of Sentendir, and Master Lady Oceanvine, Knight of the Silver Stay, does His Highness Prince Zakhar, Ambassador to the Bellinan Senate... Well, he seems to have his cousin's gift for windy greetings," Oceanvine parenthesized.

"Do me a favor, Vine, and just sum it all up," Silverwind sighed.

"That's Oceanvine!" she told him abruptly. Airblossom gave her a strange look at her reaction to the nickname, "Vine." Oceanvine continued, "Well it appears His Highness has a problem, unspecified, and would like us to give him assistance at our earliest. Incidentally we are invited to dinner a few days from now." She turned to the messenger and said, "Tell Zak we accept his kind invitation and at least one of us will be out a bit later this afternoon to see what we can do to help."

"Thank you, lady," the messenger replied, turned, and left.

"Are they all that stiff and formal?" Airblossom asked.

"Not really," Silverwind replied, "This one was young and evidently quite serious about being on the embassy staff. But, yes, the Granomen nobility set much store by ceremony. For that matter so do humans in the Royal Court. Oceanvine, do I correctly assume you'd like to go visiting this afternoon?"

"That was my plan. Do you wish to join me?"

"Later, perhaps. Hyssop and I will be stopping in at Quarentine House again. How are you feeling? Any sign of fever yet?"

"I'm a bit achy, but Airblossom's treatments seem to help."

"We don't want to go infecting the Granomish ambassador," Silverwind cautioned here.

"I'll be careful," Oceanvine assured him. "We'll keep our distance."

"We?"

"I figured I'd take Airblossom. I've told her all about my sister."

"I would like to meet Ksana," Airblossom admitted.

"Very well," Silverwind said at last. "But you be careful too, Airblossom!"

"I've been meaning to ask," Airblossom began as she and Oceanvine walked through Merinne toward the Granomish Embassy. "Since when don't you like being called, 'Vine'? I've called you that for years. Everyone in the class called you that, but every time Silverwind uses that name you snap at him."

"Oh, that. Well it started not long after we graduated. When you came back to Bellinen, I stayed at University to do post graduate work."

“I recall that part.”

“Right. Well, I soon found that a lot of the professors, especially the resident wizards, weren’t taking me very seriously so long as they called me ‘Vine’ just like my classmates. So I started insisting they use my full name.”

“And that worked?”

“It got their attention,” Oceanvine shrugged. “And if I was firm enough about it, well, it sort of worked. By the time Silverwind offered me the job as his assistant, it was an automatic reflex. And as for Candle, give him an opening and he’ll exploit it to the fullest. You should have seen his reaction when he found out what oceanvine is. He started calling me ‘Seaweed.’”

“I see,” Airblossom replied with a small giggle, “Vine, but you don’t seem to mind it when I call you that.”

“That’s different. You were in my class.”

“If you say so. Oh my, how different!” Airblossom suddenly exclaimed. “I don’t think I’ve ever been at this end of town. I’m sure I’d have remembered that!”

“That” was the Granomish Embassy. It was entirely unlike any other building in the Bellinen Archipelago. Built like a miniature Wurra Palace, it was constructed of pink granite and trimmed with large blocks of smokey quartz that Oceanvine knew had been produced magically. She was about to point that out when the sight of the small castle prompted another thought.

“Did they import all that stone from Granom?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Airblossom told her. “I’ve never seen it before.”

“Really? But you live in Merinne, how did you manage to miss a large stone building that towers over typically Orentan light wooden buildings?”

“I didn’t grow up in Merinne, Vine. I was born on Killarn and lived on a number of other islands as well. My Dad was in the Navy and we had to move whenever he got transferred. I never even saw this city until I got into the graduate program at University.”

“Funny, I knew that, but somehow I always thought you kept coming back here to the capital city.”

“No, I think I spent most of my youth going back and forth between Tissa and Ponar, that’s where the two largest naval bases are. Relics of the wars with Granom, I guess. With that sort of upbringing it’s amazing I’m not xenophobic about trolls.”

“Blossom!” Oceanvine exclaimed, shocked at her friend’s use of the derogatory term. “How can you use that term? It’s rude.”

“Of course it’s rude and if I were xenophobic, it’s precisely the term I would use all the time. That was my point. I’ve never quite understood it. It never really bothered me to be called an elf, it’s just a word after all, but I know the Granomen detest being called trolls so normally I don’t use the word, but this seemed an appropriate context for it. Anyway, you ought to lighten up a bit. After all I’ve been a member

of One Maiyim longer than you have.”

One Maiyim was the name of a movement that was dedicated to uniting the peoples of the world in a single peaceful and prosperous whole. The name was taken because of the belief that only together can all the peoples of Maiyim achieve the true greatness that the gods intended for them. There was also a strong ecological faction within the movement. However, in spite of the group’s benevolent mission, it didn’t have many members away from the University campuses of Merinne and Randona and, as yet, no chapter had been established in Querna. On the whole it was a movement made up of students, most of whom got involved in other interests after graduation and they had to make a living in the “real” world.

“Yes, you have. Oh! I never told you. Did you know Silverwind was one of the founders of One Maiyim?”

“No! When did he tell you that?”

“He didn’t. Doctor Nightfall, the Coroner of Querna did. I got the impression it embarrassed Silverwind a bit.”

“Why would that embarrass him. You would think he’d be proud of what he started,” Airblossom commented. “He certainly seems to live the philosophy of One Maiyim.”

“He does, though I’m surprised you noticed on such short acquaintance,” Oceanvine replied. “Most don’t. But I’ve sort of gathered he doesn’t entirely agree with everything as we learned it from the movement.”

“A schism early on in the movement, you think?”

“No, although that wouldn’t surprise me. He just doesn’t accept the whole platform uncritically.”

“That’s probably not a bad thing, you know,” Airblossom said after considering the possibility. “But why would he try to keep his involvement a secret?”

“Not sure he’s keeping it a secret, just not advertising it. You’ve read some of those books about him, haven’t you.”

“I’m still trying to get my hands on a copy of the latest one,” Airblossom answered playfully, knowing Oceanvine was featured in an unflattering light. “But Waterfall is still reading it.”

Oceanvine muttered a curse in Old Granomish.

“I know you don’t mean that,” laughed Airblossom.

“You speak Old Granomish now?” Oceanvine asked.

“Only a few phrases. That’s not one your mother would want to hear you saying, you know. But what about the books?”

“You’ll remember his old partner Windchime? He calls himself Geraint these days and has stopped using magic, mostly. Well, some years ago they went to the Isle of Fire on a case. It turned out to be a trap set by one of Aritos’ five demons. I don’t really understand what it did to them, but they both had headaches and nightmares whenever they used too much magic, and it was worse on the anniversaries of the

encounter. They split up after that and were in pretty bad shape, or so they tell me. Both of them went through a stage of heavy drinking in the hopes that would help make the nightmares more bearable. It certainly didn't stop Silverwind from using magic; that man can cast spells when drunk that most wizards couldn't do sober with a year's preparatory work. Geraint gave up all magic but some low level spells and even every now and then he does something that triggers the nightmares.

"After hearing what he has gone through I honestly don't understand how Silverwind kept going. He went into seclusion near a little village called Renton. It's halfway to nowhere, perfect for what he must have had in mind. And he was there for years doing research."

"Magical research? With the headaches and nightmares?" Airblossom asked.

"Yes, but he didn't use all that much magic. He was investigating the physical laws of nature. He did work in physics and chemistry; he used mathematics to quantify his findings and came up with some amazing things. I think the major reason he wanted an assistant was that he needed someone who could use higher magic without the nightmares it gave him. He still got the headaches, though and sometimes the nightmares. It was only by sheer will-power that he kept going."

"Well, I can see why you love him," Airblossom commented. "He's probably the only man on Maiyim more stubborn than you are."

"Oh, very funny," Oceanvine replied flatly.

"But true!" Airblossom laughed.

Before Oceanvine could find a suitable reply they had reached the front gate of the embassy. The gate was made of wrought iron and hung across a wide, arched portal that was part of a small gate house. Two Granomish guardsmen, in the red and gold livery of Royal Granom, stood just inside the gate.

"May I help you?" one of them asked politely.

"Yes," Oceanvine replied. "We are here at the request of the ambassador."

"Names, please?"

"I am Master Oceanvine," she introduced herself. She pulled a palm-sized piece of quartz from her purse and held it before the guard. Within the stone the seal of the University of Quarna glowed bright green. The stone, enchanted so that it would only glow when she touched it, was an infallible form of identification, proving her to be a mage of master rank as recognized by the Granomish University. Journeymen carried stones in which the seals glowed red, wizards' stones glowed gold.

Airblossom pulled out her own magestone in which the red seal of Randona glowed "I am Journeyman Airblossom."

Oceanvine smiled to herself on hearing that. When she had been of journeyman rank she had insisted on being called "Journeywoman" but had decided to use the masculine title for her rank as was customary among mages on receiving her Master's degree.

"Yes, Master Oceanvine, His Highness has been expecting you," the guard said at last. The other guard opened the gate and the two women entered the embassy compound. "Go straight on in," he instructed them, pointing to the gate of the main building, which had been built to resemble an ancient keep. "You'll

be met by a staff member who will let the prince know you are here.”

“Thank you,” Oceanvine and Airblossom both murmured.

“Are you sure they’re not all like that?” Airblossom whispered. Oceanvine chose not to answer that.

They walked across the courtyard and up a three step flight of stone stairs. The doors at the top of the steps were wide open and they stepped into the keep.

An Orentan gentleman was seated at a table just inside the doors and was just about to ask their names when a female voice called out from a balcony overlooking the large gathering room.

“Oceanvine!”

Oceanvine looked up and returned the greeting, “Ksana!”

Ksana waved at her. Like Oceanvine and Airblossom, she was dressed in a fashionable Orentan outfit – a blouse with a short skirt, both silk, the blouse with a vivid floral print. Airblossom thought it looked a bit strange on her. Ksana had a slighter build than most Granomish women, but she was still shorter and wider than most Orentans and her nearly white skin made even more of a contrast with the vivid colors of her blouse than the dark shade of skin an Orente would have. After a moment’s contemplation, Airblossom decided she liked that. “Come on up! Zak! Oceanvine’s here.” She called over her shoulder.

Oceanvine and Airblossom climbed a long and wide flight of stairs to the second floor as Ksana rushed to meet them at the top. She threw herself at Oceanvine and gave her a nearly bone-crushing hug.

“So much for caution,” Airblossom commented dryly.

“Oh, my gods! Yes!” Oceanvine exclaimed. “Ksana, you really should let go. We have the disease that’s all over Bellinen. I may have just infected you.”

“I’ve already been exposed, sister” Ksana told her soberly. After their shared experiences with releasing Ksana from the Hook, a particularly nasty enslavement spell, Oceanvine and Ksana had started thinking of each other as sisters.

“That’s why we asked you and Silverwind here,” Prince Zakhar said from behind Ksana. “You see, I have it too.”

“Isn’t all of this just ghastly?” Zakhar asked after Oceanvine had introduced Airblossom. He waved his arms around at the walls of the large central room of the keep. “We came all this way to an entirely different nation and do we build an embassy building in the fashion of the local ones? No! We carry tons and tons of stone all the way from Granom just so we can build a miniature version of the WurraPalace . Absolute disgusting. Do you have any idea how much the spells to keep this place comfortable cost? For half the cost of building this monstrosity, we could have had an estate built like some of the senatorial manor houses. Much more like what I was expecting when I arrived.” He paused to scratch himself and notice the dark glasses Oceanvine and Airblossom were wearing. “Oh those do look like a good idea. Do you know where I might get a pair? My eyes hurt. Is that the plague?” Oceanvine nodded. “Hard to

tell,” Zakhar continued. “Thought this tropical light was a bit bright even before I started getting sick.”

“Speaking of which,” Airblossom cut in, “you’ve got the contusions around your eyes. On your elbows and knees too?”

“Yes. Is that bad, Ora?”

“Call me Airblossom” she told him. “It isn’t good, but we do have a treatment for that which should help.”

“Airblossom devised it,” Oceanvine told him when he turned to her. “It works very well so far.”

“Fever?” Airblossom asked as though there had been no interruption.

“A bit, yes,” Zak conceded. “Is there a cure?”

“I’m afraid not,” Airblossom replied. “Not yet anyway, but there is hope. We’re making a lot of progress. But we do need to treat those bruises immediately. Is there anyone else in the embassy affected yet.”

“No, not yet,” Zak replied. “I’m the lucky first. I was probably exposed while talking to one or more of the various senators.”

“Well that’s good at least. Why don’t we find a place you can be comfortable while I do something to relieve some of your symptoms, then after that we can discuss ways to make you more comfortable.”

“All right,” Zak agreed. “Will Oceanvine be needed to?”

“Airblossom can handle it better than I can. She’s had more experience lately. Why don’t you two use your office while Ksana and I catch up?”

Zakhar agreed and he and Airblossom went into a room further up the corridor. Ksana, in turn led Oceanvine in the other direction to a suite of rooms that was used as the residence of the Ambassador.

“It’s so good to see you, Oceanvine!” Ksana told her.

“You’re looking very good, sister,” Oceanvine told her. “I am kind of surprised at your wardrobe though.”

“Why ever should you be? You wear this sort of clothing all the time. Why shouldn’t I? Oh I know most Granomish girls wouldn’t be caught dead dressed like this, but you forget I used to wear this sort of costume when I worked.” Ksana had been a prostitute, a street walker in Querna before Oceanvine found her near death and saved her life. While being nursed back to health in the King’s palace where Oceanvine and Silverwind were staying, Ksana had met and fallen in love with Prince Zakhar, the King’s cousin.

“Oh, I remember, but I would have thought you’d want to do anything not to be reminded of it, or to advertise that part of your life.”

“Well, we’re not making a big deal about it, but it’s not a secret either. The Orentan ladies don’t really understand what I did or why. Most of them think it was just an imaginative way to make ends meet,

even if they don't know why any man would pay. I'll admit that some of the few Granomish women associated with the embassy don't like me. The wife of Zak's chief of staff is especially unpleasant, but I can handle her and she knows it. Besides, dressing like an elf..."

"Orente," Oceanvine corrected her.

"OK, my dressing like an Orente actually helps Zak in his work. I get along fine with the senators' wives precisely because I can dress like them unselfconsciously. Some of the other wives have started wearing Orentan gowns too. Not short skirts like this one, but even the long gowns are made of silk so they are much more comfortable in this climate than the wools and heavy cottons we wear at home most of the time."

"So how long have you actually been here?"

"Just two weeks. We're still unpacking. Hard to believe since it wasn't all that long ago that I could have packed everything I owned in a shopping bag." She paused a moment. "Come to think of it, I did tend to pack everything I owned in a shopping bag. Most of what I have now was bought on the way here. Zak is such a dear, he insisted we stop at every major port between here and Querna and took me shopping at every stop. Not sure I'll ever live long enough to wear everything, but at least I have something for every occasion."

"Two weeks and you didn't let me know?" Oceanvine asked.

"Really, dear, we haven't had the time to breathe. And we didn't know until yesterday evening you and Silverwind were in Merinne still. I know you said you were headed here, but by now we thought you'd have moved on to Emmine."

"I suppose we would have by now if this plague hadn't come up," Oceanvine conceded.

"How much hope of a cure do we really have?" Ksana asked seriously. "I know your friend said you were making progress, but..."

"We'll find a way," Oceanvine told her with confidence she didn't really feel. "There's always a way."

"Thank you, sister."

"I'll find a way," Oceanvine concluded.

Nine

"How is Prince Zakhar doing?" Silverwind asked Oceanvine as they had breakfast the next morning.

"Zak is here?" Candle asked.

"He and Ksana are at the Granom Royal Embassy," Oceanvine told Candle before answering Silverwind's question. "He was much better after Airblossom finished with him. He should be a bit better today with the dark glasses we had sent to him. Are we any closer to a cure though?"

"To tell the truth? We haven't made any real progress since Airblossom worked out her treatment

regime.”

“At least none of the patients that have been treated with them has died yet,” Oceanvine sighed. “But no one has gotten over this disease either, have they?”

“Not yet. The treatments arrest the disease, but do not cure it.” Silverwind admitted, “but if it weren’t for Airblossom, we wouldn’t even be as far along as we are. Her ideas have given us the time we need to find a cure. Ah, Serabawa!” he said as the elderly Orente entered the house. “Are you early this morning?”

“Not really,” Serabawa replied. “Perhaps you are running late?”

“Perhaps we are,” Silverwind admitted. He pulled up his left sleeve and looked at a small metal object mounted on a narrow leather bracer. “I keep forgetting to wind this thing.”

“What’s that?” Oceanvine and Candle both asked.

“A wristwatch,” he replied. “I bought it in Querna shortly before we left. It’s pretty much like a pocket watch, but smaller and I thought it might be more convenient.”

“I’ve never seen one before,” Oceanvine commented.

“They’ve been popular among the Gramonish aristocracy for a couple decades, but until recently they were much too expensive for me to want to spend the money on. I found this in a clock-maker’s shop not too far from the palace. I gathered they were being produced in quantity now and the clock-maker assured me the case was waterproof.”

“It would have to be, the way we travel around.”

“Well, I wouldn’t wear it swimming or even while piloting a ship in a storm as we did when we came into Quernaport, but it should be safe enough in a normal rain storm, or if I should accidentally fall into the water. We’ll see. The only problem is that like a pocket watch it runs on a spring and I’m supposed to remember to wind it once a day.” He started winding the watch back up.

Oceanvine laughed, “I love you dearly, Silverwind, but you can be annoyingly absent-minded. This may not have been your wisest purchase.”

Silverwind grinned in reply. “It’s just a matter of making it a habit. I never had a pocket watch so keeping it wound is not something I’m used to.”

“I’ve noticed. You didn’t usually remember to wind the clock in the lab and it only needed winding every few days. The only reason the large clock in the house kept running was that I made a habit of checking it.”

“Really? I’d wondered about that. I tried a number of spells to keep it going, I just thought one of them finally worked. Do you have the time? No? Well we ought to get to the University. Candle, have a good day. Learn something, hmm? That reminds me, I’ll need to pick up a few candles. I did promise to teach you how to kindle a fire by magic, didn’t I? Best we start while we’re on land. Safer.”

Candle gave him a smile of genuine delight. He had wanted to know fire spells ever since he was first apprenticed. Oceanvine took one last sip of tea, and with Candle’s help quickly cleared the table. She

asked Candle to wash the dishes, but suspected they'd still be in the sink on her return. Then she hurried out the door with Silverwind.

After walking a few minutes Silverwind spotted the tall clock tower that was part of the Orentan Senate Compound and he paused to reset his watch.

"I had wondered about that clock," Oceanvine commented as though their previous conversation had never been interrupted.

"What clock?" Silverwind asked, starting to walk again.

"The one in your house in Renton. I'd wondered just why the weights in it had felt so light. Then I realized they were under a prolonged levitation spell."

"Oh, I thought that perhaps if the weight didn't actually fall, it wouldn't need to be raised back up. Not one of my better ideas, since the clock works because the weights are used to power the movement. If I recall, I came up with that idea while I had a hangover, but when the clock apparently kept working, I thought I had stumbled on a solution."

"And it didn't occur to you to double check?" Oceanvine asked. "Oh well, that wasn't too long after I came to Renton. I found the clock wasn't working, relieved the spell, and kept the clock wound after that. You know, that's probably a good spell to teach Candle next."

"What? Winding a clock? I imagine he could figure that out for himself by now."

"No, how to cast a long-term spell. One that will keep working after he takes his mind off it. He'll certainly need it by the time he gets to University."

"Good idea. That should be a good ship-board lesson for him for the trip back to Renton. Oh, I forgot to tell you. Hyssop and I heard from Compass yesterday afternoon. He sent word ahead that he should be back today."

"Oh good," Oceanvine said. "We need every bit of help we can get, and maybe he has some new insight from his studies in Sanno."

"We can hope," Silverwind agreed.

They proceeded onto the University campus to find a large crowd of young people, mostly Orenta, but here and there a human or a Granom could be spotted. They were milling about somewhat randomly in the large grassy quadrangle, but there were so many of them, Silverwind and Oceanvine were compelled to walk around them, rather than walk straight across as they were accustomed to doing.

"What's going on here?" Oceanvine wondered aloud.

"Freshman orientation, I think," Silverwind replied. "Classes start up again next week."

"Now? But it should be the start of spring term in Randona? New classes start in the Fall, don't they?"

"Well, actually if you check the calendar you'll notice Spring term began last month, but the school year is different here in tropical Bellinen. This will be the first term of the school year and the second will begin six months from now. In Granom, they started fall term last month, but they begin their school year in the

spring. You received your masters degree at the end of spring term, remember?”

“I did,” she agreed. “I guess I’m a bit confused. We’ve been away from Renton for nearly a year but we’ve gone through enough seasonal changes for two years.”

“That can be confusing,” Silverwind agreed. “There were times years ago when I’d see three or more winters in a row. Don’t think I ever got more than two summers at a time, unless you count long stays in Bellinen.”

“I suppose we’ll have to find a new room to work in once classes and labs start,” Oceanvine commented as they entered the Biology Building.

“Likely. I believe there are one or two offices available on the third floor, and there’s room in both Compass’ and Hyssop’s offices for meetings.”

As they entered the lab, Airblossom looked up from another of her large charts. She was looking very tired.

“Haven’t you been getting any sleep?” Oceanvine asked her.

“Not much” Airblossom admitted, “Waterfall’s sick now too and I didn’t feel well enough to sleep last night.”

“So you’ve been here all night?”

“Since about midnight. I came in after Waterfall got to sleep. I figured it was better than keeping him up with my discomfort.”

“You really aren’t looking good,” Silverwind opined. “Maybe you should go home and sleep now, I’m sure we could find something to allow you to sleep comfortably.”

“No!” Airblossom responded a bit too excitedly, then a bit calmer, “That’s what Hyssop said. I really need to work on this.”

“What good will that do, Blossom,” Oceanvine asked, “if you kill yourself from exhaustion?”

“Oh, I’m not that bad,” Airblossom replied, “am I?”

“You should see yourself from this side,” Oceanvine told her.

“Well, maybe after we finish briefing Wizard Compass,” Airblossom acquiesced.

As if on cue Compass and Hyssop could be heard approaching the lab.

“Ah!” Compass was saying, “so you admit your germ theory isn’t adequately explaining this disease.”

“Actually, Wizard,” Hyssop replied, just outside the lab door, “I said we have been unable to adequately discern the vector of infection. That doesn’t disprove the existence of germs, just that there is something we do not know.”

“Intradepartmental squabbling?” Silverwind asked, amused. “Might not be the best greeting to the

incoming class!”

“Maybe not,” Compass replied a bit sheepishly. “Master Hyssop and I have been having this debate for a few years now. Tell me Silverwind, how do you feel about Master Colchicum’s Germ Theory?”

“I met Colchicum briefly several years ago during my last visit to Randona. He seemed like a very serious-minded young man. Not the sort to propose an hypothesis without a lot of thought behind it. That’s all his thoughts about germs were at the time, a loose hypothesis. I haven’t really kept up with that since then, not really my field, of course. But I understand he has demonstrated sufficient proof to consider it a theory. The concept of germs is not unreasonable, it seems to me. Certainly, it explains the spread of conventional diseases.”

“I haven’t seen much in this case to suggest germs,” Compass noted.

“Nor much to suggest an imbalance of humours either,” Silverwind replied, “but I’m not a medical expert. These days I’m not really an expert anything most of the time, except maybe an expert generalist.”

Compass smiled, “Yes, I’ve heard you call yourself a professional dilettante. That’s not completely true, you know. You’re really an expert on many subjects.” Silverwind shrugged that off easily. “On the other side of it, I am a medical expert, but then so is Master Hyssop and if you with your great experience don’t merely shrug off this concept of germs, I suppose I can at least take it seriously until we have further proof against it.”

“Wizard Compass,” Hyssop asked, amazed, “are you proposing a truce?”

“Why, I believe I am,” he answered, “at least for the duration of the current crisis. After that we may well go back to our usual debate, but only on the condition that you don’t thoroughly discount the Humour Theory either.”

“I can live with that,” Hyssop agreed.

“Good!” Compass concluded. “Now let’s get to work, there’s so much to be done and I’m not really feeling...” he stopped as he suddenly noticed Airblossom. “My dear! You look as bad as I feel.”

“I just need some sleep,” Airblossom told him, “I’ll be better in the morning, I hope. But what symptoms are you showing, Or?”

“Itching and fever, mostly. None of those dreadful contusions we’ve been seeing although my feet seem unnaturally sore and I mean to get a pair of those glasses you’re wearing.”

“Ask Doctor Rehamawa at Quarentine House,” Oceanvine told him, “well the first quarantine house, there are several of them now. He’s been supplying them to victims.”

“Sore feet?” Airblossom asked. She checked the chart in front of her. “Yes, here it is, there have been three others in Merinne who have complained about that. I can cure that with a quick spell and it will make the fever a bit lower too, but you’ll have to reapply the spell once every eight hours. It doesn’t last very long.”

She paused and closed her eyes. A moment later Compass sighed deeply and said, “Oh yes! That is much better. You must show me how to do that before you go catch some sleep.”

“I will,” Airblossom agreed.

“Master Hyssop has been telling me you’ve worked up a number of such techniques.”

“Yes, Or. But they aren’t perfect. They only treat the symptoms but the disease remains.” She went on to fully describe what she had done so far.

“But none of those you’ve treated have died?” he asked.

“Not yet, but it’s only a matter of time, I’m afraid.”

“Perhaps not,” Compass told her. “I have all my notes from Sanno in my office. Maybe they can shed some light on this mystery.”

“Oh!” Airblossom exclaimed. “I must see them and tabulate the data.”

“Not until you’ve had some rest, Blossom,” Oceanvine told her. “I’ll start tabulating this morning. You will sleep!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Airblossom replied facetiously. Then they all finally got down to the serious business of debriefing Compass on his studies and of informing him of what they had learned in his absence.

When Oceanvine and Airblossom got to their visit to the Granomish embassy the day before, Compass concluded, “So the trolls, sorry, Granomen are susceptible to this disease as well. That is quite out of the ordinary, you realize. There are only a relatively few diseases that affect all three sentient species on Maiyim, you know. Most can only be contracted by one or two of us.”

When the session was over, Airblossom described the spell by which she had relieved some of Compass’ symptoms and then she finally went home.

“She’ll be back in a few hours, mark my words,” Silverwind commented.

“It wouldn’t surprise me in the least,” Compass agreed. “She’s a very determined woman.” Then he looked at Hyssop and Oceanvine and added, with a twinkle in his eyes, “Just like these two, hmm?” Silverwind chuckled while the two ladies glared at him.

“No,” Oceanvine disagreed at last. “She’ll stay home all day and sleep, “Though I wouldn’t bet against her being back earlier than the rest of us tomorrow morning.”

They went on to discuss some of the charts and graphs Airblossom and Oceanvine had devised. They were still discussing them with Compass when there was a knocking at the laboratory door.

“That can’t be Airblossom back so soon,” Silverwind muttered.

“Of course not,” Oceanvine replied, getting up from her seat to open the door. “She wouldn’t be knocking.”

“Good point,” Silverwind allowed.

Oceanvine opened the door to reveal a young human man with dark brown hair and a full beard. He

wore a typical Emmine-style tunic and trousers, though the clothing was made of light cotton and not the heavier materials he might have worn at home at this time of year.

“Excuse me,” he said. “I was told I could find the Wizard Silverwind here.”

“Over here,” Silverwind called, with a wave of his hand.

“An honor to meet you sir,” the young man said, approaching the wizard. “I’m Quarterstaff. I work for Geraint.”

“Excellent,” Silverwind replied. “So he’s expanding his business still more, eh? Good for him.”

“Yes, sir. One of my duties here in Bellinen was to deliver this packet to you. Back mail, I believe. Eloise made me to understand one of the items was urgent,” he told them.

“Well, I did ask Geraint to do this for me,” Silverwind sighed. “Now I guess I’ll have to take out the time to answer my mail. Do you need anything from me, Quarterstaff?”

“No, sir. Geraint said he would put this on your tab.”

“He didn’t send you just to deliver mail did he?”

“Oh no!” Quarterstaff laughed. “Actually I’m on my way to Sonatrie to bring back a load of their cheese. This stop was pretty much on my way. Otherwise someone else probably would have been sent.”

“Oh good. I’d hate to have to pay your passage both ways just for a few fan letters.”

“Silverwind! You don’t get fan letters!” Oceanvine told him.

“Not often anyway,” he agreed. Quarterstaff said his farewells and left.

Silverwind dumped the packet out on the lab bench and started sorting out the mail. Fortunately there were only five pieces in the packet.

“Well, let’s see. This one is from Geraint.” He skimmed through it. “Just seems to be news. He stopped by the palace in Renton not too long ago. Everything seems to be in order. The queen is expecting again and the King decided not to wait for the Lords to concur with his suggestion for a parliamentary House of Commons and he has made it a decree. Elections will be next year, and evidently there are already several candidates campaigning in Keesport. He doesn’t like any of them. I hope he doesn’t decide to run himself. I wouldn’t wish that on a friend.”

“Eloise would make a better politician anyway,” Oceanvine added.

“She probably would at that. Let’s see, what else we have.” He opened the next envelope. “Ysemay’s letting me know she wrote another book. The good news is we’ve already seen it. This is from the Dean of the Randona University. He’s asking me to join the faculty again.”

“Doesn’t he ask that every year?”

“Almost like clockwork. Maybe I’ll take him up on that someday, but not anytime soon. What’s this? Oh, one of those.” He tossed the fourth letter aside, having barely glanced at it. Oceanvine picked it up and

looked at it.

“Well, that’s original,” she commented.

“Not really,” Silverwind told her. “I used to get a lot of those. It’s an old swindle really.”

“Looks to me like he’s just being lazy,” Oceanvine returned.

“What is it?” Hyssop asked at last.

“There’s an old legend of pirate treasure buried in a cunningly devised pit out on one of the minor islands in the middle of the Nildar Ocean.”

“Snake Island,” Compass added. “I’ve heard of it. Wasn’t that supposed to be where Danarawa the Black would hide out between raids about a century ago?”

“In Emmine they think it was Yakkov of Mifde, but it’s the same story. Maybe they both used that island. I wouldn’t know,” Silverwind told them. “For all I know there really is a fabulous treasure pit. I’m not interested. Nobody really knows where Snake Island was supposed to be for certain. There are two small island groups in the Nildar and it could be any of the islands.”

“There is supposed to be a mysterious construction on one island that could be an elaborate pit of some sort with layers of wood, clay, coconut fiber and normal sand as you dig down,” Oceanvine added.

“I’ve been there,” Silverwind replied. “And several people have died so far trying to find treasure in it. Whether there really is a treasure or not doesn’t really matter. The writer of this letter proposes that he and he alone knows where Yakkov’s treasure is and how to get it and he will give me half of it if I will go and dig it up for him.”

“Maybe he does know,” suggested Hyssop.

“And maybe I can swim all the way home. If he does know, it is obviously the worst kept secret in the world as at least twenty others have told me the same thing. Many of them were obviously too lazy to write an original letter for they were nearly verbatim the same as this one. No it’s not an honest proposal. I know several other mages who have received these letters. I’m surprised you haven’t, Vine.”

“That’s Oceanvine,” she corrected him automatically, “and I guess it’s just something I can look forward to.”

“Well, don’t fall for this no matter how good it might look. Windchime and I knew a mage who fell for one of these proposals and hasn’t been heard from since. Let’s move on to the last letter.” He opened the envelope and read it. “Hmm, maybe I ought to reconsider looking for pirate treasure.”

“What is it?” Oceanvine asked.

“It’s a letter from the Vogt of Rjalkatyp.”

“What is a Vogt?” Compass asked.

“A supposedly elected leader of some sort,” Silverwind replied, “at least that’s the way it sounds. I don’t really know what is happening on the Isle of Fire. Last we heard a triumvirate of military men had

overthrown the government, killed the President and Vice President and most of the Senate. A few surviving senators showed up a few months ago in Querna. All told, the situation there sounded rather unsettled.”

“Unsettled?” Oceanvine repeated, “It sounds absolutely horrendous!”

“That too. Anyway this Vogt, Andriy by name is writing for our help.”

“*Our* help?” Oceanvine asked.

“Hmm, yes, he must have read Isemay’s latest scribble too. He does mention you by name.”

“Terrific,” she replied flatly. “I’m not particularly inclined toward giving any assistance to a man who murdered most of the members of the legitimate government of the Isle of Fire.”

“Have friends there, do you?” Silverwind asked. “What do you really know about the former Democratic Republic of Rjalkatyp? It wasn’t a particularly pleasant place to live, I can tell you that much. It started out with all the usual high ideals, but while it was a good thing for the electors, the members of the Senate, that is, the commoners might have well been living in a kingdom under a particularly despotic monarch. I don’t recall that their House of Commons had a lot of say in the matter. Maybe this Vogt is better for the people of Rjalkatyp. Maybe not. We ought to find someone who can update us on the latest news there. The President of the Bellenin Senate perhaps or Prince Zakhar. I suppose we could ask the Emmine ambassador, but I wouldn’t know him if I met him, so we’ll leave him for last. Whatever the case, though, I think you’ll feel obligated to travel to the Isle of Fire.”

“Oh? And why is that?” Oceanvine asked.

“Because they are suffering from the same plague we are. One of our earlier conjectures may be correct. This disease may have originated there.”

“We can’t charge off immediately, Silverwind,” Oceanvine pointed out. “We haven’t finished here yet and until we do, what real good could we do in Rjalkatyp?” She paused and then continued softly, “We might not even survive the trip.”

“Of course,” Silverwind agreed, “but we should send the Vogt everything we know about the plague already. It will help a little.”

“I’ll start putting a packet together to be sent there. Does the Vogt have an embassy here?”

“No, I’m sure he doesn’t, not yet. Besides, the Senate here hasn’t recognized his government, whatever it is. You should be able to send it through the Granomish embassy. When we left Querna, King Ksaveras was trying to open negotiations for amnesty for any of the surviving senators and their families. How long before you can send it?”

“I can put the important parts together by the end of the day,” Oceanvine told him, “and get it to Zak before dinnertime.”

“Good I’ll go with you. I need to ask him about the situation in Rjalkatyp anyway.”

Ten

Silverwind dreamed.

He was walking toward his house outside Renton. Something was wrong, but he wasn't sure what it might be. He entered the house and everything seemed dark although the window blinds were all open and the sun was shining. The living room was empty and he continued on into the kitchen where he found Oceanvine sitting at the table. She looked up and Silverwind noticed her hair seemed thin and dirty. In her hand was a bottle of whiskey. She took a long pull from it and offered it to him.

"Want a drink?" she asked.

He turned away and left the kitchen to find himself in Jim-peg's inn. Geraint was already there at the bar drinking from a large tankard, a platter of Kamo biscuits in front of him.

"Jim-peg!" Geraint called. "Draw one off for Silverwind! Tough day?" he asked Silverwind as the wizard sat down next to him.

"That's putting it mildly," the wizard replied. His tankard suddenly appeared in front of him. Jim-peg hadn't dropped it off, it was just there, but that didn't seem unusual. Silverwind always had a drink available when he wanted one. He picked it up and took a swig. And immediately spat it back out again. Instead of a cold hopped beer, the liquid was warm, thick and salty. It was blood!

He stood up and turned back around to find himself on the grounds of Castle North. There must have been a drought going on, all the grass was gold-colored and the gardens were dead-brown. There were no leaves on any of the trees. He turned to look at the castle and noticed that the doors to the keep were wide open. Running inside he discovered Lord Jason and his sister hanging from ropes that had been slung over the large chandelier in the front hall. Candle sat on the stairway just beyond with Jason's younger brother. They were laughing.

Then he was on the high seas on the *Isle of Marga*. Candle was climbing the main mast while Oceanvine was sunning herself on the poop deck. Only she wasn't tanning. Instead she had a lobster-red sunburn.

"Serp ho!" Candle called from the crow's nest.

That's not right, Silverwind thought, *we fought the serp on the Jocey's Skate.*

"Silverwind," Oceanvine said idly, "will you be a dear and handle it on your own this time? I need to work on my tan."

The large sea snake approached the ship but instead of attacking, it encircled the ship and transformed into thousands of smaller snakes, all intertwined in a large seething mass that then turned and attacked the ship, the snakes eating their way through the hull. Silverwind tried to ready a spell but nothing happened.

"Silverwind? What's wrong?" he heard a voice from infinitely far away.

Suddenly he was in the water, unable to breathe. The surface was so far above him that no light could be seen. He kicked for the surface, but felt like he was making no progress. Finally after what seemed like forever, it began to lighten. Then as he reached the surface he was in a room in the Wurra Palace with brackish water draining away into a corridor. He looked down and saw Candle on a completely sodden bed.

Candle looked up and said, "I'm still thirsty. Could you get me some more water?" Silverwind tried to conjure up a glass of water but instead the tankard of blood materialized. "That will do," Candle said, and drank it.

"Silverwind?" he heard again.

He turned again and was on a street corner of Querna. Oceanvine stood by a street lamp and was dressed like a prostitute just as she had been when they tried to lure the serial killer into their trap.

Candle came up behind Silverwind and said "Ya want me sister, m'lord?" Silverwind turned around to admonish the lad but no one was there. In fact there was no street or lamp. He turned around again and found he was alone.

"What's wrong?" he heard another voice in the distance.

"I don't know, Candle," replied the first voice. He recognized it as Oceanvine's, but they were both too far away to respond to.

His eyes adjusted to the darkness and he found himself in a dark narrow alley in a Granomish style city. Not one like Querna which was built of stone. The buildings to either side of the alley were wooden. A loud noise came from outside the alley. He rushed to its mouth in time to see a building burst into flames. And then another caught fire, and another. Soon every building in sight was completely encased in flames. And from amidst all the flaming buildings a figure walked casually forward. It wasn't a human figure, not quite. It was above average height for a man, and its head sported a pair of curved horns several inches long each protruding from the temples. It approached Silverwind and he realized this was Arithan, the demon who had defeated him and Windchime on the Isle of Fire so many years earlier.

Arithan looked at Silverwind disdainfully and asked in a soft, but chilling voice, "Did you really think you'd ever truly be free of me?"

Silverwind was thrashing about in bed. He sat up abruptly, his eyes wide open and then fell back onto the bed. Oceanvine slept lightly most of the time and was instantly alert. She sat up and looked at Silverwind whose eyes were still wide open. He sat up abruptly again and thrust his arm out in front of him.

"Silverwind?" Oceanvine asked. "What's wrong?"

Silverwind didn't respond to her, but after a few moments his face filled with an expression that mingled disgust with horror.

"Silverwind?" she asked again louder.

He turned around in the bed a couple of times, flailing his arms a bit, narrowly missing Oceanvine only because she was able to duck in time. The effort caused her to fall off the bed. She crashed to the floor. The door opened and Candle came in quietly.

He helped her up and asked, "What's wrong?" He turned to watch Silverwind worriedly.

"I don't know, Candle."

They sat and watched Silverwind for a few more minutes. Finally he shouted something they couldn't make out, then collapsed back on to the bed, holding his head in both hands.

"Silverwind!" Oceanvine called him. "What's happening?" Silverwind only groaned in response. "Silverwind?" she asked again.

"Oceanvine?" Silverwind's voice was raspy and he kept his eyes closed and his hands clasped to his head.

"Silverwind, are you awake now?" Oceanvine asked. Immediately she regretted having done so. It was a silly question but at the moment it was all she could think of.

"I hope so," Silverwind replied tiredly.

"What happened?" Candle happened.

"A nightmare, Candle. That happens from time to time, you know. Don't worry about me. I'll be okay. Go back to sleep."

Candle didn't look convinced, but Oceanvine steered him out the door and whispered to him that she'd make sure everything was fine. That seemed to reassure him. After she closed the door, Oceanvine suddenly realized what was wrong.

"This is the night, isn't it?" she asked. "It was this night, however many years ago it was, that you..."

"Yes, that's right," Silverwind replied, his voice still rasping. "This is the anniversary of my meeting with Arithan. "I'd forgotten all about it. I thought I'd been cured back in North Horalia, but I was wrong."

"But you've been so much better since then without any problems no matter how much magic you used."

"Evidently Arithan's curse was just waiting for the anniversary to renew itself."

"Do curses work like that?" Oceanvine asked.

"I don't know. I doubt anyone does. Curses, real curses, not just spells used malevolently, aren't the sort of magic humans do. That's demon magic."

"Or the work of Aritos," Oceanvine added, remembering the evil god common to all mythologies on Maiyim."

"And I'm not sure about him," Silverwind commented, sounding more like himself than he had so far.

"So you've said before," Oceanvine replied. Then she had an idea. "What if the curse doesn't renew itself annually?"

"What do you mean?" Silverwind asked.

“What if you had the curse in remission but something else reactivated it? Like another curse?” she suggested.

“The plague? That could be. And it would certainly explain some of the odd characteristics of the disease.” He got up and started getting dressed.

“Where are you going?”

“First, I’m going to find a headache cure,” Silverwind told her. “Then when I can think for more than a minute running I’m going back to the University. Care to join me?”

“None of the buildings are open,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Since when do either of us need a key?”

Airblossom was still hard at work in the laboratory when Silverwind and Oceanvine arrived.

“Have I been up all night again?” was her first reaction. “Wait a minim! It’s still dark out. What are you two doing here this late?”

“It’s early for us, Blossom,” Oceanvine told her, “and if you want it to be light out I doubt you need to wait more than another hour.”

“That late? Hmm, I guess it is, maybe I should go home for a few hours.”

“I won’t stop, you,” Oceanvine told her, “but Silverwind had an idea that we’re hoping might lead to a cure.”

“No time for teasing friends, Vine,” Silverwind interrupted. “We have a lot of work to do. Airblossom, is the library’s demonology section still in the basement?”

“We have a demonology section?” Airblossom asked.

“Maybe we should have brought Candle,” Silverwind commented.

“I’m here,” the boy said from the doorway.

“I thought I told you to go back to bed,” Silverwind told him.

“I did, but when you two left the house, I followed,” Candle admitted. “I wanted to know where you were going.”

“We’ll talk about that later, but since you’re here, we can use an extra set of hands. Vine, explain my idea to Airblossom, then the two of you start going over those charts of yours again. You know what to look for. Candle, come with me.”

“Where?” Candle asked.

“The library. We need to get a few books I remember seeing here.”

“Silverwind,” Airblossom said, stopping him from rushing off, “The library won’t be open for hours yet.”

“Well, yes and no. It’s true the librarian won’t be in for hours, but the library will be open shortly after Candle and I get to the front door.”

“Oh, well, when you put it that way... try not to scare too many students. Sneaking in is practically a rite of passage, but then you must know that.”

“I didn’t think of that. I was here as an assistant professor and a wizard candidate. Post graduates don’t generally need to break into the library and it just wasn’t done in Randona, not in my day anyway. Now that I think of it, I remember hearing the students in Querna talking about a similar activity, only they weren’t sneaking into the library. They were trying to get into the carillon tower.”

“Whatever for?” Oceanvine asked. She remembered the daily lunchtime concerts there as well as the bells that marked the hours of the day.

“To muffle the bells, of course,” Silverwind laughed. “They didn’t succeed very often and in that case the idea was to be the first to do it that year. Once someone manages, the competition is over until the next school year. Come on, Candle. Let’s see how busy the library is after hours.”

A few minutes later they were at the library’s front door.

“Want me to open the lock?” Candle asked eagerly.

“Probably, but let’s see if it’s already open.” He tried the handle. “No. Maybe we’ll have the place to ourselves. Go ahead.”

Candle sat down in front of the door and closed his eyes. In the past few weeks he hadn’t had much time with Silverwind nor much practice with magic. He enjoyed his lessons with Serabawa, but it was magic that really held his interest. On one level he fully understood that everything he learned would add to his magical abilities – one had to understand how things worked in order to affect them – but exercising those abilities held his interest most of all. For a moment he was too excited to properly work the spell he intended. Magical energy couldn’t flow through a mind that wasn’t relaxed, but he took a deep breath and tried again and was instantly rewarded with a solid click from the lock.

“Excellent, Candle!” Silverwind commended him. “Let’s go in, the stairway to the lower level will be off to the left.” They walked through the quiet building and down the stairs. Once they were on the lower level, Silverwind took the lead as they made their way through a maze of stacks. “Let’s see,” he muttered to himself when they paused at what seemed to be a wider intersection than most. “I think the demonology section is over there.” He pointed in a direction that none of the aisles went, but he started walking quickly and Candle raced to keep up with the wizard’s long strides. Candle may have grown a few inches over the last year, but Silverwind was still much taller. They took a quick turn four aisles up the way and continued on. Finally Silverwind stopped so abruptly Candle was unable to stop in time to avoid bumping in to him. “We could probably use some light, don’t you think?”

“You haven’t taught me that one yet,” Candle pointed out.

"I haven't? No, I guess I haven't. It's not very hard to do. In fact producing light is a by-product of many spells as you already know from our adventures in Querna, but producing a simple light by magic is a slightly different process. Actually it is the simplest of the class of illusion spells."

"But if it is an illusion, wouldn't I only think I can see?" Candle asked. "How would I know I'm seeing what is really there?"

"No that isn't the way illusions spells work, Candle. Visual illusions are all a matter of playing with light, re-arranging it, sort of, to make the image of what you want to show. Such an illusion will be seen by everyone."

"So a light," Candle said slowly, thinking his way through the problem, "is sort of an illusion spell without any particular image?"

"That's correct. Actually, it's not all that different from the fire spell I keep promising to teach you, but with more light and less heat. In fact I think that will be your next spell, but not tonight. We'll need to go over the theory behind it thoroughly before you try it. It can be very dangerous, like that translocation spell you did when you were sick and thirsty. Remember all that brackish water?" Candle nodded. He had nearly drowned. What Silverwind hadn't told him was that the spell was one many advanced mages would have never tried. One they thought could only be accomplished by a wizard. Somehow Candle's fevered mind had worked out how to instantly translocate objects. It was not something he was likely to try again soon, but the fact that he had managed it without anyone telling him how to do it impressed Silverwind greatly. Candle had learned to think his way through a problem carefully from that misadventure and Silverwind had learned not to underestimate his apprentice.

"However, once you know how, making a light for yourself is as easy as this," Silverwind concluded, and immediately a small glowing sphere appeared above his head. "Now let's see what we have here. *The Five Demons and Their Properties*, yes, we should have that one. *Aritos' Children* by Wizard Quadrant. Yes, I suppose. It's very old, but it may have insights the others lack..."

Silverwind made his way through the small section and an hour later he and Candle each carried several volumes back to the lab.

"Took you long enough," Oceanvine noted, although in a pleasant voice. "Did you have to stop and sign autographs?"

"Actually we didn't so much as hear any students there. Maybe it's still too early; freshman orientation and all."

"Could be," Airblossom agreed. "Silverwind! This is amazing! What made you think the disease had demonic origins?"

To Oceanvine's surprise, Silverwind smiled and replied easily, "Let's just say I suffered an inspiration."

"Oh," Airblossom said simply, catching Oceanvine's surreptitious signal to let it lie. "We haven't gone through all the data yet, of course, but so far your inspiration is, at least, a strong possibility. If our initial findings bear out, I think we can make it a convincing case for Wizard Compass when he gets here this morning."

"Good. I'm pretty sure I'll have it proven by the end of the day, but it will go faster if I don't have to fight Compass all the way while doing it."

Convincing Wizard Compass, however, didn't turn out to be the problem.

"Demons?" Master Hyssop asked incredulously. "In this modern day and age you expect me to believe in demons?"

"You wouldn't have a problem if you had been with us in North Horalia," Oceanvine told her. "Didn't Meadow mention that when you saw him?"

"Wizard Meadow didn't really say much about that. He said there was a rogue mage causing mischief involving the Bond of Aritos."

"Mischief? Mischief is what Candle gets up to if we don't keep a close enough eye on him. What this mage was doing was attempting to raise one of the demons, which he actually did. Believe me. One look is all it would take to make a believer of you. Where is Candle, by the way?" she asked Silverwind.

"I sent him home hours ago. You were busy at the time, I guess you missed it. By now he should be surfing with Serabawa."

"A demon?" Hyssop asked a little less certainly. "You saw a real demon? Both of you?"

"I've seen two of them," Silverwind told her flatly. "The one on Horalia was the second."

"Where was the first?"

"On the Isle of Fire. Years ago. It was due to that encounter that I realized what this disease might be. Now if you'll keep an open mind and look at Airblossom's latest data, you'll see a list of anomalous symptom combinations."

"I'm aware of all that. We've been dealing with it for weeks," Hyssop retorted.

"Yes, but this time we've compared it to known and reputed cases of demonic curses and their symptoms," Airblossom told her. "The tabulations have a significant percentage of similarity."

Hyssop took a look and for a long moment she was silent and then muttered, "Demons." She looked again then said, "No, I can't accept this. There has to be another reason."

"Hyssop," Compass spoke up for the first time since having heard Silverwind's explanation, "Don't be as pig-headed as I am."

"What?" She turned to face the head of her department.

"You keep telling me to keep an open mind about germs and maybe I've just been too stubborn to do so. I've been unwilling to admit it, but until this morning you had me convinced that I've been rejecting Germ Theory without adequately examining it. And maybe I should give it a less biased examination. But you're doing the exact same thing now. Perhaps you don't like the concept of a disease caused by a demon. Can't say I like it much either, though for different reasons, but there is adequate proof that the demons exist. I suspect that those books Silverwind has there contain that proof. So please try to keep in mind that what Silverwind, Oceanvine and Airblossom are proposing is at least as possible a cause for this plague as germs might be."

“Well,” Hyssop began.

“And it does make a much better explanation for why my treatments have been as effective as they have been,” Airblossom cut in. “Ameliorating a curse seems far more like what those treatments have been doing, than curing a disease. You know more about this than I do. How many diseases are you aware of that can be partially cured by changing the symptoms?”

“I thought you said you were just making the victims more comfortable.”

“That was the idea,” Airblossom admitted, “but you’ve used the treatments yourself and you know as well as any of us how we’ve kept nearly all the victims alive by treating the symptoms that appeared to be associated with the more lethal forms of the disease. In hindsight, it seems amazing we didn’t pay more attention to that.”

“I suppose,” Hyssop sighed. “I seem to be out-voted here. Oh well, I promise to keep an open mind, no matter how preposterous this seems. Demons! What next? An official divine visitation?”

Oceanvine leaned over and whispered in her ear, “Spend enough time with Silverwind and it’s not impossible.” Hyssop turned to stare at her then suddenly they both burst out laughing.

“So what’s next?” Hyssop asked at last.

“We need to determine which demon is the originator of this plague. Admittedly there are only five of them, but they differ so completely that a counter-curse will only be effective, well, positively effective, if we can correctly identify which demon we’re dealing with. If we just guess and get it wrong we could make it much worse.”

“All right,” Oceanvine said, clapping her hands together, “what do you want us to do?”

“Go through these books, like I’ve been doing for the last few hours and try to make an accurate identification.”

“You want us to go through them? Aren’t you going to do so too?”

“I already have and I think I know who to blame, but I need an unbiased corroboration. So while you do your homework, I have an appointment to talk to Prince Zakhar. He’s been getting updates from the Isle of Fire for me.”

“But if we solve the problem here, we can just mail the Vogt the solution, can’t we?” Oceanvine asked.

“If you reach the same conclusion I have and it turns out to be correct, we’ll have to go there anyway.”

Eleven

“It’s unanimous then?” Silverwind asked them that afternoon. “Arithan?”

“I held out for it being Xenlabit,” Compass admitted, “and I think Airblossom agreed with me until Oceanvine found a reference in Quadrant’s *Aritos’ Children* that defined a point of difference between the auras associated with their spells.”

“Yes, it’s also believed by the experts that Xenlabit is permanently imprisoned in his island,” Silverwind informed him.

“His island?” Airblossom asked.

“The Five Demons, that small archipelago south of Ellisto, are more than just named for the scions of Aritos,” Compass told her. “Each island was created by Aritos as he brought the demons to life. It is only on those islands that demons may be permanently banished from this world – each one on the island of his birth, of course.”

“But how do we know Xenlabit is imprisoned?” Hyssop asked.

“There are a number of tests one can do,” Silverwind explained.

“Mostly on the islands themselves,” Compass added. “Doing so is almost always a part of a wizard’s final exams, not that you always get positive results. My own exams were held on Pohn and I was not able to ascertain whether the demon Pohn was imprisoned.”

“Didn’t that count against you?” Oceanvine asked.

“It might have, but none of the examining wizards could get a positive reading either. So long as your results agree with theirs, you have the right answer.”

“After reading through those books,” Silverwind opined, “I think Pohn was the demon we met in North Horalia. So of course he wouldn’t have been there when you took your exam.”

“We defeated Pohn. Did that consign him to his island?” Oceanvine asked.

“Unfortunately not. Only the gods can permanently banish a demon.”

“Where was your exam?” Compass asked Silverwind. It was a common question among wizards.

“Gredac,” Silverwind replied, “and yes, he has been imprisoned there for several centuries.”

“I must have missed it then,” Hyssop admitted. “Silverwind knows first hand that Gredac is banished and you,” she said with a nod to Compass, “know that Pohn was not when you were on his island. So from what source do we know Xenlabit is banished?”

“I don’t think that was in any of these books,” Airblossom noted.

“It might be,” Oceanvine replied. “That’s not the information we were reading for. So?” she finished, turning to Silverwind.

“I couldn’t say about that,” Silverwind told them, “but the chief priest of Nildar had a divine visitation a couple of decades ago or so. Evidently we have Nildar’s word for it, and I’m sure it’s been verified by whatever wizards have been tested on that island.”

“Merinne! A divine visitation?” Hyssop asked. “Do they really happen? I always thought the gods have as little to do with religion as they possibly can. I’ve never heard of a case in which one actually spoke to a mortal, not outside mythology.”

“This one was verified by three wizards from the Randona university, but yes, the gods, some of them, do talk to us mortals every once in a while, if they have good reason to do. It’s amusing that you, like so many Orenta swear by Merinne when she has never been known to have anything to do with mortals. Merinne is reputed to be very shy and retiring and rarely even meets with other gods, aside from Bellinen and their daughter Wenni.”

“But we do worship her,” Compass put in. “Perhaps it is more a matter of form, but our respect for the gods are for what they have done for us, not what we expect them to do in the future. But we’re getting off the subject. We agree that we’re dealing with the work of Arithan.”

“I never really doubted it,” Silverwind admitted. “Only a spell of his could have caused my nightmares to return.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t just the anniversary?” Oceanvine asked, greatly concerned.

“I think it was a combination of the two. Anyway I wanted you to verify that it is Arithan on your own. As I said earlier, it would be disastrous to be wrong and I do make mistakes often enough.”

“Well, we know for certain that Gredac and Kerawlat are banished,” Compass summed up, “and from what you say Xenlabit may be as well. That would leave either Pohn or Arithan and they are so different that there’s really no comparison.”

“True enough,” Silverwind agreed. “So now we need to work out a counter-curse. I’ve been working on that while you’ve been busy corroborating my intuition.” He spread a roll of paper out on the table. “Take a careful look at this. It is only an outline of what I think will do. There are parts you’ll see that need to be filled in and parts, most of them, probably, that can be edited out.”

“It looks hopelessly complex,” Hyssop commented.

“We’ll need to simplify it if possible,” Silverwind admitted. “I tried to cover all possible known attributes of Arithan. I know they don’t all come into play in this plague, but it was easier to note them, and plan in case I missed something.”

“Why don’t we start by eliminating those attributes we don’t need to consider?” Oceanvine suggested.

It was fully dark outside by the time they were done. All five mages had made contributions to the final spell and, to Silverwind’s relief, it looked to be no more complex than a competent journeyman could perform.

“Time to test it,” Silverwind said at last.

“We’re all infected,” Hyssop pointed out. “Who will be first?”

“I will,” Silverwind announced. “The outline of this spell was mine, so I should be the one to take the risk.”

“No, Silverwind,” Compass disagreed, “if we’re wrong we cannot afford to lose you. You understand this far better than anyone else.”

“I think Oceanvine has a firm grasp of the spell and its theory. She can continue the work if something

goes wrong.”

“Wizard Compass is right,” Oceanvine disagreed. “Let me be the first instead.”

“No, Vine,” Airblossom spoke up. “I’ll do it.”

“No, Blossom, I will.

“No, Vine,” Airblossom insisted. “You cast the spell. I trust you.”

“Do it, Vine,” Silverwind told her.

Oceanvine spun on him with her usual retort but stopped short of delivering it as Hyssop and Compass nodded their agreement.

“All right. Give me a few minutes to prepare.” They agreed and she sat down on top of the lab table, crossed her legs, and brought herself into a trance. In her meditative state she allowed the pattern of the spell to take shape in her mind. She knew that others used other metaphors to prepare themselves for working magic, but seeing spells as patterns had always worked for her. Finally, when she felt ready, she reached out with her magical senses to find Airblossom. The spell, while simple enough for a journeyman, although just barely, contained diagnostic capabilities and as she started the active portion of it, she was able to detect the demonic infection that infused the body of her friend. This too, she saw as a pattern, and continuing the metaphor, she modified her spell pattern to more closely fit the pattern of the curse. And with surprising ease, she let the curative spell do its work.

“Ahh!” gasped Airblossom. Then, “Wow! That was amazing! And I feel so much better! Let me take a try!”

A few minutes later they were all free of the disease.

“We should rush right out to the quarantine houses,” Airblossom enthused.

“Blossom, you haven’t slept in two days,” Oceanvine pointed out. “And Silverwind and I aren’t all that far behind you.”

“I don’t feel all that tired,” Airblossom countered.

“You will,” Compass told her, “as soon as the excitement of the moment wears off.”

“Agreed,” Hyssop added. “I think this burst of energy we’re all feeling would be best used to write a final version of the spell for distribution. Then we can have some students copy it tomorrow and start sending it out everywhere there has been an outbreak of the plague.”

“All over the world, then,” Oceanvine commented.

“Yes,” Hyssop nodded, “all over the world. And tomorrow we can start curing the local victims too.”

“And as soon as that’s taken care of, Oceanvine and I will need to be on our way to the Isle of Fire,” Silverwind told them.

“Do we still need to go?” Oceanvine asked. “I know the Vogt requested us, but we can just send the

spell can't we? There must be competent mages in Rjalkatyp."

"There are," Silverwind agreed, "but since we think the plague originated on the Isle of Fire, we must also be prepared for the possibility that the originator of the plague is still there as well."

"Arithan?" Oceanvine whispered the question. Silverwind nodded. "Are you sure you want to meet him again?"

"I'm sure I don't, but it's something I have to do."

"Why you?"

"Who else?" Silverwind replied. "Besides, he and I have a little unfinished business. Airblossom, I think it would be best if we didn't take Candle with us though."

"You can say that again," Oceanvine agreed.

"Only if you insist," Silverwind said dryly then turned back to Airblossom, "Might we impose on you and Waterfall to take care of the lad until we return?"

"Of course," Airblossom said instantly. "Taking him into a plague zone as well as one in which there may be a living demon would be inexcusable, and I think Waterfall really likes him. We'll be glad to have him stay with us. Should we send him to school with Orenta his age?"

"He may be a bit behind them yet. Candle's very intelligent but he didn't really start his formal education until a year ago."

"Not a problem," Hyssop replied. "The public schools in Merinne have entrance exams in any case, so they'll be able to place him in classes in all subjects at his level. And if you're going to the Isle of Fire you'll be gone for a semester or two so he'll have plenty of time to catch up in."

"Good, that's taken care of," Silverwind said with relief. "Let's get to work."

Interlogue

And after the Elder Gods created Maiyim, they created all living plants and animals. The Six felt the world was full, but Aritos, the solitary God, challenged them to create people, creatures as intelligent as they were themselves.

Together Emtos and Emmine created humans and in this act of creation, their immortal son Nildar was born. Bellinen and Merinne came together to create the Orenta and from this union their divine daughter Wenni also came into being and when Gran and Querna created the Granomen, their daughter Methis the Inventor was born. Aritos worked alone and created the soulless demons.

The Three Younger Gods grew up with their mortal siblings maturing gradually over the course of the millennia. At first they met each other only infrequently when their parents had business with each other, but these meetings grew ever less frequent after the Elder Gods agreed to remove themselves from the mortal world. But the Younger Gods stayed among their people for centuries after their parents left.

As humans began to explore theOuterSeas , Nildar explored ahead of them, traveling to the lands of the Orenta. He lived for a while among the Orenta, getting to know them and their ways. He was traveling between Orentan villages one day when he met a beautiful young Orentan lady. She was tall with medium brown skin and long straight black hair, and Nildar's heart went out to her immediately.

"You are not Orente," she said curiously. "Who are you? Where are you from?"

"I am Nildar, son of Emtos," he replied in the human manner of the time, unable to take his eyes off of her. "I come from the lands of Emmine, beautiful Ora."

"Ah, the human lands" the Orentan lady replied. "But you are not human either."

Nildar frowned, "Either?"

The lady laughed gently, "I am Wenni. My parents are Merinne and Bellinen. I am no more Orente than you are human. Why are you here in the lands of my people?"

"My people have begun to explore the world. I wanted to know what and who they might meet."

"I dare say we may meet them half way as my people are accomplished sailors and have also begun to explore beyond the bounds of theInnerSeas ."

Nildar expressed his love for Wenni and she for him, for she knew they were meant for each other. For a long while they spent all their time together, but eventually they returned to their peoples to see how they were fairing.

Humans and Orenta had some minor disagreements, but on the whole they got along. As yet they only met each other rarely for the oceans were vast, the distances great, but their ships were not built for theOuterSeas and the art of navigation was still in its infancy.

"Our peoples will be friends," Wenni said happily to Nildar one day, "but what about when they meet the children of Gran?"

"I do not know," Nildar admitted. "Perhaps we should journey to the lands of the North and find out."

So they traveled to Granom and met the people there. The Granomen looked on them with suspicion. With patience Nildar was accepted among them, but Wenni was never treated well by either the sons or daughters of Gran. So Wenni and Nildar disguised themselves as Granomen and in their Gramonish guises were made welcome. As they traveled through the Granomen Archipelago, word came to them of divine Methis, daughter of Gran and Querna and knowing her for a cousin decided to seek her out.

They found Methis in her workshop in the mountains of Quirnlia.

"Yes," she said looking up as they entered, "and what can I do for you, cousins?" For Methis knew who her visitors were even in Granomish guise.

Nildar and Wenni took on their true aspects and Nildar explained why they had come to Granom and how the Granomen had treated them, especially Wenni. "We fear that our peoples may not be friends," He concluded.

"My brothers and sisters are fine people," Methis replied, "but they do have their blind spot where

females are concerned. Still, I am more concerned with how they may deal with people who are not Granomish.”

Together they examined this problem for years traveling back and forth across the world. Living among the humans, Orenta and Granomen. Finally Methis came up with a solution.

“Let us join together and create a land here on Maiyim on which all our peoples can live together in peace and prosperity. We will bless that land and it will stand as a sign to all people.”

Nildar and Wenni agreed and they journeyed far to the north, so far that mountains of ice were a common sight in the seas. And from the sides of such an ice mountain, they joined together and caused a great volcano on the bottom of the sea to erupt, to spew out great amounts of lava and to form a large island amidst the ice-strewn sea. And when the island was large enough to suit their purpose, they caused the lava and ash to turn to arable soil, so that even though the volcano would still erupt from time to time, living things would grow there. And they planted grass and bushes and some few trees. They brought animals to this island so it was full of life.

And finally they blessed the Island of Fire so that when people came they would feel welcome and would live together in peace.

Then The Three followed their parents’ example and withdrew from the affairs of mortals so that this peace would not be compelled, but among the people of the Isle of Fire it is said that the Younger Gods visit the island each year on the anniversary of their creation to admire their handiwork.

Theologians still argue among themselves as to just when that may be.

Part II

Rjalkatyp

One

Silverwind dreamed.

The world was grey and the sky was charcoal with black clouds. He stood on a windy moor while the shrieks from unseen victims of a torture chamber filled the air. Suddenly the ground before him erupted in a vast fountain of fire. And within that fire he saw the corporeal form of Arithan.

When they first met, Arithan was no giant, but stood somewhat taller than an average man, but now he stood five times as tall. His skin was black, he was garbed in flame and his eyes burned in an unhealthy shade of yellowish green. His face split in a mirthless grin as he spotted Silverwind and his ivory-white teeth stood out in sharp contrast with the rest of him.

“Well, well,” Arithan said sweetly. “It’s my old friend Silverwind the Sort of Magnificent. Doing well these days, are you? Oh so happy to hear it. I just knew you’d get over our last meeting eventually. That’s why I sent for you tonight. Time for another dose, don’t you know. And what have we here?”

Arithan reached out a great black arm and from behind Silverwind picked something up. In a single large hand he held Oceanvine by the waist and turned her around so he could look her square in the eyes.

“For me? How thoughtful, Silverwind. Windchime was really no fun at all, but you, my lovely,” he said to Oceanvine, “you and I are going to have just loads of fun.”

Before Silverwind could react, Oceanvine spat in the demon’s face. Then as he stood there stunned, she brought her leg up and kicked his grinning face as hard as she could.

“Yes, indeed!” laughed Arithan, and he threw her away. “There’s so much to work with there! Maybe you should have brought that shiny new apprentice along as well. Have to start them young, you know!”

Silverwind stopped listening and turned to see where Oceanvine had gone. In the distance he could still see her tumbling through the air. He ran off toward her. Before he reached her landing spot, though, he suddenly found himself running through a dark corridor with walls of dark brown stone. The corridor ran straight ahead for long way before taking a sudden left turn. Silverwind continued on and found himself in a maze of infinitely long hallways that went off in almost every direction. No matter which way he turned, each hall went straight on until it became a mere point in the distance.

He picked a direction at random and ran on until he found a door on one side. He opened the door and looked inside. It was the tap room at Old Jack’s tavern in Renton. There was nobody in at the moment, not even Old Jack, but a cheery fire blazed in the fireplace. Silverwind walked around the room, side-stepping tables as he went. The tables were all empty with the chairs on top of them save one. Two chairs stood on the floor around that one table and on the table was a glass wine bottle. At some time in the past that bottle must have been heated until it melted for it was wildly deformed, flattened on the downward side.

“Anyone home?” Silverwind shouted. Silence except for the crackling of the fire. He took a closer look at the fire, but there seemed to be nothing unusual about it. He left the taproom and found himself walking along the streets of Keesport.

Like Old Jack’s tavern, the city was empty. Nothing was happening although the street were pleasantly lit by the gaslights. He wandered around and found himself outside of the complex Geraint and Eloise owned. He climbed the stairway to their home and knocked on the door. It opened up by itself so he entered the room.

The entry room led into the kitchen. There was a tea kettle on the stove with steam coming out of the spout.

“Hello!” Silverwind called. “Geraint? Eloise?” Nothing. He took the kettle off the stove and placed it on a trivet and then turned and left the apartment. He walked back down the stairs and onto the green sand beach of a small island he recognized as being in the Great Bay of Rallena.

That was where he had spent the two years of his hermitage. This time he expected it to be empty of people and he was not surprised. Overhead, he heard the cry of an osprey as it circled over the water waiting to sight a fish. He remembered building a nice comfortable shelter under a rocky overhang about a quarter of a mile upslope from this beach. He could see the trail he had made through the mostly pine woods that stood between the beach and the shelter. He sensed he ought to go check that shelter out, but decided to look around first. He walked along the beach for a long way before turning back. The sense that he should be headed toward the shelter had grown stronger, irresistible.

Even so, he stopped every so often to look at a shell, a flower or a pretty rock, but finally he was outside the shelter. Forgetting this was a dream, he was amazed to find it intact after all this time. He knew it was a sturdy little shack. As a youth, he had ample experience building things. His father had been a carpenter. Then he shrugged, opened the door and stepped in.

“It is about time!” a female voice said, exasperated. Silverwind turned to see Oceanvine and a tall Orentan lady with long black hair seated at a rough slab table near the fireplace he had built into the shelter. They were drinking tea near a large cheerful fire. “You win, Oceanvine. How did you know he would ignore My summons.”

“Silverwind always does everything he can to avoid a summoning spell, Divine One,” Oceanvine replied politely.

“Cast by a mortal, perhaps, but this was My summoning spell!” Oceanvine merely shrugged.

“I must have gotten distracted, Ora,” Silverwind cut in.

“I had to summon you three times and the first two times you flatly refused to even see Me. This third time you actually started walking away. Do you have any notion how insistent I had to be to even get you through that door there?”

Silverwind wisely chose to be silent.

“Oh very well. Silverwind, I am Wenni, daughter of Bellinen and Merinne. Perhaps you have heard of Me?”

“Your name has cropped up from time to time,” Silverwind admitted.

“Yes,” she said dryly, “I am sure it has. Did you intentionally ignore My call?”

“I didn’t know it was You specifically, Ora,” Silverwind replied.

“Have you any idea of how annoying it is to have a summons ignored? Do you often ignore a God’s summoning spell?”

“It hasn’t been my experience to be summoned all that often by a God,” Silverwind replied.

“I can understand why,” Wenni snapped. She closed her eyes and as her lips moved, Oceanvine was certain the goddess was counting in Ancient Orente. “You and Methis have a lot in common. That may be why she had no trouble getting your attention last time. All right. I do not have Methis’ sense of humor and you have already wasted most of the time available just avoiding this meeting.”

“Does this have anything to do with the great quest Methis alluded to when I met her a few months ago?” Silverwind asked.

“Not directly. And no!” Wenni said with sudden emphasis, “I will not tell you who the other two companions will be.”

“How did you know...”

“Methis said you would ask. If it makes you feel better, Methis told Me to tell you I cannot read your

mind.”

“I would have felt better if You had phrased that differently,” Silverwind replied. “Just because Methis told You to say it, it doesn’t make it so.”

At that Wenni smiled with unpleasant mystery. “Got you,” She said flatly. “There, did that work?” she asked Oceanvine.

Oceanvine laughed. “I think You have his attention, Divine One. Go ahead.”

“Time is slipping away,” Wenni repeated solemnly. “The rest of the Gods may know when there will be another opportunity, but I certainly do not.”

“You mean this isn’t a dream?” Silverwind asked, a bit surprised.

“Of course it’s a dream!” Wenni snapped again. “This is the only way We can communicate with you until after you complete that task Methis mentioned. After that, well, We probably won’t need to. I’m certain I won’t want to. Is he always like this?” she asked Oceanvine.

“Pretty much so, yes,” Oceanvine admitted.

“I really do not know how or why you put up with him.”

“Perhaps it’s love,” Silverwind suggested.

“Perhaps it is,” Wenni agreed, Her eyes softening for the first time. “Let us call a truce here and keep the verbal sparring down to a minimum. There is so little time left. What I most desperately need to tell you is that you absolutely must take Candle with you to the Isle of Fire.”

“That’s it? You want me to bring my apprentice into what may be an extremely dangerous situation; one possibly involving a demon?”

“Yes, that pretty much sums it up,” Wenni told him.

“Why?”

“Because you need him there. Silverwind, you hide it well, but you are still vulnerable to the nightmares caused by Arithan’s curse. You feel them closing around you every time you use magic.”

“Silverwind!” Oceanvine gasped. “Is that true?”

“I’m no worse off than I was before the case in North Horalia . I can handle the nightmares and the headaches. I have before.”

“Sure you can,” Wenni muttered sourly. “Just don’t forget to bring Candle with you. Not only do you need him there, but for reasons of his own that are far more important, he needs to be there.”

“What reasons are those?” Silverwind pressed.

“Try asking him. Maybe he will tell you, if he knows. I certainly will not.” And with that pronouncement Wenni began to slowly become transparent and then disappear completely. Just after She had completely

faded out they heard, "Let Methis deal with him from now on. I care not whose turn it is next time!"

Silverwind and Oceanvine woke up simultaneously. The sun was just touching the horizon to the east. They sat up in bed and turned to look at each other.

"You really should have been more polite, dear," Oceanvine told him. "She is a Goddess after all."

"I really thought that was just an ordinary dream until nearly the end," Silverwind explained.

"You must have strange dreams," Oceanvine observed.

"Often enough," Silverwind admitted. "It's getting light out. We should probably get up. There's still a lot to do before we catch the evening tide."

"True enough. I'll go put a kettle on for some tea, though we'll pick up breakfast at the University this morning." She got up, slipped on a robe and left their bedroom,

Silverwind sat on the edge of the bed for a few minutes then started getting ready for the day. When he was washed and dressed, he stumbled into the kitchen area.

"I made the tea a bit strong this morning," Oceanvine told him.

"Good, I like it better that way," Silverwind told her.

"Really? You've never complained about my tea."

"I'm not all that fond of tea anyway and you are, so it only makes sense for you to make it the way you like."

"Oh. We need to tell Candle he'll be going with us after all," Oceanvine noted. "He wasn't very happy with us last night."

"That should change. Are we all packed?"

"I am," Oceanvine replied. "Just have to finish the last bag and I'll be ready. How about you?"

"Pretty much the same. I hope Candle's all packed up too. Should we wake him up and tell him the news?"

"You drink your tea," Oceanvine told him. "I'll break the news to him."

Silverwind nodded and went back to his tea. A moment later Oceanvine was back in the kitchen.

"Candle's gone," she told him. "He's not in the house. His bags are gone too."

"Maybe he just got up early. We'll have to pick up his bags from Airblossom and Waterfall's place."

“I’d feel better if we went to look for him,” Oceanvine said, worried. “You can still follow the string of the apprenticeship spell can’t you?”

“It’s only a year old; hasn’t worn thin yet. Less than a year actually since I had to recast it, remember. Tell you what, you go get dressed and I’ll meet you down on the beach.”

Oceanvine nodded and Silverwind walked out and onto the deck. When he got there, he found Candle’s two bags sitting neatly just outside the door, although Candle was nowhere in sight.

Looking out to sea, he noted that the surf was up with some very good waves this morning. It was then that he noticed a small figure very far out, just beyond where the waves were breaking. *It might be Candle*, he thought. *It might be Bellinen himself for that matter.* At this distance there was no telling who it was nor even if it was male or female, not while whoever it was was still sitting on his board.

Silverwind checked the thread of the apprenticeship spell that bound him and Candle together and verified that the lone surfer was, indeed, Candle. Silverwind was about to signal to Candle, or even to cast a summoning spell of his own, when Candle spotted the swell he had been waiting for.

Candle dug down into the water and started his run, and as he felt the wave rise under him, he stood up on the board and began to ride it in. He didn’t try any fancy tricks, just moved himself back and forth across the wave face, to keep himself riding on the best part of it. It was a fine ride and he finished it without falling off the board until he intentionally stepped off near the shore.

“Very good,” Silverwind commended him. “I was never that good on a board. Too clumsy, I suppose. I always wiped out. However, what were you doing out there alone? Didn’t Serabawa warn you about how dangerous that can be?”

“Uh... It did come up,” Candle admitted sheepishly, “but I thought this might be my last chance for a while. Waterfall and Airblossom don’t live on the beach and if I’m in school most of the day...”

Silverwind suspected more than a bit of resentful rebellion lay behind that bit of risk taking as well. “Candle, it was reckless of you and I’m very disappointed.” That was all it took to wipe any grin from Candle’s face.

“I won’t do it again,” he promised quickly. “But...”

“No buts, Candle. This is very important. I don’t want you taking unnecessary risks.”

“You do,” Candle pointed out, “all the time.”

“Not unnecessary ones. The risks I take are only done when there is no other alternative. You had an alternative, it would not have killed you to miss a wave, but it might have killed you to catch one. Those are fairly large swells out there.”

“I’ve surfed larger ones.”

“Alone, Candle?”

“Well, no. With Serabawa... But, Silverwind, it’ll be at least a week before I can go surfing again and then only if I can find someone to surf with.”

“During the days there’s usually someone here,” Silverwind pointed out, “but I imagine your next chance to go surfing will be even further away than you think.”

“Huh?”

“You’ll be coming with us to the Isle of Fire.”

“You changed your mind?” Candle asked, hardly believing his good luck.

“Let’s just say I had my mind changed for me.”

“By who? Uh, whom?” Candle corrected himself. His grammar was a far cry from that of the young thief he had been when first apprenticed to Silverwind.

“Never mind,” Silverwind sidestepped him. It wouldn’t do to let Candle know he was going by divine decree. “but you have got to promise not to take any untoward risks.”

“I won’t,” Candle promised instantly.

Silverwind doubted it would last, but he knew Candle would be more careful for a while. He hoped this spate of good behavior would last long enough.

“Well, go get dressed we’ll get some breakfast at the University.”

It was late afternoon before they made their way to Merinneport harbor. Over the course of the day, Wizard Compass and Hyssop made certain that copies of the counter-curse had been sent out and would continue to be sent out. Oceanvine and Airblossom made their final visit to the quarantine houses to certify that the last of the local patients there were cleared of the curse. Silverwind spent most of his time talking to the President of the Bellinen Senate and to the ambassadors from Emmine and Granom.

Candle spent the day following Silverwind from place to place, and then spending the time working on the fire spell Silverwind had started teaching him. That usually meant staying in a kitchen as there were otherwise few fireplaces in any part of Merinne, heating not being a problem most of the time. He didn’t make much progress until late in the day when he managed to get a log in the fireplace of the front hall of the Granomish Embassy to turn black in the spot he had been concentrating on with a thin tail of smoke rising off it.

“Not bad for the first day,” Oceanvine told him. “Where’s Silverwind?”

“Don’t know,” Candle replied. “Off with Zak somewhere.”

“It’s getting late. Let’s go find him,” Oceanvine suggested.

They found Ksana in the apartment she shared with her husband and she brought them to Prince Zakhar’s office.

“There’s really no need to hurry,” Zak told Oceanvine. “I booked you on the ship of an old friend and

he'll be willing to wait however long you need to."

"Who?" Oceanvine asked, "and what ship?"

"Captain Yakaw of Kif and the *Isle of Marga*," Zak replied. "When I spoke to him this morning he seemed quite pleased that you would be sailing with him again. He said that with you two as pilots he could leave against the tide if need be."

"It's a lot of work to pilot a ship that size against the tide," Oceanvine informed the prince. "If you don't mind, I'd rather not have to. Bringing her in against a blizzard nearly did me in last winter and that was with Silverwind's help."

"I didn't realize magic was so hard. Sorry," Zak apologized. Unlike most people Prince Zakhar had no talent at all for magic, not even the minor spells children were taught. "Then perhaps we should go down to the harbor. I have a pair of carriages arranged and Silverwind and I can conclude our conversation along the way."

"Oceanvine," Ksana said, holding her back from the others as they proceeded toward the gate, "Is this how your life always is? Going from place to place, solving people's problems?"

"Lately it has been, but only for a little over a year. Before that I spent three years in a small village about halfway back from nowhere at all as Silverwind's research assistant."

"And before that?" Ksana asked.

"I was a university student in Randona. Top of my class but on probation the entire time I was there. Haven't I told you all this before?"

"Not really. You've mentioned various incidents and you told me a bit about your apprenticeship to Master Sunbear and I know why you were on permanent probation at University."

"Actually, you only know half the reason," Oceanvine replied quietly, after first making sure Candle was out of hearing range. "I told you about Kormac of Medda, but that incident only had me serving detention chores for my freshman year." She stopped as they arrived at the carriages Prince Zakhar had arranged. She motioned that Candle should join Silverwind and Zak in the larger carriage while she and Ksana would ride in the other.

"I still don't understand what you did that was so wrong," Ksana commented. "Wish I could have done the same thing to any number of men. He had it coming."

"He did indeed," Oceanvine agreed. "What I did wrong was to perform a high level spell without supervision of my master. Well any master, really. What I did was very advanced magic, magic I was not allowed to perform on my own until I had my Master's degree. That was part of what appealed to me about working with Silverwind. As a wizard he could supervise any spell I needed to perform, in theory. In practice he usually left me on my own and trusted me not to do more than I should. That never happened at University. The professors there never forgot what I did as an apprentice."

"Maybe they might have, but as I know you've noticed I have a short temper more often than not, or as friends would say, I do not suffer fools gladly. I was no sooner out of detention duties when I got into trouble all over again."

“Oh dear!” Ksana giggled, “What did you do?”

“At the start of our sophomore year one of the professors undertook clandestine testing of the members of my class. This is something that we were all told to expect. Our grades would be based on how we reacted to the situation we were put in. Well, this professor was sneaking in to the dormitories while we weren’t there and taking various personal belongings from our rooms.”

“And you had to catch the thief?”

“All they really expected of us was to devise a way to protect what we owned. I did catch the thief, though. Airblossom and I egged each other on with our solution and the supposed thief ended up with blinking red spots all over his body and brilliantly glowing green eyes. What really angered him was he couldn’t counter the spell himself.”

“Did you use inappropriate magic on that too?”

“No, I try not to repeat mistakes,” Oceanvine laughed.

“So why were you in trouble then?”

“We gave him the wrong counter spell. It only made the problem worse. He would have had to forgive the first spell as part of our solution, but not the second. That was done for spite. Nor would we counter it even afterward, so he was stuck with the eyes and spots for a month before the spell wore off and we were washing dishes after every meal in the cafeteria for the same amount of time.”

“And then?” Ksana prompted.

“A number of minor incidents. A lot of students do little things that might get them into trouble, but I had a record and no real sense of humor either. So I tended to over-react to little things. The first year with Silverwind got me over that. Trust me, after a year with Silverwind you either have a sense of humor or you go crazy. I’m no crazier than most.”

“You’re not crazy at all, Oceanvine,” Ksana told her. “Oh, I am going to miss you, sister. We didn’t have anywhere enough time together this time around.”

“And we didn’t get to sail here together as we at first planned, either,” Oceanvine added.

“No, we couldn’t leave as quickly as we thought. Not with everything that was happening on the Isle of Fire, and now that’s why you’re leaving too.”

“Well, the situation has quieted down by now, hasn’t it?”

“I don’t think so. Zak doesn’t tell me everything. I think he would if I asked, but he doesn’t seem to like to talk about it when we’re alone together, so I don’t press. However, what I do hear sounds very uncertain. I wouldn’t want to be a ‘working girl’ there, that’s for sure. Actually I don’t want to be a prostitute anywhere, it’s a terrible life,” Ksana added, getting agitated. “Never met anyone who liked it. It was just a way to make money if you didn’t know what else to do.”

“You’re away from that now, dear,” Oceanvine comforted her, “and with a good man to boot.”

“Yes,” Ksana agreed. “I am. And now here we are,” she finished as the carriage came to a halt beside a

tall-masted bark.

The *Isle of Marga* was a three-masted ship with square-rigged sails on her fore and main masts and fore-and-aft sails on the mizzen mast. Her hull, like most ocean-going ships on Maiyim, was painted black to hide the scorch marks that marred it from multiple battles with the vicious aquatic plant that Oceanvine named herself after. The sails and rigging were another matter, however. The ropes of the rigging were made of golden yellow fibers and the sails, currently furled, were bright white. Captain Yakaw insisted the brightwork be kept polished and the gunwales painted white. The masts were the brown black of tarred wood and the deck a holystoned white. This was a well-cared for ship, an orderly ship. Every bit of gear had its rightful place to be stowed and the crew made sure that everything was stowed properly.

“So you’ll deliver this to our embassy in Rjalkatyp?” Zakhar was asking Silverwind as they approached the gangplank to the *Marga*.

“Of course, Your Excellency, or do you prefer Highness?” Silverwind asked.

“I’d prefer not to have to use either title officially,” Zak admitted, “but I tend to use ‘Excelency’ when acting as ambassador. It’s ‘Highness’ on social occasions, if a title is used at all, at least so long as I’m an ambassador. Of course what others might call me...” he trailed off with a grin.

“It’s nice to meet a nobleman who doesn’t take his rank seriously,” Silverwind chuckled, shaking Zak’s hand. “You should do quite well in Bellinen, you know. If more Granomen were like you there may never have been war between your peoples.”

“Thank you,” Zak replied modestly. “Safe journey to all of you!”

“Thank you, Zak,” Oceanvine replied, hugging him. “Ksana, be sure to write, I know you can now! Maybe Zak will be reposted to Emmine some day.”

“The gods forbid!” Zakhar laughed. “That post is cursed.”

“Cursed?” Candle asked.

“Seems it. Always trouble. And Ksaveras can’t keep anyone there more than a couple years before they appeal for relief. But who knows maybe we’ll visit some day. Renton sounds delightful.”

“Delightfully boring,” Oceanvine laughed.

“Yes, exactly!” Zak agreed. “Nothing wrong with getting away from the big city. I could go hunting, perhaps”

“In Renton?” Silverwind chuckled. “We have some deer running about and maybe the odd mountain cat, though I haven’t heard of any of them being seen recently. Other than that, just squirrels, rabbits, foxes and the lot.”

“I’ve heard that fox hunting is fashionable in Emmine,” Zal replied.

“Not in Renton,” Silverwind told him. “The local nobility aren’t often in residence on their estates and the gentry are too busy trying to make a living to indulge in such pursuits.”

"I could always write a book I suppose then," Zak sighed.

"You don't have to go all the way to Renton to write a book, Zak," Oceanvine commented, "but you'll be welcome no matter what excuse you use."

"We probably ought to board ship soon," Silverwind observed. "Especially since it looks like the entire crew is waiting on us." He was nearly right. Several crewmen, mostly Granomen, but with a few humans among them were standing on the deck, waiting for them to board. It wasn't quite a welcoming party, but most of these crewmen had been on the *Marga* last time they had sailed on her. They said their final farewells to Zak and Ksana and started up the gangplank even as the skies began to darken.

"Permission to board," Silverwind requested formally.

"Permission granted," the first mate, a stout Granom named Larka replied, "Welcome back, all three of you. We'll take your bags below. Captain Yakaw requests Journeywoman Oceanvine's presence on the bridge."

"That's Master Oceanvine, now Larka," Silverwind informed him.

"Congratulations," he told her.

"Thank you," she replied and made her way to the bridge.

Captain Yakaw nearly always sailed his ship as he stood in the weather. The *Isle of Marga* boasted a wheelhouse, but when at sea he preferred to use the wheel that stood on deck. The wheel house was only used for sailing in extreme weather. However, it was also where Yakaw kept his navigational tools and where he did his sums that worked out the ship's exact location. That was where Oceanvine found him.

"Hello, elf-lover!" Yakaw boomed as soon as he spotted her. Yakaw had called her that scornfully enough when they first met. A conservative Granom, he had no fondness for the Orenta and Oceanvine's habit of dressing in Orentan styles had set off his prejudices. However as they grew to know each other 'elf-lover' had become an odd term of affection. "You *are* going to pilot for me tonight aren't you?"

"It would be my honor, Captain," she replied smiling. "So how have you been, you old troll?" The term came haltingly to Oceanvine's lips. In most circles it was as rude a term as 'elf,' but Yakaw merely laughed his booming laugh and grabbed her in a fierce hug.

"Oh, Gran! I've missed you, Oceanvine," he told her. "Doing my sums hasn't been quite the same since you left. You know if you ever decide to leave that wizard you can sail with me anytime."

"Thanks, Captain, but I think I'll be staying with Silverwind for a while longer yet," she replied with a smile.

"Seriously, I never thought otherwise."

"So when do we cast off?" Oceanvine asked.

"As soon as I give the order. Do you want to change into your usual shipboard togs first?" Oceanvine often wore a skimpy Orentan bathing suit while they sailed, at least where the climate was tropical.

"I only wear a two piece suit when I'm sunbathing, Yakaw. You know that." Yakaw just chuckled. "I think these clothes will do just fine. You know," she continued, "it's odd, but I didn't get to do much of that while I was here. We were just too busy."

"You'll have to tell me about it once we're in clear waters. Well, beyond the harbor anyway, we won't reach the Outer Seas for a while yet. We'll be threading our way through the inner seas of Bellinen before we reach the Nildar."

They left the wheel house and Captain Yakaw gave the order to cast off all lines and make ready to sail. The first mate relayed the order to the bos'n who shouted, "Make ready to cast off all lines!" Then after the men were in position, "Cast off!" The heavy ropes used to tie the *Marga* to the wharf were untied from the large cleats and hauled aboard ship, where they were neatly coiled and stowed for their next use. The ship was now adrift beside the wharf. As the tide was high and just starting to go out, the Captain could have let the tide draw the *Marga* out into the harbor and out into the open water, where once the winds were favorable he could set sail. However, in a crowded harbor like Merinneport this process could be a lengthy one. If a single low tide was not enough to drag the ship out to where sail could be set, the ship would have to drop anchor and wait for the next tide. If conditions were phenomenally wrong, getting to open water could take days so when a pilot was available he could use a specialized spell to propel the ship out of the harbor. Merinneport actually had an official pilot captains were required to use when they carried no mage of their own to pilot the ship into and out of a harbor, but with both Silverwind and Oceanvine on board, Yakaw was able to save the expense of his services.

Yakaw took his place at the helm and Oceanvine stood nearby. From this location she had a clear view of where she had to guide the ship. She closed her eyes briefly to compose herself and cast the initial spell. As she opened her eyes, she began to use the spell to push the ship aftward away from its slip. At first it didn't move visibly at all, but through the spell she could sense the slow progress it made through the water of the harbor. Soon, however, the ship moved visibly backward until it cleared the end of the wharf. She paused to check that all was clear, then guided the *Isle of Marga* into a ninety degree turn so she was now facing bow-forward toward the mouth of the harbor.

A calling voice from the wharf distracted her and she turned to see Ksana and Zakhar waving "Goodbye" from the wharf. She smiled and waved back, then started the ship forward. Ever so slowly, the ship slowed in its sternward movement, came to a halt in the water and then started forward. By the time she turned back toward the wharf for a final look, it was too dark to see if her friends were still there, so she went back to her task and skillfully guided the *Marga* out of the harbor. It was an easier job than the one Silverwind had undertaken when they sailed out of Kanaduin. There were not quite so many ships anchored between them and the main channel. Also, the Merinneport harbor master did not tolerate any wrecks in his harbor, so there were no semi-submerged obstacles. Further the channel was fairly straight so once they had made their way to it, there were no hidden sand bars to worry about.

Still, as simple as the job was compared to that in other harbors, it was a time-consuming one and it was nearly midnight before the order could be sent to the sailors, to climb the rigging and unfurl the sails. Merinne sat on the southern side of Orent Island, which in turn was on the southern edge of the Bellinen Archipelago so for this stretch they would be sailing along the northern-most part of the Wenni Ocean and would until they rounded the western side of Orent.

"I haven't as much experience in Bellinen," Yakaw admitted, "so we'll have to sail carefully when we reach the inner sea here. The elves, uh... Orenta," he corrected himself before Oceanvine could, "use a different system of buoys than we do. The system is different still in Emmine too, but I haven't sailed the inner seas there very much, mostly just in and out of Kanu and the other outer islands. The only inner seas we sail regularly are in Granom." Yakaw had not only grown used to Oceanvine on their previous

voyage together, but had fallen into the habit of explaining the mechanics of sailing, which gradually led to discussions of how he made decisions as captain. By the end of that trip Oceanvine was more knowledgeable about captaining a ship than most sailors would have been.

“The differences are easy enough to see in daylight,” he continued, “but where we use red and green oil-lighted buoys for nighttime navigation, the colors are yellow and red here. That makes it too easy to get confused, especially if I keep to four hour watches, so while we’re within inner Bellinen I plan two hour watches at night and we’ll shorten sail a bit. It will lengthen the trip a little, but it will still be shorter than if we tried to skirt the entire archipelago. Ah, lass you’re falling asleep on me, not boring you am I?”

“Oh no, not at all. Sorry,” Oceanvine apologized with a yawn. “It’s been a very long day.”

“And a long evening as well,” the captain agreed, “and you haven’t even seen the inside of your cabin yet. Well, you go on below and get some sleep. Sleep it off and if you like we’ll meet at sunset and I’ll let you do the sums.”

“I’d like that,” Oceanvine told him. “Good night, captain.”

“G’een, lass.”

Two

Unlike their last voyage on the *Isle of Marga*, they encountered no patches of oceanvine on this trip. Nor did they spot a serp, one of the great oceanic snakes, as they had on their first trip on Captain Jocey’s *Skate*. No pirate vessels were encountered and aside from a couple of storms they had no potentially life-threatening experiences. In fact the storms were more an inconvenience than a danger to the crew and passengers of the *Marga*.

That is not to say that the trip was entirely uneventful. Traffic on the inner seas was fairly heavy and they often signaled greetings to passing ships. Twice they stopped to parlay and deliver mail. Mail on the seas was sometimes a chaotic affair. The Royal Mail Services of Emmine and Granom and the Republican Postal System of Orente hired ships to carry letters and parcels to their destinations, and barring the infrequent disasters at sea, these charters were carried out directly and in a timely manner. But another less official system existed and flourished on the seas of Maiyim. Anyone could ask an officer or crewman of a ship to deliver a letter or package. Depending on the circumstances, the person accepting such a piece of mail might charge for the service or not. As the recipients were mostly the many sailors of all three nationalities, it was usually a free service. But just as in other facets of life, one gets the value one pays for.

A man who makes his living at sea does not always know where he is going to be. Plans get changed, a storm might slow down or speed up a voyage, or he may even find himself on another ship or two before returning home. Consequently someone sending a message via another sailor had no way of knowing when, or even if, that message might arrive. Captain Yakaw said he once shipped with a man who had such a message follow him around the waters of Maiyim for years so that by the time said message arrived, informing him of the birth of his son, that son was grown and working on the same ship.

So it was not unusual to stop to exchange news and gossip and, if it was thought the ship one met was going in the right direction, it was quite normal to ask that ship to take such mail for delivery if possible. Several letters and packages changed hands during these encounters, although nobody present was the

final recipient.

Once they passed beyond the marked boundary of Bellinen, the crew settled into the more relaxed routine of the outer seas. Only twice since they left the final bell bouy behind did they even spot another ship. On the first occasion it appeared to be a ship headed from the northern-most reaches of Bellinen to somewhere in Emmine without bothering to head south as most ships did to sail through the Chain Islands that almost linked the two archipelagos. Such a course was referred to as "Linking the Chain" and was the traditional course for ships between Emmine and Bellinen. However, with improved navigational aids since the discovery of how to use time to measure longitude, sailing that course was no longer necessary and an increasing number of ships sailed more direct routes.

The second time they saw another ship, they were nearly halfway to the Isle of Fire and were just to the east of the Saindo Archipelago, the small group of islands that included Snake Island. Oceanvine and Candle wondered about it and when they asked the captain he said he wasn't sure where it might be going, although its heading suggested that it came from somewhere in Granom and might be going to somewhere in the Saindos or maybe further west to the Wennil Archipelago.

"Never actually stopped in either," Yakaw said, "though my cousin sailed on a ship that stopped regularly at Snake with supplies for some of the treasure hunters there. Not many people anywhere in those islands, but there are some and there are some interesting plants and animals that live on those islands, some quite valuable. Some folks go to make their fortunes in those places, others just go to look for peace, and still others go to study the animals and the plants, so I hear."

"What about the treasure pit off Snake Island?" Candle asked. Oceanvine had mentioned it to him a few days earlier during one of their daily lessons. He had mastered the fire and light spells and she had started teaching him basic wards. She had been surprised at first how quickly he picked up their theory, but then remembered how she had used him as a sounding board months earlier while working on her thesis. He was still having trouble maintaining them, but was actually doing much better than most apprentices might have.

"It's a fairy tale, if ye ask me," Yakaw laughed. "Someone built something there, that's true enough, but just what it is, I doubt we'll ever know."

And that was all the captain would say about it. But that didn't stop Candle from asking others about Snake Island and the supposedly fabulous treasure there. He spoke about it at length to the ship's cook.

Innokenty, Kenyato his friends, spent much of his time fishing and on the voyage to Quern, he had let Candle help out whenever the boy had time off from his lessons. A genuine affection had developed between them, so when Candle tried to press him about Snake Island, he laughed gently and told the boy that if he wanted to get rich, he stood a better chance selling sand door-to-door in Merinne.

It was Silverwind who spoke most seriously on the subject with him, giving him the same respect and attention as he did whenever Candle had a question.

"Was there years ago with Geraint. The company that was digging there at the time, before they ran out of money, hired us to try and stop the tide."

"What? How?" Candle asked.

"Well, one of the features of the pit, whatever it is, is a pair of channels that were cut through the sand

and run to the edge of the island. The channels are at sea level, and kept open with coconut fibers so whenever the tide comes in the water rushes into the pit, no matter how much you may pump it out at low tide. Anyway they wanted us to find a way to stop that. We tried several times, but we were never able to find a way. Geraint was convinced there were more than just a pair of channels, but instead there might have been several smaller ones that fed into the two that reached the pit itself, so while we could remove the coconut fibers, and thereby destroy the channel in a couple of locations where we found them, there were still more that we couldn't find."

"But couldn't you have used magic to keep the water from going into the pit?" Candle asked.

"Yes, but that much magic is a lot of work. We could have held back the tidal surge once, probably. But we would have been far too tired to do it again the next time the tide came in and that's all it would have taken to refill the pit. But, you know there's really no evidence that the island they're digging on is the same Snake Island that treasure is supposedly on and even if it is, there's not been a lot of evidence that there's anything at the bottom of the hole. A few bits and pieces that could well have been planted and a few hints here and there that may also have been fabricated.

"If there is a treasure on that Island, I'm willing to bet it is nowhere near that pit. The pit is a trap and a very clever one. I think those channels were designed to drown anyone in the pit once they had dug it down below sea level. Several men did die that way. Anyway, Geraint and I made several attempts at stopping the sea water from spilling into the pit before we gave up. More trouble than it was worth, if you ask me, and you did!"

Most of Candle's time, however, was spent in lessons. Silverwind continued to teach him new spells, most of which were really specialized applications or combinations of those spells Candle already knew. But the most time Silverwind spent with his apprentice involved a study of literature. Silverwind had bought over a dozen volumes of various sort of literature while they were in Merinne and he gave them to Candle one at a time, had the boy read them, and then would discuss them at length. This turned out to be an especially easy task, except for the fact that Silverwind had to read them first, for Candle loved stories, all stories, and even some of the drier pieces held his attention. The collection of poems slowed him down a bit, but once he got past the concept of poetry, he enjoyed that too.

Oceanvine continued to teach him basic wards. Candle was in some ways too quick a study and with Silverwind showing him new ways to use his earlier spells, he occasionally experimented with the wards Oceanvine had him working with. On one occasion he fortunately lost his concentration when Oceanvine suddenly screamed in fright. He had tried to combine the fire spell with a simple sheet ward and created a wall of fire. On a wooden ship, this was a dangerous experiment to put it mildly. After that she had him promise to consult her before trying something new.

She also continued his lessons in Maiyim's history. So far she had spent more time teaching him the history of places they were traveling to, but now she covered the history of their native Emmine Archipelago, although she did tell him what she knew of the Isle of Fire.

"Until last year, the Isle of Fire was governed as a democratic republic," she told him one afternoon while they sat on the foredeck.

"I remember," Candle nodded. "With a president and vice-president and a congress, all of whom are elected by the people who live there."

"Not all," Oceanvine corrected him. "The congress was bicameral..."

“Bi... what?” Candle interrupted Oceanvine’s lecture.

“Bicameral. It had two houses. Members of the House of Commons were elected. Senators were hereditary, that is they were born to the rank.”

“Makes sense,” Candle noted. Having grown up in a land governed by noblemen, the concept of an elected government had been difficult for him to accept. The Parliaments of Emmine and Granom were composed of Lords only, although the king of Emmine had recently proposed a House of Commons and after great resistance from the Lords, had decided to impose the new governmental system on his lands. “So did they ever have a king?”

“Originally they did, yes. There were half a dozen of them or so.”

“Why did that stop? Or should that be how did they start?” Candle asked.

Oceanvine smiled, “Two good questions. The Isle of Fire was settled first by two small groups; one of Granomen, and another of Orenta. They settled on different parts of the island and for some years were not even aware of each other. The Orenta founded Rjalkatyp, I forget the name of the Granomish city. It was abandoned centuries ago. Each group set up a government similar to to the ones of their homelands so the headman of the Granomen called himself king, although with only a few dozen settlers, it wasn’t much of a kingdom. The Orenta had about as much sense, with the men establishing themselves as senators. Hardly a distinction when everyone is a member of the senate. Well, they did appoint one of their own to act as First Speaker, but it was a job that rotated among them.

“Anyway, that’s how it started. Each year a few more colonists came to the island and eventually the two groups discovered each other.”

“That must have been exciting,” Candle opined, “considering how well Orenta get on with Granomen.”

“Surprisingly, there were never more than some minor frictions between the two groups. They say the island was jointly blessed by the Younger Gods and because of that blessing there has never been any inter-species war there. In fact the two groups merged to form a monarchy that ruled jointly with the Senate. Granomish nobles became senators and the king was king of all. When the sixth king died without an heir, it was decided not to choose a new king from among themselves. By that time human colonists had joined the mix as well, so they had a Senate that was made up of all three species of people.”

“But how did the Senate become the Congress?”

“Ah. Well at first anyone with enough money could buy a seat in the Senate. That’s not the way it is done anywhere else on Maiyim, of course, but I don’t think any of the original colonists were really nobles. Oh a few second sons of nobles, perhaps, most were even further removed from real titles, so for a while senatorial rank was a mark of how rich one was. After a while that stopped, and some of the senatorial families died out. There were a lot more people who weren’t senators by that time and they petitioned the Senate for representation. So it was in Rjalkatyp that the first House of Commons was founded and its members, called congressmen, are elected by popular vote. At the same time they introduced the position of His Democratic Majesty, the president,”

“And his sidekick, the vice-president,” Candle added.

“You’ve been spending too much time with Silverwind,” Oceanvine muttered sourly. “But yes, and his

sidekick, the Vice-President. One of the duties of the president is to promote citizens to the Senate as vacancies occur. It doesn't happen very often, but that way the number of senators is kept up to a constant twenty-seven."

"Or was," Candle corrected her. "Didn't that triumvirate we heard about kill most of the members of the government?"

"It looks that way," she told him. "The president and vice-president were killed outright in the coup. Many of the senators and congressmen were too, but a good number escaped by either taking refuge in the various embassies there and a few are unaccounted for, thought to be hiding out in the moors somewhere."

"From what Zakhar has told us it appears that one of the triumvirs is already out of the picture. That would be Senator Lavro. Maybe he is retired, or maybe his erstwhile partners killed him when he was no longer necessary. I understand he supplied the money before the coup. Right now the real power is being divided between General Hervasiv who controls the revolutionary army, whatever that is, and Vogt Andriy of Rjalkatyp who seems to head the civil side of the government. It was he who requested our help."

"Why are we helping him?" Candle asked. "Sounds like any problems he has, he brought on himself."

"Maybe. There's a lot about the situation I don't know yet, but the truth is we aren't really going because he asked. We're going because the demon who caused the plague may still be there."

"That's the same demon who hurt Silverwind so long ago, isn't it?"

"Yes it is, Candle," she replied. "And he isn't completely well now either. That's why we didn't want to bring you with us. We're going someplace that may be very dangerous and you're going to need to be very very careful. Do you understand?"

Candle nodded silently. He was about to say something when a voice called out from the crow's nest.

"Thar she blows! To the starboard bow!"

"What's going on?" Candle asked. Behind them, orders were being shouted to the crewmen to climb the rigging and prepare to furl the sails.

"I'm not sure," Oceanvine admitted, looking forward to her right. The she saw what the lookout had seen. There was a pod a breaching whales swimming on what might be a collision course with the *Isle of Marga*. "Look, Candle. Whales!"

"Those are tremendous! I didn't know fish got that big," he responded.

"They aren't fish," Oceanvine corrected him. "They're mammals and breathe air just like we do, but they spend their lives in the ocean. I wonder what kind they are?"

"Big ones," Candle replied. "How many kinds are there?"

"Quite a few. Some are larger than others and these are pretty big."

"What do they eat? Serps?"

“Stand by to strike the sails!” they heard the order. “Ready about! Hard alee!”

“Some might, but they seem to be divided into two groups. Some eat fish and others eat plankton or krill.” The ship was swinging around so that the wind was no longer filling the sails.

“Plankton?” Candle asked.

“Very small plants and animals that drift around in the ocean.” They heard the order to strike all sails.

“How small?”

“So small that you cannot see some of them without a microscope,” Oceanvine replied. With the sails furled, the ship was now gliding to nearly a halt, moving only as the wind pushed it, mostly sideways.

“And krill?”

“Equally small shrimp-like creatures,” Oceanvine replied

“Must have to eat an awful lot to feed something that size,” Candle told her. The tone of his voice told her he didn’t completely believe that was possible

“True,” Oceanvine replied, ignoring the disbelieving tone. “Yes, see their mouths?” she asked now that they were much closer to the whales, “Those things are baleen strainers, They strain the plankton out of the water so the whales can eat them. This type couldn’t eat a serp, or anything that large. I’m told that some will also eat small schooling fish like herring, but only whales with true teeth will eat a serp, squid or aother creatures that large.”

Soon enough the pod of whales went on its way. Then sails were unfurled once more and the *Isle of Marga* continued on her journey.

Three

Rjalkatyp’s harbor had a deep but narrow channel at its mouth. Once inside the harbor, ships had a wide almost circular area in which to maneuver, but the harbor master found it necessary to regulate the flow of nautical traffic in and out of the harbor. This was accomplished via a series of flags and by the requirement that a local pilot must accompany ships in and out of the harbor. Most other harbors allowed any mage acquainted with the craft of piloting to fill their requirements, but the mouth of Rjalkatyp was such a tight channel that only a local pilot could be trusted to assure safe passage.

When Captain Yakaw brought the *Isle of Marga* to rest outside the Harbor, the flag at the harbor’s mouth signaled that only out-going ships were being allowed to pass. In return Yakaw ordered a certain green and white pennon to be raised, requesting a pilot, who would arrive when the ship would be allowed to enter the harbor.

An hour later a pilot arrived in a small skiff, not entirely unlike the one Oceanvine had seen the Keesport pilot use. He was a middle-aged, somber-looking Granom who wore a blue and gold uniform that marked him as a sergeant in the local military. Oceanvine was tempted to ask him if he had been in the army before the coup, but kept the question to herself. It was something she’d be able to learn for herself

soon enough.

As the *Marga* was being moored to her dock, Silverwind sent a message on ahead to the Vogt's Office. He wasn't sure where that was, but suspected it might be the building that had served as the Presidential Mansion. The large edifice could be seen from the harbor, high up on one of the hills that overlooked Rjalkatyp. The building didn't look as though it sustained any major damage.

By the time they were ready to disembark a human man with blond hair arrived, dressed like a Granomish herald in a tabard bearing a device that Silverwind recognized as a variant on the old Isle of Fire arms. Evidently the Vogt had opted to add touches of a noble's court to his government.

"Marquess Silverwind?" the herald asked. "Lady Oceanvine?"

"Guilty," admitted the wizard. Oceanvine merely nodded.

"His Excellency, Vogt Andriy of Rjalkatyp regrets he can not meet with you and your party at the present but commends you all to Chief Rostik of the Rjalkatyp Department of Security and Justice. He will brief you all on the situation."

"Why can't the Vogt brief us himself?" Oceanvine asked sharply.

"That is not for me to say, Lady Oceanvine," the herald replied stiffly.

"Why? Doncha know?" Candle snapped. He wasn't sure why, but something about the herald annoyed him.

"Most Honorable Lord," the herald turned to Silverwind indignantly. "Are you going to allow this impudent boy to speak to a herald of the Vogt's court in such a manner?"

"No, I'm not," Silverwind replied. "Candle you were out of line. That question was mine to ask." Then he turned on the herald. "Why? Doncha know?"

The herald blanched and repeated that Chief Rostik would answer all their questions before hurrying off as quickly as his dignity would allow.

"I guess he didn't know at that," Silverwind shrugged. "Good call, Candle."

"You aren't gonna punish me?"

"No, that man made my hair hurt. Sounded like he had the same effect on you. I can't blame you really. Well, we obviously aren't getting the full red carpet treatment this time, are we? I just assumed the Vogt would send transportation. Well, no matter, but we didn't travel all that lightly. I'll have to arrange for some way to get our bags to where ever we're going to be staying."

"Leave them in your cabins, Silverwind" Captain Yakaw said, approaching them. "We'll be here for at least a week. They'll be safe until you can find a place ashore, and if you need the cabins tonight that will be fine too."

"Thank you, Captain. We'll do just that. Well, come on you two," he said to Oceanvine and Candle. "Let's go find the Chief of Police. Last time I was here, the station was about half a mile in that general direction."

“Hold on a minute,” Oceanvine said. “I have several copies of the counter-curse we sent everywhere else. Let me just grab them and put them in my bag.”

“Good idea,” Silverwind agreed.

There were no streets going directly in the direction they needed to go, but when they left the ship they headed uphill away from the docks. The neighborhood changed rapidly from a combination of ship chandleries, taverns and what Oceanvine still thought of as bawdy houses as they walked away from the harbor. Soon they were in an area where there was a wide variety of offices, shops, and inns of a somewhat higher class than those closer to the harbor.

There weren't many people walking about through the city once they got away from the docks. The streets were not completely empty but the number of pedestrians, wagons, and riding horses was definitely less than Silverwind would have expected. Then he realized that the plague had been active here longer than in Merinne. Naturally there would be more sick people here. All told he was more surprised that the streets were as orderly as they were. *I should have expected garbage in the streets and dead bodies. Well, maybe not, this is Rjalkatyp after all. Cleanliness is practically a religion here, but there ought to be quarantine signs everywhere. That's how Rjalkatypers would attempt to handle a plague.*

The buildings of the city were mostly brownish gray brick with roofs of blue-gray slate tile. The cobblestones and curbing stones were also a light gray and sidewalks were paved in the same slate as the roofs. There were spotty piles of snow in the shade everywhere. To the north Mount Rjal, the largest volcano on the Isle of Fire, overlooked the entire city. It was not unusual to find steam or smoke issuing gently from its peak, but today there was none and its snow-covered sides blended gently with the gray skies. The overall effect was to make Rjalkatyp appear to be an almost colorless city and what little color there was seemed to be pastel. Even the shop signs were dull colored.

“I hadn't heard the people here were so adverse to bright colors,” Oceanvine commented after the first few blocks.

“Adverse to bright colors?” Silverwind asked. “What makes you think that?”

“Look around you, Silverwind. Everything is gray.”

“Oh that,” he replied with a smile. “There's not a lot of choice in the local building materials. The stone is various shades of gray and the local clay makes gray bricks. The Isle of Fire isn't exactly known for its trackless forests, is it?”

“I haven't seen a tree since we got here,” Candle put in.

“There aren't a lot,” Silverwind told him. There are a couple of public parks with a few imported trees and the President used to sponsor a small forest on the East side of the island. But for the most part wood is a valuable commodity here and most of what is used here is imported from Bellinen and Granom. So you won't find any of it wasted on buildings and given the weather around these parts you wouldn't want to paint the masonry. By spring it would be all chipped and patchy, so gray is the external color of the city. Once we go inside some of these shops you'll see a difference. The people here have a fondness for murals, they aren't as bright as Orentan prints, but that's only for the best. Anything brighter than something an Orente would wear would only make your eyes bleed.”

“So they use very little wood here?” Oceanvine asked.

“Actually they use every splinter they can get and they request imports to be shipped in wooden crates just so they can get more, I doubt you’ll find a piece of wood here that hasn’t been used in some other form before its current use. Well, I guess the furnishings in the Presidential Mansion or whatever they call it these days, were probably made of virgin timber, but most furniture around here began life as a packing crate.”

“If there aren’t a lot of trees here, what do you find outside the city?” Candle asked. “Is it mostly farms like North Horalia?”

“No, the natural attractions of the Isle of Fire are moors and volcanos, with some rolling grassy hills in between just to make sure you can tell them apart from the rest of the land,” Silverwind replied with his usual sardonic humor. “Neither’s the sort of land you can make much of a living on. Moorland isn’t very fertile and mostly swampy.”

“Though the peat you can gather in some moors can be quite useful,” Oceanvine supplied.

“What’s it used for?” Candle asked.

“Fires,” she replied. “When dried, it makes a pretty good fuel.”

“Distilling over peat fires makes Isle of Fire spirits quite unique,” Silverwind added.

“So I’ve heard,” Oceanvine replied darkly. Like most mages she rarely drank alcoholic beverages and never to excess. Also she preferred the lighter drinks like hard cider to distilled spirits.

“What’s a volcano?” Candle asked suddenly.

“A mountain of fire,” Silverwind replied. “A crack in the ground from which melted rock flows forth, though some of the ones here emit tons of ash. Poisonous gasses too. Good places to stay away from if you can. There are quite a few on the island here. That’s why they call it the Isle of Fire.”

“Will we see any?” Candle asked, fascinated.

“If we have to leave the city, probably. Though there may not be much to see, Candle. It’s not like they erupt constantly. Some stay dormant for decades, and others just smoke a bit.”

“Silverwind, it just occurred to me,” Oceanvine interrupted. “Why are we going to a police station?”

“Hmm? Because the Vogt’s herald told us we were expected there. Oh, I see what you mean. We were called here to help with the plague, why should we be visiting the local constabulary?”

“Maybe the coroner’s office is part of the police force here?” Oceanvine suggested.

“No, I don’t think so,” the wizard replied. “At least it wasn’t last time I was here.”

“A lot has changed since then,” Oceanvine pointed out. “And I really want to know why the Vogt didn’t want to see us.”

“I imagine we’ll know soon,” Silverwind told her. “At least the police station is still in the same place.”

See?”

The building in front of them stood five stories high, two more than its neighbors, although it was made of the same brownish gray brick. Gas lights inside sea green lenses on either side of the front door seemed more colorful than the rest of the city all together, but were really there to mark the building as a police station. There was a long ramp that led up to the front door which was approximately three feet above street level.

“A ramp?” Oceanvine asked. “Why not a few stairs?”

“It’s customary here,” Silverwind explained. “Stairs are used between floors but ramps for front doors. Some claim it is because it’s easier for elderly and physically handicapped people to walk on a ramp, but if you check the history of the area you’ll find this has always been done at least since Rjalkatyp was founded.”

They entered the station to discover a wide room with large fireplaces on both sides. There were Rjalkatyp policemen at work at several desks. Some looked up as Silverwind, Oceanvine and Candle entered, but quickly went back to their own work. Silverwind led the way to a man behind what was obviously a reception desk. The markings on his dark blue uniform labeled him as a sergeant.

“Good afternoon, sergeant.” Silverwind began pleasantly. “We’ve been directed to Chief Rostik.”

“Right,” the desk sergeant replied. “Is he expecting you all?”

“The Vogt’s herald led us to believe so, but there’s always a chance he was mistaken. I am Wizard Silverwind and this is Master Oceanvine and my apprentice Candle. Now is the chief expecting us?”

“Damned if I know,” the sergeant muttered. “They don’t tell me anything. But I’ll find out. Please wait here.”

“Of course.”

The sergeant called over a much younger officer and told him to run upstairs to see if the chief would talk to Silverwind and company. The young man’s eyes bugged out a bit at Silverwind’s name, but he swallowed hard and ran out of the room as fast as he could without tripping over desks and people.

“Zeb’s a bit young, but he’s a good kid,” the sergeant commented as several others in the room yelled a complaint or two at Zeb as he went by. “Means well. I imagine he’s a bit overwhelmed at the moment, sir. You being who you are. Um, you are the same Silverwind as is in the books, aren’t you?”

“That is me,” Silverwind admitted. He decided not to try to deny the exploits depicted in those books.

The sergeant reached into his desk and pulled out a battered copy of *Silverwind in The Case of the Ancient Crown*. “Might I trouble you to sign this, sir?” he asked. “It’s for my daughter. She’s been so sick with the plague. Maybe this will make her feel better.”

“Of course,” Silverwind replied, taking the book and fumbling for a pen from the desk.

“We have a cure for the plague,” Oceanvine volunteered. “That’s part of why we’re here.”

“Really?” The sergeant asked. “How soon can you all start curing people?”

“As soon as we’ve spoken to the chief,” Silverwind replied. Having autographed the book, he handed it and the pen back to the sergeant. “After that we’ll talk to the local mages and they should be able to cure victims almost as quickly as they can get to them.”

“Gods bless you all!” The sergeant said fervently. Oceanvine thought she saw tears trying to form in his eyes. Before she could be certain, however, young Zeb had returned and offered to lead them to the chief’s office.

Chief of Police Rostik had a small office on the third floor. It was on the north side of the building and its single small window did very little to illuminate it. Instead there were two gas light sconces on the wall and an oil lamp on his cluttered desk. There were several certificates mounted on one wall.

Rostik rose to greet them as they entered the office. He was tall for a Granom, almost completely bald with just a fringe of gray hair around the sides and back of his head. He wore a simple police uniform, no different than the ones worn by the officers downstairs, save a pair of small round pins on the epaulets of his jacket that were embossed with the official seal of the City of Rjalkatyp, the insignia of his rank.

“Please come in,” he said to them as they stood at the door to his office. “Have a seat. Hmm, we seem to be short one. Zeb, please bring one for the boy. Thank you.” While Zeb rushed off to get a chair for Candle to sit in, Silverwind introduced his party to Rostik. Soon they were all seated around the chief’s desk.

“What puzzles me, sir,” Silverwind told him, “is why we were sent to you. The request from the Vogt was to come here and help with this plague you’ve been suffering from. When we arrived however, His, uh Excellency is it?” Rostik nodded. “Right. Anyway, he refused to see us.”

“Ah, yes,” Rostik replied with an embarrassed cough. “It is possible the Vogt may not even know you all are here. He’s been very sick for the last three months, nobody has been allowed to see him. Most likely his personal secretary sent you here in his name.”

“But why here?” Oceanvine asked. “Doesn’t your coroner have his own office?”

“He does, yes. And I would think it would have been even more appropriate to send you all to the Minister of Health, and I’ll be glad to give you a letter of introduction, although I doubt you’ll need one. However, there’s another reason His Excellency’s secretary sent you all here. Several in fact.

“The first one is related to the plague. The first known victim was one of my finest officers. Detective Lieutenant Amanser Amaniev; a good man with an outstanding record. Served in this department for twenty years until we found him. He was found comatose on the floor of a local tavern. Witnesses tell us he burst into the tap room and started screaming incoherently. He screamed his voice out and kept going until he finally collapsed. We don’t know how he got there or what caused him to go insane like that. We do know he left the department building earlier that day with his partner, an Orentan female mage called Mace. That was the last time anyone saw her. Amaniev was taken to the Hospital. He had a low fever, but no one thought much of that at the time.

It was a week or two later when his doctors and nurses started getting sick, and soon we had a full-blown plague on our hands. I understand it has spread to Granom and Bellinen as well?”

“And there have been reports from Emmine as well,” Silverwind added.

“Oh my Gods!”

“Not to worry, chief,” Silverwind assured him. “That problem we have a solution for. We worked out a cure while working on the disease in Bellinen. We’ll need to instruct your local mages and healers but it isn’t a complicated process, just an unusual one. They’ll manage and you’ll be free of the plague as quickly as we can visit all the survivors.”

“Excellent!” Rostik exclaimed, getting up from his desk. He walked around it and opened up the door to his office. “Get Ironblade up here,” he told his secretary, then closed the door and returned to his desk. “Master Ironblade is in charge of forensic magic here and one of the most experienced mages on the Isle of Fire. He’ll be a good man to start with on that. Now all this brings us to what I think is the main reason you all are here and it too may relate.

“Lieutenant Amaniev and Journeyman Mace were investigating a series of missing persons cases when all this happened. Since then more people have gone missing and those cases are still open.”

“You must have assigned other officers to that matter, haven’t you?” Oceanvine asked.

“Yes, of course, but none of them have Amanser’s investigative abilities. There has been no progress for months. At the moment I have two of Amanser’s former partners working on it. I’ll have them report what they know to you.”

“Oh? Are we taking the case?” Silverwind asked.

“I, uh, had hoped... Sorry. I should have asked first, shouldn’t I?”

“That’s all right. We’ll talk to your people and consider the matter. We are here, after all, and the matter we were called for will be taken care of quite shortly so there really isn’t any reason we cannot help you.” But Silverwind’s point had been made clearly enough; the choice of whether he would work was his to make, not the chief’s.

A knock on the door interrupted them. The door opened to reveal a tall and thin red-haired human man. Unlike most of the people working in the police department, he wore a dark suit of the fashion customary in Granom..

“Ah, Master Ironblade,” Rostik greeted him. Please come in and meet Wizard Silverwind, Master Oceanvine and Apprentice, oh sorry, I’ve forgotten your name,” he apologized to Candle.

“Candle,” the boy replied. “Pleased to meet you, sir.” He got out of his chair and offered it to Ironblade, who waved him back into the seat.

“Likewise, lad,” Ironblade replied urbanely. “And you as well, Wizard, Master,” he continued, shaking their hands in turn. “To what do we owe the honor of your company?”

“His Excellency, requested their assistance with the plague, but it appears they already have a cure for us,” Rostik explained.

“Praise the Gods!” Ironblade swore fervently. “It must be a difficult technique indeed if it requires a wizard!”

“Not at all,” Silverwind replied. “My apprentice could perform the necessary spell.”

“I could?” Candle asked.

“Most likely,” Silverwind assured him. “We never taught it to you because it wasn’t necessary. You had your other studies and by the time we might have used you, the problem was solved.” Silverwind didn’t mention that Candle was already learning some theory and techniques that were not normally apprentice level magic. Not that he had learned everything an apprentice should know. Not yet, but he was a prodigy and Silverwind had encouraged him to learn advanced techniques that represented the natural progression from what he already knew. The end result would be that by the time he attended University he would be ahead of most of his class even though he had a later start than almost all of them.

Oceanvine reached into her bag. “I have the instructions right here,” she told them. She pulled out the sheets and handed one to Master Ironblade. “What do you think?”

“Quite unusual,” he commented after a minute of perusing the counter-curse, “but you are correct, any journeyman should be able to administer this if it works. You’ve tested it?”

“We administered it to dozens of victims, including ourselves,” Silverwind told him. “The results are immediate, although weaker patients need longer recovery times.”

“And this was your invention, Silverwind?” Ironblade asked.

“It was a cooperative effort,” Silverwind replied modestly. “Much of the preliminary work was by Master Oceanvine as well as the Orentan mages Wizard Compass, Master Hyssop and Journeyman Airblossom. Airblossom contributed more than anyone I think. She’ll deserve the mastership she gets for her efforts. We all worked on the final version of the spell.”

“But Silverwind wrote the basic spell and we didn’t change very much of it in the finalization,” Oceanvine added.

“May I have the rest of the copies?” Ironblade requested. “I’ll send them to the Department of Health so the mages there can get right to work.” Oceanvine nodded and handed the remaining sheets to Ironblade. He stepped to the door, opened it, said a few words to Rostik’s secretary and handed her the sheets. “They’ll be there in a few minutes,” He told them, when he stepped back into the room.

“I’d like it if Oceanvine and I could discuss the spell with the mages who will be casting it, and maybe demonstrate it a few times,” Silverwind said.

“You all can go over to Health yourselves in a few minutes,” Rostik told him. “I am also trying to convince them to help us with the missing persons case Amaniev was working on when all this started,” he explained to Ironblade.

“Good!” Ironblade exclaimed. “I’ve been trying to get more mages in on this case for months.”

“Yes, yes,” Rostik sighed tiredly, “I know. But all the other mages were on loan to Health and you were too busy to put aside all your other projects.”

“I’m not so certain of them. I said all along there were implications of magic involved with those missing persons and after seeing that curative spell, I’m sure it relates to the plague.”

“In what way?” Oceanvine asked.

“I’ve found spell traces in some of the locations where the missing were last known to be and that spell of yours has parts that might work well as a counter to some of those traces.”

“I’m hearing a lot of “mights” and “somes” in there,” Rostik noted. “Can’t you be more exact?”

“Not with what little we know even after over a year,” Ironblade responded.

The discussion had all the earmarks of an old and well-worn argument, so Silverwind cut in, “Perhaps we could hold a meeting on this subject in the morning.”

“That seems to be your usual method,” Oceanvine noted.

“It is,” Silverwind agreed. “When working with a team, I like to hold meetings first thing in the morning when everyone is fresh. Some people like evening meetings, but I get my best work done late at night.”

“Yes, I’ve noticed that too,” she commented dryly.

“I was sure you had,” he replied just as dryly. Candle just rolled his eyes; he’d seen this act before.

“A meeting tomorrow morning would be a good idea,” Ironblade agreed. “As it happens Gastao and Afonso are out of the building at the moment anyway. They’re the officers who have been pursuing this case most recently. For now, however, why don’t we walk over to the Health Department building?”

The building that housed the Rjalkatyp Department of Health was only a few blocks away from the Department of Security and Justice. While built of the same materials as the rest of the city this building had a lighter, airier look to it than most of the others. Most buildings in Rjalkatyp were blocky, cubes and rectangular solids built of the ubiquitous brownish gray brick with steeply-pitched slate roofs on top. The Department of Health’s building was brick, but with a white plaster-covered colonnade all around the perimeter. The colonnade was two stories high with another two floors above them. An architectural artist had taken the bricks of the upper floors and created a masterpiece. The bricks were the same brownish gray, but had not been laid in a common stretcher bond pattern or with snap headers or with stripes made by some bricks being laid with the long edge facing and some with the short ends facing. The artist who designed this had used the bricks to create a marvelous set of textures all over the building and in front to frame a majestic mosaic of the arms of the Isle of Fire.

Master Ironblade was recognized as soon as he entered the building. Several men and women looked up and smiled or waved a greeting at him. He started to lead his guests toward the reception desk, but was headed off by several happy people.

“Ironblade! This is fantastic!” a tall Orente called from the head of the pack that quickly surrounded them. He was holding one of the sheets with the counter-curse. “Where ever did this come from? Did you write this?” Several of the others voiced similar questions.

Ironblade raised his hands for silence and while he didn’t quite get it, it got quiet enough for him to reply, “Not I, but I have the honor of presenting the Wizard Silverwind, Master Oceanvine and their apprentice, Candle, from Emmine, by way of Bellinen.”

“By way of Granom,” Candle muttered quietly. Oceanvine heard him but doubted anyone else had. There was a collective gasp of surprise as Ironblade made his introduction. From the whispering and pointing, Oceanvine realized that she was once again surrounded by fans of the penny-dreadfuls about Silverwind.

One by one, Ironblade introduced the various people who surrounded them. Nearly all of them were mages, mostly journeymen and some apprentices but the Orente who had first greeted them was Master Eyesplice, Chief Medical Mage for the Department of Health.

“As it happens we were just coming to see you, Eyesplice,” Ironblade told him. “Silverwind felt it would be best if he and Oceanvine were to demonstrate this new spell for you and your staff before you all went out and started teaching it to the rest of our healers.”

“It’s not strictly necessary,” Silverwind told him. “We’ve sent this spell all over the world in written form, but as far as we can tell The Isle of Fire is the source of the disease and I want to be extra careful here.”

“No need to worry,” Eyesplice assured him. “We’ll be honored to be trained in this by you and Master Oceanvine. And we have a clinic just downstairs. I’m sure there will be some plague sufferers there. There almost always are,” he added ruefully.

Word had gotten around the health department so the patients in the clinic were outnumbered that afternoon by healing mages and bureaucrats at least for the first half hour or so. After the novelty had worn off, the bureaucrats returned to their desks and many healers left to visit quarantine houses, but the clinic was soon crowded again as the word started going around that there was a cure for the plague and those suffering but still mobile started coming in eagerly.

It was just after sunset when Ironblade noticed that Silverwind and Oceanvine were still curing patients. Even Candle had learned the spell and, under supervision, had cured several people, although most of the time he was running errands around the clinic. However, Ironblade remembered that Silverwind and his people had just arrived on the morning tide so it had been a very long day for them.

“Silverwind,” Ironblade started, “You look tired. Perhaps you all should call it a day. The mages here can carry on. Looks like they’ll be at it all night anyway.”

“You may have a point,” Silverwind replied with a forced grin. “A bit of sleep and we’ll be ready for tomorrow morning’s meeting.”

“So where are you all staying while you’re in town?” Ironblade asked. “I can have a carriage sent to pick you all up.”

“Well, tonight we’ll be on board the *Isle of Marga*. I thought we’d have time to find a suite this afternoon, but I guess that wasn’t to be.”

“What? Didn’t the Vogt’s people arrange a place? What the hell is going on up on the Hill? So much for the fabled hospitality of Rjalkatyp. I’d invite you all to stay with me but I’ve only a small apartment, but I will see to making sure you all have a place by tomorrow night.”

“Thank you,” Silverwind said a bit tiredly. “Oceanvine?” The pretty blond mage was just finishing up with a patient. “Are you ready to go back to the ship for the night?”

“If we can stop on the way for dinner, yes,” she replied. “I’m sure Candle is hungry too.”

“I’m sure he is,” Silverwind agreed. “I think I saw him over near the door a little while ago. Let’s collect him and start heading back. Ironblade, we’ll see you again in the morning.”

Four

They found a pleasant inn on their way back to the dock. The find was almost accidental. The door to the inn was unremarkable, nor was there a sign outside to attract customers. In fact all there was to point out that the plain green door was to an inn was a small scrap of paper with a menu on it tacked up next to it. Even so, they might have missed it if Candle hadn’t pointed it out as two men were leaving.

Inside were a dozen round candle-lit tables, a large fireplace with a warm fire blazing away inside, white plaster walls with many framed drawings and paintings, which turned out to be for sale, and an immaculate wood plank floor. Oceanvine fell in love with the place immediately and even Silverwind admitted it had a nice friendly feel to it.

The food was good, the prices were low and the other diners were friendly and welcoming. Silverwind realized the inn they had fortuitously stumbled into catered to the local populace rather than trying to attract transients like sailors and tourists. It was as much a clubhouse as a restaurant quite similar to the pubs in Granom. The regular clientele did not keep to themselves and were quick to bring Silverwind, Oceanvine and Candle into their discussions. The topic of conversation tonight was exclusively preoccupied by the story that a cure for the plague was being administered all over town. This was considered cause for celebration and one Granomish gentleman bought a bottle of fine wine for Silverwind and Oceanvine. Oceanvine thought at first that the man did so because he realized that they had brought the cure to the island, but soon discovered that he had done so because they hadn’t ordered any and thought perhaps that they had been unable to afford one and didn’t want anyone unable to join in the celebration.

It was inevitable that someone would ask their names and when the truth was known, the celebration became even more buoyant than before with everyone wanting to buy them drinks and various appetizers native to the Isle of Fire. It was also inevitable that Silverwind would be talked into showing off. He chose to perform his favorite party trick; throwing tiny balls of fire into an open wine bottle at the far end of the room while blindfolded. As Oceanvine explained quietly to Candle, it was not really a difficult thing to do as the bottle was part of the spell and therefore the balls of fire would find their target without Silverwind being able to see it. The spectators, of course, didn’t know that and were betting over how many times in a row Silverwind could hit his target.

The crowd was counting together as Silverwind made impressive although totally unnecessary gestures as he threw each fireball, “Eighty-one! Eighty-two! Eighty-three! Eighty-four! Eighty-f...”

On the eighty-fifth attempt Silverwind stopped in mid-gesture and instead slowly put his hands on his head. After a minute he slipped off the blindfold he was wearing and tiredly said, “Sorry, I think that’s it for tonight” There was a murmur of sorrow from the crowd so he continued, “It’s been a very long day for us. I’m sure you understand.” And most of the people there nodded agreement although it was obvious they would rather the wizard continue the show. “Perhaps another time, real soon,” he added. “Goodnight, all!” and with many farewells he, Oceanvine and Candle made their way back to the street.

“What’s wrong?” Oceanvine asked as soon as they were outside where their new friends could not hear

them.

“Nothing,” Silverwind lied. “I’m just a bit tired.”

“The hell you are!” she retorted. “I know you better than that, dear. Now fess up! What’s wrong?”

They walked a full block before he answered, “The nightmares are back.”

“I thought they were back in Merinne.”

“In my sleep and after a lot of magical exertion, yes. But not from a little spell like the fireballs.”

“Well, you’ve been doing lot of magic today,” Oceanvine pointed out. “How did you feel while you were curing the plague?”

There was another very long pause. “Headache mostly but there were a few troubling visions. Now I’m having the aches and visions even when we just walk. Well, maybe you’re right and I’ve just done too much today. This isn’t as bad as it used to be. I can take it.”

Oceanvine didn’t reply but she wasn’t convinced either. They were soon back at the *Isle of Marga* and wasted no time going to sleep.

Oceanvine awoke four hours later when Silverwind screamed.

“What happened?” she asked, sitting up quickly and looking at him. He didn’t respond. “Silverwind?” She looked at him; saw his eyes were open and his breathing was ragged. “What’s wrong?” she asked, then it came to her. “The nightmares?”

Wordlessly, he nodded. She waited a couple minutes for him to recover. Before he did, however, there was a knocking at the door.

“Silverwind?” Candle called. He sounded scared. “Oceanvine?” Oceanvine got up and let him in. “What’s happening?”

“Just a bad dream,” Oceanvine told him. She did not think this was the time to explain Silverwind’s demon-spawned nightmares.

“Worse than most,” the boy commented. “Terrible!” Then she noticed how pale Candle was looking.

“Candle, did you just have a nightmare?”

“It was very strange, more like I was watching Silverwind’s nightmare,” he replied.

“Silverwind, is that possible?” Oceanvine asked, forgetting his condition.

“Through the apprenticeship spell, perhaps,” Silverwind replied almost normally. There was a slight tell-tale rasp to his voice that disappeared when he continued. “We are bound by the spell and some of

the peripheral effects of the nightmare may have seeped through the spell's string between us. Candle, how do you feel?"

"Okay," Candle replied. "Just..." Words failed him.

"Just a little shaken?" Silverwind asked. Candle nodded. "Any pain, a headache, perhaps?"

"No."

"Really?" Oceanvine asked, concerned.

"Really, I'm fine," Candle told her. He was already looking better as well.

"All right. Candle, I know it's late but could you go to the galley? Maybe Kenya is still there, or there early. I don't even know what time it is, but if he is, could you ask him to make a pot of coffee, please?"

"I will," Candle agreed and ran off to the galley.

"And you?" Oceanvine asked.

"And I what?" Silverwind evaded.

"How are you feeling?"

"I'll get by," he told her simply.

She wasn't fooled. "That bad was it?"

"I've had worse."

"Followed by a two year hermitage," she pointed out. "Silverwind, tell me!"

"No, really," he started but was brought up short by her expression. If she was a dragon he would be a flash-fried wizard by now. "Oh well. This was pretty bad. About as nasty a bout as I've ever had, but as we agreed earlier, it was a very rough day. One bad night doesn't put me out of action. I could do with some of those pain pills the doctor in Querna gave us for Candle when he was sick, though. Might have helped the headache."

"We still have some," Oceanvine told him.

"We do? Where?"

"In my luggage," she replied, getting up. "Now if I can just remember which trunk," she muttered. "I think this is it. He gave us quite a few and it seemed like such a waste to throw the rest away. Now that I think of it, I wonder why I didn't think of these while we were sick in Bellinen."

"Old habits, I guess," ventured Silverwind with a shrug.

"Probably," she agreed. "Ah! Here it is." She pulled a small brown glass bottle out of the trunk. "I believe the doctor prescribed one every four hours as needed."

Silverwind took the bottle and spilled a pill out into his hand. “Do we have anything to take it with?”

“The coffee, when Candle comes back with it?” Oceanvine suggested, “or you could get some water in the galley.”

Candle arrived a few minutes later with a large mug of coffee and when it had cooled a bit, Silverwind used it to swallow the pill. After he had taken it, he suggested they all try to get a bit more sleep.

“Are you sure you can sleep with all that coffee in you?” Oceanvine asked.

“Coffee almost never keeps me up,” he replied confidently. “This headache might until the pill starts to work, but the coffee, never!”

They woke up again a few hours later when knocking came at the door again.

“Now what?” Oceanvine muttered, then louder, “Who is it?”

“Me,” came Candle’s reply. “Our ride is here.”

“Our ride?” Oceanvine and Silverwind asked together, but they got up and dressed as quickly as they could.

When they got up on deck they found a formal black carriage on the dock waiting for them with the arms of Rjalkatyp emblazoned on its doors.

“Ironblade did say he’d send a carriage,” Oceanvine reminded the wizard.

“So he did,” Silverwind replied dryly. “Well, it beats walking. Let’s go.”

“What about breakfast?” Candle asked.

Oceanvine didn’t have any other answer for him aside from assurances he wouldn’t starve before his next meal. She reflected that for a boy who little more than a year earlier counted himself lucky to eat more than once a day, he certainly took meals for granted now. Of course he was also a growing child and had gained several inches since they first found him scrounging around their possessions. He was roughly as tall as she was and likely to get taller than Silverwind, who was somewhat taller than the average man.

Not too long after, the carriage rolled up to the front door of the Department of Security and Justice. Once inside most of the officers present crowded around them offering their thanks and asking for autographs. The desk sergeant for whose daughter Silverwind had signed one of the penny-dreadfuls, was part of the crowd. He couldn’t find the words, but the tears streaming down his face spoke volumes.

Once they worked their way clear of the welcoming crowd, young Zeb led them to a meeting room at the back of the first floor. Inside they found Master Ironblade waiting for them with two other officers at a long table.

“May I present Detective Sergeants Gastao Villenov and Afonso Boris?” Ironblade introduced the other two. Gastao was a short, stocky Granom with blond hair while Afonso was a tall and thin dark-haired but balding human. “They have been working on the missing person’s case for a few weeks now and have both partnered with Lieutenant Amaniev, although on other cases, of course. “

Just then the door opened and several men came in with trays of food and drink. "I took the liberty of having breakfast brought in," Ironblade explained. "I thought there was a chance you all might not have a chance to break your fast before you got here."

"Good assumption," Silverwind replied with a smile. "We were asleep when the carriage arrived. That was a bit late even for me." They all helped themselves and very little else was accomplished until they were finished. Over coffee and tea Silverwind brought them back to business, "So tell me about this case."

"It began over a year ago," Ironblade started, "with the disappearance of a traveling merchant. He left Rjalkatyp for a circuit of the other towns and cities around the island. He never reached his first stop."

"Not that we noticed that right away," Alfonso added.

"Oh we had the usual missing person's report from his family," Gastao put in, "but it was an isolated incident at that point."

"Right," Ironblade agreed, with a glance at the two sergeants that was clearly a message to let him tell the story. "In fact it wasn't until four other men and women went missing that we started to notice that these might be connected in some way. After those initial victims all the missing persons were children for a while and we were not as quick to notice a connection between their cases and those of the adults as we might have been. In all, so far fifteen men, eight women and seven children are missing and we have made no real progress toward finding out what might have happened to them.

The closest we came to progress was a few months ago when Amanser Amaniev was partnered with Journeyman Mace, a young Orentan mage. It was Mace who detected a magical influence behind the missing persons; spell traces at or near their last known locations."

"What sort of spell traces?" Oceanvine asked.

Ironblade looked uncomfortable and was silent for what seemed like an eternity before answering. "Very well, perhaps I shouldn't have held this back for so long, but Mace was the only mage to serve on this case and I couldn't get Chief Rostik to assign another to it after the plague broke out. All our departmental mages were on loan to Health at least part of the time and the rest of the time we were needed here on more immediate problems.

"You all are aware of the Bond of Aritos of course," he continued. Silverwind, Oceanvine and Candle all nodded agreement. That Candle knew, shocked Ironblade. "Even you lad?"

"Candle was with me when we last encountered a use of that sign," Silverwind explained.

"I've never actually seen it though," Candle told Ironblade.

"As well you haven't, lad. I'm not sure anyone below a master mage can handle it even in its least malevolent aspect. Whatever that might be," he added.

"I was still a journeywoman at that time," Oceanvine noted.

"But you were more than ready for your masters' exam. You may recall I told you that repeatedly," Silverwind told her.

“So you did. And yes,” she turned to Ironblade, “it is an insidiously complicated curse ingredient.”

“Indeed,” Ironblade agreed. “And just when was this?”

Silverwind eyes suddenly widened. “About the same time you started losing people here. Interesting. Could the events in North Horalia have been a diversion of sorts?”

“Diversion?” Oceanvine asked, “That was a pretty devious diversion if it was and I thought you said that was probably the Demon Pohn, and this disease was associated with Arithan.”

“Yes, but who’s to say Pohn and Arithan weren’t working in concert. There aren’t many mages who can defeat a demon, maybe none of us can do it alone. In North Horalia we not only had the three of us but Wizard Meadow as well. Two attacks in widely separated parts of the world? Could be one of them might be successful that way. And that whole situation with Hiram and Pohn always did seem a bit clumsy to me.”

“Why didn’t you say so earlier?” Oceanvine asked.

“None of us are demon experts, dear. It could be that Arithan is much more subtle than Pohn. They are the only two demons I’ve ever come face-to-face with; not much basis for comparison.”

“It could also be that the only coordination on the part of both demons was in timing,” Ironblade noted. “Or there might have been no coordination involved at all, just coincidence.”

“Nor does it really matter,” Silverwind added. “Let’s move on.”

“Wait a minim!” Gastao said suddenly.

“Yeah,” agreed Alfonso. “Do you all really expect us to believe in demons?” The two looked at each other and laughed at the thought.

“As a matter of fact,” Ironblade replied coolly, “yes, that is exactly what we expect you two to believe. I have kept this to myself because I thought it would have caused needless panic if it got out. You two are a little too young to remember the Great Fire clearly, but any mage can tell you all that it had only a peripheral attachment to the eruption of Mount Rjal that happened that night. Both events were caused by a demon. Many older citizens saw the demon that night and Silverwind here fought that demon to a standstill.”

“You saw that yourself, did you?” Gastao asked skeptically.

“I was at the University in Querna at the time, standing for my Master rank, but old Master Sundial told me all about it when I returned. It is something all master mages of the Isle of Fire know. We know there may come a time when we’ll have to band together. The demon was defeated, but not banished.”

“And you think he’s back now?” Alfonso asked, obviously not convinced, but no longer as sure of his disbelief.

“It is a possibility. The Bond of Aritos we were discussing is a mystic sign almost exclusively associated with demonic activity. Mace’s reports involved numerous spell traces that when put together formed the shape of a partial form of the Bond.”

“Partial?” Gastao asked. “What good is part of a sign? Wouldn’t that change its meaning?”

“The problem here is that we were dealing only with the traces of spells. Most such traces decay rapidly. We were lucky to find anything. I correlated the data in Mace’s reports. She drew out the portions of the symbol she detected and I was able to put them together. What formed was close enough to the complete Bond of Aritos that it could not have been anything else.”

“But you say that there’s a chance this so-called Bond of Aritos might not be associated with demonic activity?” Afonso asked.

“In my experience,” Silverwind replied before Ironblade could, “every instance in which the Bond has appeared has turned out to involve one demon or another.”

“And Aritos, the evil God is behind all of this?” Gastao asked, with a nervous chuckle.

“Probably not,” Silverwind told him. “The sign may have been named erroneously. I have a colleague who claims to have met Aritos. He says the God has been very misunderstood, but that’s besides the fact that demons are indeed evil and it’s a demon that we’re dealing with here.”

“Is it Arithan again?” Ironblade asked.

“I have reason to believe so, yes.”

Silverwind was about to say more but the door opened and a Granomish woman entered the room. Like most of her species she was short and broadly built. She wore her dark brown hair very long in the Orentan style. Oceanvine found it intriguing as the only Granomish women she knew of who emulated the Orenta were prostitutes. Then it occurred to her that such prejudices might not be as pronounced on the Isle of Fire.

“Sorry, I’m late,” the newcomer said in a deep, husky voice. “I was forced to take a detour by way of the Hill.” She didn’t sound particularly happy about that.

“Quite all right,” Ironblade told her. “You did say you might be and haven’t missed anything you didn’t already know. Wizard Silverwind, Master Oceanvine and Apprentice Candle, this is Journeyman Blizzard. Blizzard is my assistant here in the department.”

They murmured polite greetings to one another as Blizzard helped herself to a cup of the tea then sat down next to Ironblade.

“I hope you all won’t mind, but I’m assigning Blizzard to this case. I’m going to be very busy and I do want one of our own mages working with you all.”

“That is quite acceptable,” Silverwind assured him. “Jobs like this always go better when I can work with local people who already know the area. And I must admit that a lot has changed since the last time I was here.”

“Much has changed since this time last year,” Ironblade replied darkly.

“Ah yes, the recent coup,” Silverwind commented.

“The Triumvirate called it a revolution,” Blizzard said tonelessly, her eyes flickering quickly toward Gastao and Afonso and back again.

“Yes? I’m sure we would all like to hear more about that at another time,” Silverwind suggested, catching on to the visual cues. This was obviously not a conversation for mixed company.

“Have you looked for patterns in all the disappearances?” Oceanvine asked. “Are there similarities in the locations the people went missing in? Anything?”

“We have mapped all the places the victims were last known to be, but there doesn’t seem to be much of a pattern. Most went missing within Rjalkatyp proper and all disappeared within twenty miles of the city.”

“So the locations don’t form a Bond of Aritos or some other sign?”

“No,” Blizzard replied with wonder in her voice. “What an extraordinary notion! I’d have never thought of that, but I’m sure we’d have noticed it if that particular pattern appeared. As for the rest of your question, we haven’t discerned any clear patterns aside from the fact that roughly half the victims were unmarried. Do you think that might be significant?”

“Could be, might not though,” Oceanvine shrugged.

“Silverwind,” Ironblade broke in. “since you all have been called in to handle this, perhaps I should turn this meeting over to you. How can we help you?”

“Hmm,” Silverwind muttered to stall for time as he thought. “For now I believe we can use more briefing. Let’s start with Sergeants Afonso and Gastao. Gentlemen, you have been the men on the street. How long have you been on the case and what have you learned?”

The two sergeants spoke about their investigations at length but didn’t add much to Silverwind’s understanding of the case.

“All right,” he said at last. “Sergeants, please continue your investigations just as you have so far. We will endeavor to bring you up to speed with the magical component of the case in the next few meetings, but until I’m up to speed myself, I don’t know what is significant and what isn’t and there’s no need to hamper you with useless knowledge.” The two men nodded. “Blizzard I’d like you to stay here with Oceanvine, Candle and me for a bit and give us the details of what you know.”

“Silverwind,” Ironblade cut in, “I don’t mean to question your judgement, but do you think it’s a good idea to bring an apprentice into this matter? The Bond of Aritos is too strong and subtle for most mages of any level. It is mortally dangerous for an apprentice.”

Oceanvine glanced at Candle. The lad was holding his breath in anticipation.

“It is precisely because this is so dangerous that I want to keep Candle with me,” Silverwind replied, and Candle stopped holding his breath with a great whoosh.

“That’s your choice to make,” Ironblade admitted. “not one I’d have made, or maybe I would have. His being near would make it easier to protect him too, wouldn’t it?”

“That occurred to me too,” Silverwind admitted. “But I also know that Candle will pull his own weight.

He was immense help in Querna some months ago. I imagine he'll be even more help here. Right Candle?"

Candle nodded enthusiastically.

"Excellent," Silverwind continued. "Gentlefolk, thank you for coming. Let's meet again tomorrow morning."

Five

"I'll need to get to my office as well, Silverwind," Ironblade said as Sergeants Afonso and Gastao left the room. "Unless you need me that is. But I think Blizzard here knows everything I do about this case"

"I wouldn't mind if you chose to keep a hand in this case," Silverwind began, "but I understand this isn't your only concern."

"Well, you know where to find me at need. By the way, as promised I am arranging for a suite for you all in a nearby hotel. Should I have your luggage delivered there?"

"That would be kind of you," Silverwind replied. "Thank you." Ironblade nodded and closed the door behind him.

"Most of my notes on this case are in my office," Blizzard told them a moment later, "but it's a very small office, and there's not enough room for all four of us. Should I go get them?"

"Perhaps," Silverwind replied. "I am particularly interested in the notes on the spell traces you found." She nodded and hurried out of the room. "Good. Now while she's gone, Oceanvine, how far along have you brought Candle in his study of wards?"

"Just basic stuff so far," Oceanvine reported. "Simple curtain wards without much power behind them. Candle, how do you think you're doing with them?"

"Okay," the boy replied.

"Are they hard for you to maintain even when you aren't concentrating on them?"

"No, I can even keep one up in my sleep. I've been practicing."

"You have? I didn't tell you to do that," Oceanvine said, surprised he had tried to do that without being told. Maintaining a ward, even a simple one in his sleep was not an easy task.

"Once again Candle has intuitively guessed the next lesson," Silverwind chuckled. "Excellent! That talent of yours may eventually get you into trouble, Candle, but for now I'm delighted. Have you experimented with differently shaped wards?"

"You can do that?" Candle asked. The notion had never occurred to him.

"He will now," Oceanvine laughed.

“Good. Work with him on that. Also work on making them as powerful as he can make them, but be careful on where you put them. And when you’re satisfied with his progress there, work on wards that act as triggers for other spells, wards within wards and any other complication you can think up, even those alternating current wards you invented if he can handle them.”

“Silverwind, that magic is way above apprentice level. Dangerous and he could get in trouble using such spells without supervision.”

“Then we’ll have to supervise him, dear,” Silverwind replied gently. “If Arithan is out there, apprentice level magic isn’t likely to do any good either in defeating him or for Candle to defend himself. Candle? How would you like to learn that trick I did last night with the fireballs?”

“Looked like fun,” Candle said, grinning.

“It is,” Silverwind told him. “Along with the fun we’re also going to need to improve your concentration skills.”

“He’s no slouch even now,” Oceanvine admitted. Candle was astonished. Until now he thought his ability to concentrate was minimal. For Oceanvine to say he was pretty good... Oceanvine said that! Then he must be pretty good. Unlike Silverwind she only complimented him if he was exceptional.

Oceanvine continued, “He’s not in your class nor even mine, but he’s young and inexperienced. For a one year apprentice he’s exceptional, however.”

“There are some glaring holes in his training though. Mental shields, for example. We haven’t even touched on those.”

“What apprentice usually needs such a tool?” Oceanvine asked.

“True. Well, I think Candle will. Will you work on that with him? It should go hand-in-hand with ward training.”

“I know some exercises that can be used both ways, yes,” Oceanvine agreed. “What will you be teaching him?”

“Along with doubling up on the mental disciplines, some basic physics and chemistry.”

“You are aware of the Elistan proverb concerning ‘Interesting Times?’” Oceanvine asked, but didn’t wait for a response, “Just make sure you also teach him why it’s good to only mix some chemicals at a great distance, or why it may not be good at all as it may happen. Candle, if you can swallow all we’re talking about, you’ll be ready for University by the time we get back to Renton.” She paused and reconsidered, “Actually, if you can really absorb it all they may as well just hand you a degree. It will save them the aggravation of having you show them up. Professors hate that.”

“You think I can learn that much?” Candle asked, a far away look in his eye.

“Don’t worry, lad,” Silverwind assured him. “We will still have a long way to go in the liberal arts, but that will have to wait until we finish up here. Too bad, though. Some of my most innovative spells have come from classic literature. Well, that can’t be helped.”

“And inventing spells isn’t the sort of thing you ought to be doing at this stage anyway. Remember that

little mistake with the water in Querna?" Oceanvine pointed out to Candle.

Candle grinned. In retrospect it was funny although at the time he just wanted something to drink. "I was a bit out of it at the time," he retorted, dryly.

"Actually spell invention may be exactly what he needs to do," Silverwind told them, "being able to take elements of what he knows and put them together in new combinations may be essential." Oceanvine's eyes widened with alarm, this was much more than ought to be expected of any apprentice no matter how talented. "However, Candle, while I may want you to be able to do such a thing, it isn't something I want you experimenting with. Before you try anything new, even if it seems like a logical extension to what we've already taught you, please talk it over with one of us first. Understand?" Candle nodded.

"Good advice," Blizzard said from the doorway. "Oh! Am I interrupting something?"

"No, not really," Silverwind replied lightly. "We were just giving Candle an overview of his next few lessons."

"Must have been some pretty tricky stuff if you had to warn him that strongly, or," she noted with consideration, "has he had a record of over-reaching himself, I mean, if I'm not over-reaching myself by asking."

"Actually Candle has been an excellent student so far," Oceanvine told her. "But we're about to start him on some advanced techniques and felt caution should be stressed."

"I understand. If I can be of some help there, I'm fairly strong on forensic diagnostic spells, if I do say so myself and most of those are, at least, not dangerous."

"Not a bad idea," Silverwind agreed. "well, I suppose we ought to get to know each other better as we'll be working together for a while. And you didn't even know us when you first walked in today."

"Well," Blizzard admitted, "I knew who the three of you were when I walked in, of course. I was among those at the Department of Health yesterday, but we were all so busy, it didn't seem the time to introduce myself."

"It didn't seem to stop anyone else," Oceanvine noted. "I think I signed as many autographs as I cured patients."

"Do you enjoy that? Signing autographs, I mean."

"The novelty didn't take long to wear off," Oceanvine admitted, "but I don't mind it as much as I would have thought. It's just something that's happened a few times. Eventually we'll be able to go home and I'm sure I'll have the opportunity to forget how to sign my name. Of course I'm not the celebrity Silverwind is. I'm just the sidekick in the book."

"Books," Blizzard corrected her.

"Excuse me?"

"Books. Plural. The second one with you in it arrived here over a week ago. I must say Lord Astil does not seem to like you very much."

“Probably because he is actually Lady Ysemay, Silverwind’s ex-wife,” Oceanvine told her.

“Ah, that explains a lot.” Blizzard grinned.

“Just don’t believe a word you read in those books,” Silverwind told her a bit gruffly. “I do wish Ysemay would turn her talents toward improving Maiyim and stop writing.”

“What else can she do?” Blizzard asked curiously.

“Does it matter?” Silverwind replied. “So long as she stops writing.” He took the sting out of that by smiling. “But never mind that, tell us about yourself. How does a Gramonish woman find herself with a Journeyman Magestone?”

“Okay. I went to University in Merinne. It’s not like a woman could ever matriculate in Querna, especially not in the Department of Magical Studies.”

“True enough,” Candle said with a smirk. “Only one woman in all history has ever managed to do that.”

“Really? Who?” Blizzard asked. Candle merely pointed at Oceanvine. “Really? When we get a chance you’ll have to tell me how you managed that! Anyway, I graduated a bit over five years ago with a major in magic, obviously and a minor degree in criminal science and came home to Rjalkatyp. I landed a job as a junior mage in the Rjalkatyp Police Department and have been working here ever since, well now it’s called the Department of Security and Justice, but my job is the same.” Her eyes had briefly picked up a wary look when she obliquely mentioned the recent political changes, but she covered it well. Only Oceanvine noticed.

“I would be interested in hearing about the current government of the Isle of Fire,” Oceanvine requested blandly. She wasn’t sure this was what Silverwind had meant by discussing the situation later, but with only the four of them it seemed right to her.

“You understand these are very nervous times here and this is a very sensitive subject?” Blizzard asked uncertainly.

“We got that impression,” Silverwind told her. “Between the senators who found asylum in Querna and Bellinen and other reports we’ve had from the Granomish Embassy in Merinne, we understand the governance of the Isle of Fire is split between this Vogt Andriy and General Hervasiv. Do I have those names right? Good. We also have heard that they overthrew the Senate in a rather bloody coup with the assistance of a former senator by the name of Lavro and for a while they styled themselves a triumvirate. My first question is what happened to this Lavro?”

“We were told he retired not too long after the coup,” Blizzard replied quietly. “Then a month ago it was rumored he had died quietly at his estate in Oprin.” She looked around the room then whispered, “I know what you’re going to ask and no, I don’t know how true that may be. Senator Lavro was very popular on the Isle of Fire and it was his brave denunciation of the corruptness of the President and most of the Senate that led most people here to support the coup. We were told the Senate was to be rebuilt with men of integrity and the Triumvirate would only be temporary. Well, that part turned out to be true enough.”

“What I’d like to know,” Oceanvine began, “is what in the God’s names is a vogt?”

“Oh that,” Blizzard said dismissively, then gasped at her own carelessness. “It’s an old Granomish title.

Not from Granom, but from here on the Isle of Fire. When Granomen first started to sit in the Senate some of them were ennobled by the votes of their townsmen. The title for such elected nobility was usually, but not always vogt. Andriy convened a sort of Council of Nobles – the heads of surviving senatorial families, there are some – and had them elect him. As he was the only candidate, nobody was surprised at the outcome.”

“How do the people feel about this?” Silverwind asked, then thought better of it. “No, don’t answer that. You can only speak for yourself and we’re not here to meddle in local politics. Besides our employer is supposed to be Vogt Andriy. Eventually we’ll have to meet him, assuming he’s still alive.”

“Oh he is,” Blizzard told them. “No mere disease could take out that son of a . . . cooper,” she finished lamely.

“First time I ever heard that as a term of derision,” Silverwind commented dryly.

“It wasn’t the first word that came to mind, sir,” Blizzard said contritely, “but his father did make barrels. Reputedly he was the best cooper on the island but it was before my time.”

“How does the son of a tradesman become the ruler of an island nation?” Oceanvine asked.

“The usual way, I imagine,” Candle said acidly, “lies, treachery and what was it Serabawa called it? Oh yeah, creative mayhem.”

“Candle!” Oceanvine hushed him warningly.

“Yes, Candle,” Blizzard said much more softly, “you have the right of it, but it really isn’t safe to say that sort of thing out loud, especially where someone might hear you. Not that that is much of a change. The old president had hundreds of men and women in gaol for just that. He called it treason, but it’s amazing how many politicians with a chance at being elected to the Hill were found guilty.”

“It’s okay to talk about that?” Candle asked.

“So long as you imply that the current government would never do such a thing.”

“It wouldn’t?” Candle pressed.

“Don’t let him bait you,” Oceanvine commented acidly. “So basically what we’ve established is that the Triumvirs replaced one repressive government with another. I guess that explains why most people are going about their business as though nothing is unusual. Because, really, nothing is unusual. Makes me wonder why Rjalkatypers are so renowned for their hospitality. One would think you would be afraid to speak to any strangers.”

“Has anyone been talking politics with you?” Blizzard asked pointedly.

“Just you.”

“And I’m likely to be the only one and I always did have trouble keeping my mouth shut, though you’ll find that Master Ironblade feels much the same as I do. But why don’t we get back to the case before someone comes in and overhears something they ought not?”

“All right, show us what you’ve learned about those spell traces,” Silverwind suggested.

Blizzard continued to show them her notes for most of the rest of the morning. Silverwind was just about to suggest they find something for lunch when Ironblade stuck his head in the door.

“I hate to interrupt,” he started, “but Sir Vlassu is out in the lobby looking for you all.”

“Sir Vlassu?” Silverwind asked.

“The Vogt’s herald,” Ironblade amplified.

“Small, thin, obnoxious man?” Oceanvine asked, “with short blond hair; uses his nose to point at the sky.”

Ironblade considered it for a bit then grinned. “Yes, that’s a fair description.”

“This is bound to be a jolly meeting,” she noted sourly.

“I don’t recall there being any knights on the Isle of Fire,” Silverwind mused.

“Except for the occasional tourist, there weren’t any last time you were here,” Ironblade told him. “This is a new invention of the Vogt. Somehow I can stand to wait to see this year’s honors list.”

“I’ll bet. Well, let’s go see what he wants.”

They all trooped out to the lobby, even Ironblade and Blizzard. Sir Vlassu was impatiently pacing back and forth, annoying everyone in his path. He was so intent on his pacing, however, that he failed to notice that the mages had entered.

“You were looking for us?” Silverwind asked, coming up behind the herald.

Startled, Sir Vlassu jumped with a loud gasp, then spun angrily around to face the wizard. He looked like he was about to scream something but instead slowly got himself back under control. “Wizard Silverwind,” he said at last with a semblance of calmness. “You and your party are summoned to attend the Vogt immediately. Please come with me.”

“Oh? He has time for us now, does he?” Silverwind asked.

“The Vogt is a very busy man,” Sir Vlassu replied haughtily.

“So am I. So have you supplied transportation or are we going to have to find our own way up the hill?”

“I have a carriage,” the herald replied.

“Good for you. We’ll use that. Come on, gang. You too, Blizzard.”

“Wizard! Only your party was summoned, surely this officer should stay at her post.”

“At the moment her post involves working with me. Besides I may need a local translator.”

“Wizard, the Vogt speaks the same language you do.”

“Yes, but he’s a politician. I’ve never understood anything a politician says. Maybe Blizzard here can help translate whatever he says into something I can understand.”

Sir Vlassu’s black lacquered carriage had room for all of them although just barely. The driver, who had waited with the carriage and horses, had to be woken up, but once up he handled the two-horse team well.

On the way up the Hill, Oceanvine and Candle got their first full look at the city of Rjalkatyp. Oceanvine noted that in spite of the lack of colors, this was a city of textures. The characteristic brownish gray brick was laid in patterns that changed from one neighborhood to the next.

“Once you know all the patterns you’ll know where you are just by looking at the brickwork,” Silverwind told her.

“It all looks alike to me,” Candle commented.

“That’s because you don’t know what to look for,” Blizzard replied and she started showing him the subtle differences in the masonry.

The city also changed texture on a grander scale. The buildings in the center of town were more closely bunched together and the streets varied in width from main thoroughfares to small alleys and breezeways, as they left the center of town the buildings were not as tall but were wider and the streets more even in width. The overall effect when they could see the city from partway up the Hill was that the center looked like it was packed with small tightly-fitting blocks that gradually grew larger and more sparse as one went further from the center.

Oceanvine was watching the city so intently that she nearly missed the first clear view of the Vogt’s palace, the building once known as the Presidential mansion, but which most citizens of Rjalkatyp referred to as the “Hill.”

The Hill was built of the same brownish gray ceramic material that was the basic construction medium of the rest of the city, but the master artisan who fabricated the blocks that made up the walls of the Hill cast them in sizes and shapes no lesser craftsman would have attempted. Oceanvine knew a little about working with ceramics. Her mother’s father had been a potter as was her maternal uncle and when visiting, both men would let her work with clay and the potting wheel. She never really mastered the art, but she had managed to throw a dozen crooked flowerpots that found places of honor around her parents’ house on the island of Medda. In making them, however, she learned about firing and cooling times and she grew to have an appreciation for what it took to make such large ceramic pieces.

Some of those blocks must have taken two weeks or more to cool, she thought to herself.

The Hill however was built on a far grander scale than anything else on the island and in a style used only in Granom. She was forcefully reminded of the Wurra Palace in Querna and couldn’t understand why. It was built of different materials and it had none of the towers of the Wurra, but there was something about the lines of this building and the monumental scale of the architecture that was indicative of the Granomish touch.

They drove directly into the immense structure through a wide arched portal. Beyond the archway was a large open courtyard with a gravel drive that allowed them to roll right up to the entrance to the main building.

“Walk this way,” Sir Vlassu said as they got out of the carriage. He walked haughtily into the Hill.

Oceanvine caught a strange look in Candle’s eye, and whispered, “Don’t say it.”

“What?” Candle asked innocently.

“Just don’t!” Blizzard made an odd sound that might have been a muffled snort. “You too?” Oceanvine asked, rounding on her. Blizzard merely raised her hands, palms outward in a surrender gesture, but there was a twinkle in her eyes Oceanvine’s glare couldn’t erase.

“Play nicely,” grumbled Silverwind.

The entrance hall of the Vogt’s palace was as grand as the building’s exterior. Silverwind had been there before on his last visit to the isle and noticed some marked differences. While the walls were still covered with murals depicting scenes of historic note, gone were the ones that glorified the formation of the Congress and the democratic republic of the Isle of Fire. Now the paintings centered on the early history of the Isle of Fire. There had been one mural, Silverwind recalled, that had shown the coronation of the island’s first king and it was still in place, but now there were others depicting royal victories from the age of kings. Silverwind tried to recall just what some of the paintings actually showed, but decided that most of these glories were probably fictional. The only theme they seemed to have in common was the rightness of the rule by the nobility.

Sir Vlassu led them through the entry hall and deposited them in a much smaller waiting room. “His Excellency will call for you at his convenience,” he told them and promptly left.

“I thought he already had,” Candle commented.

“I told you it was difficult to understand what politicians say,” Silverwind replied. “Don’t worry, I doubt we’ll have to wait long.”

“What makes you say that?” Oceanvine asked.

“We’re probably just waiting long enough for the Vogt to get to wherever he holds audiences.”

“I’ve heard he has a throne room,” Blizzard said.

“Something to look forward to, then,” Silverwind replied dryly.

“Does King Ksaveras have a throne room?” Candle asked. The Granomish monarch was the only king Candle had ever met.

“Of course,” Silverwind told him. “You’ve seen it.”

“I have?”

“Oh yes. It’s the same large room he uses for feasts, balls and other formal occasions.”

“So it’s not just used for holding court?”

“No. Not in Querna. You see King Ksaveras would consider it a waste to have a room that large that did nothing except when he held court. Most of his work is accomplished in that conference room at the top of the main tower. You may not have noticed but there was a small desk off in one of the corners. It is from that desk that he really governs Granom.”

“Why up there in the tower?” Candle inquired.

“It has a nice view, doesn’t it?”

A few minutes later a teen-aged man wearing a tabard in the livery colors of the Isle of Fire opened the door and politely announced “His Excellency will see you now. Will you come with me, please?”

He led them back out into the entry room and then down a long corridor. There were two uniformed guards at the end of the corridor on either side of a wide door. As they approached, one of the guards opened the door for them. Beyond that door was a long, narrow room. The room had been decorated with ancient tapestries that Silverwind suspected from their subject matter may have once been hung in the local temples to Wenni, Nildar and Methis. Most of them depicted the three Younger Gods in various stages of the creation of the Isle of Fire although one was a representation of the meeting between the early Granomish and Orentan colonists. Silverwind didn’t know what function this room had served when a president lived in this house, but it had obviously been adapted for use as a throne room with the addition of a small raised area at the far end of the room.

“Wizard Silverwind, Marquess of Sentendir, Master Oceanvine, Knight of the Silver Stay, Journeyman Blizzard and Apprentice Candle,” Sir Vlassu proclaimed in his official position as herald as they entered. “You will advance and attend His Excellency, Vogt Andriy of Rjalkatyp, Lord Protector and President of the Isle of Fire, Beloved of the Younger Gods!”

“Your Excellency,” Silverwind murmured with a slight bow as they approached close enough so that shouting was unnecessary. “How may we serve?”

“You certainly took long enough getting here, My Lord Marquess,” the Vogt replied testily.

“We came as soon as you called this morning, Your Excellency,” Silverwind pointed out politely.

“It took you months to arrive!”

“Ah! Well, Your Excellency’s letter went to Emmine, but at the time we were in Bellinen. It took a while to catch up to us, you see. We did catch the first ship bound for Rjalkatyp when it arrived.

“Very well, We will let that pass for now,” Andriy replied. Silverwind realized that he must have reacted visibly at the vogt’s use of the royal “We” when Andriy demanded, “Yes? There is something on your mind?”

Silverwind thought quickly and replied, “Only that I was wondering how you were feeling. You are recuperating well?”

“Recuperating?” the Vogt repeated uncertainly. “Ah yes, We are feeling much better. Thank you. So it appears your commission is filled already. I suppose you would like to be paid so you can be off again?”

“Well, we aren’t quite finished. The commission has been filled only in the most literal sense, Your Excellency. We have a cure for the disease, but the ultimate cause appears to be magical in origin. It is the ultimate cause that my associates and I are still looking into.”

“You think it is necessary for you to do that? We have Our own mages in Rjalkatyp. This is not some single dock island out in the middle of the Nowhere Ocean, you know.”

“Begging Your Excellency’s pardon,” Blizzard began nervously, “but I believe we do need Silverwind to help us in this investigation. I mean, we hadn’t gotten anywhere on the cure before he and Oceanvine arrived.”

“You are one of Our subjects?” the Vogt asked coldly.

“Yes, Your Excellency. Department of Security and Justice.”

“Ah,” he almost whispered. For a long moment he became silent and looked distracted. Finally his eyes refocused on them and said, “You may be right. Thank you for your good advice. Wizard, I commend you to your task. Thank you for coming in the middle of what must be a busy investigation.” It was clearly a dismissal.

On the ride back down into town they were all silent until Candle blurted, “I don’t like him.”

“Who?” Oceanvine asked quietly.

“The vogt. He’s creepy.”

“Creepy? I wouldn’t call him that. Arrogant, haughty, more full of himself than a king, but he’s not creepy”

“I think he is. All that other stuff too, but creepy too.”

“What about him do you find creepy?” Silverwind asked.

“Don’t know.” When stressed, Candle had a habit of dropping back into his old speech patterns. Normally he spoke in full sentences and had picked up a knack of intelligent speech that came so easily that Oceanvine often forgot his background, but every so often his speech became terse and clipped. “Just something ‘bout him.”

“I must admit,” Silverwind commented, “that I didn’t like him much either. It was everything I could do to keep from trying to turn him into some furry woodland creature.”

“You wouldn’t have,” Oceanvine told him calmly and confidently. She knew Silverwind too well to believe him when he said that sort of thing.

“Can you do that sort of thing?” Blizzard asked curiously.

“Oh, I could change his shape easily enough. I imagine you could too if you put your mind to it. But I doubt he would have survived the experience.”

Blizzard thought about that. “But what if you changed every bit of him carefully so that the experience was not physically traumatic?”

“I suppose it might be possible in theory at least, but you would need to be an anatomical and medical expert I would think. I’m neither of those. In fact I don’t think there is currently any wizard on Maiyim with enough expertise to pull off such a stunt.”

“And there’s an easier way to manage it anyway,” Oceanvine added. When Blizzard looked at her questioningly she added, “With an illusion.”

“That would make it look like you had done it to a third party, but the object of the spell would know better,” Blizzard replied.

“Not if you made it a tactile illusion.” Oceanvine noticed that Silverwind glanced at her and smiled. Not so long ago he was teaching her about tactile illusions. Now she was sharing the knowledge.

“I was told that couldn’t be done.”

Oceanvine smiled gently and then closed her eyes and forced herself to relax. A moment later Blizzard felt someone tapping her shoulder. She turned to look who might be doing it, but there was nothing behind her except the back of the carriage seat. She looked suspiciously at Candle sitting next to her, but even as she watched him, she felt the tapping again.

“How did you do that?” she asked.

“By magic,” Oceanvine replied deadpan.

“No, really. How?”

“It’s a bit complex, but have you ever cast an illusion that only one person in a group could see?”

“Uh, no. I can cast an illusion that everyone can see, but not a selective illusion.”

“All right. The theory behind a non-selective illusion, as I’m sure you know is a matter of playing with light. But a selective illusion is cast by directly affecting the subject’s thoughts. It’s a tricky sort of thing, but when you get down to it, it’s really a matter of mind control. You convince him to think he’s seeing what you want him to see and his brain sort of goes along obligingly. A tactile illusion is very much the same sort of thing, although it does take a lot more concentration.”

“I’ll take your word for it. If I can’t do the first, the second is that much more beyond me.”

“You don’t know until you try,” Oceanvine told her. “Let’s see if you can do a selective visual illusion.” They spent the rest of the trip with Oceanvine coaching Blizzard and Candle, who decided that he’d like to try it too. By the time they reached the Police Department, both were starting to make progress. Candle even managed to make Oceanvine see a fuzzy image of himself sitting between him and Blizzard. Blizzard’s results weren’t quite so distinct, but Silverwind told her she had caused him to see a patch of fog. She was disappointed since she had hoped to duplicate Candle’s trick.

“Don’t worry,” the wizard told her as they exited the carriage. “Just keep practicing and you’ll get it. Well, I don’t know about you, but I’m hungry. The least the vugt could have done was feed us. Why don’t we all go find something to eat. Where would you suggest, Blizzard?”

“There’s a nice tavern around the corner where most of the police officers go,” she replied. “The food is

plain but good.”

Six

“Who was he?” asked Silverwind.

“Lord Grigoru Osipavic,” Afonso informed him.

Gastao added, “He was Vogt Andriy’s chief of staff.”

Silverwind and Ironblade had been enjoying a mid-morning cup of coffee together when word had come that a man had been found dead on the moors to the east of town. Ironblade had asked the chief to assign the case to Sergeants Boris and Villenov on Silverwind’s advice.

“This could relate to the disappearances,” Ironblade said thoughtfully. “How did you know?” he asked Silverwind.

“I didn’t. We haven’t made much progress this past week and Oceanvine is more patient with data analysis than I am. This seemed like a good change of pace and I often have breakthroughs when I take a break from a difficult project, but this time it was a lucky coincidence. When was he found exactly?” That last question he asked Sergeant Boris.

“Early this morning. At first light, but according to the man who found him the body was already cold.”

“The coroner will, no doubt, be able to give us a better estimate of the time of death,” Ironblade commented. “I see the wagon coming down the hill. Are we ready to let them have the deceased?”

“Yes, sir,” Afonso replied. “We have the witness’ statement and Gastao has made a sketch of the crime scene.”

“I think we have time to check for spell traces,” Ironblade noted. “Would you like to do the honors, Silverwind?”

“Thank you, I shall.” Silverwind turned to look at the body. He began to relax and concentrate on the scene before him. The body of Lord Grigoru was not dressed in outdoor clothing. Instead he was wearing a well-made woolen tunic and trousers in the Granomish style. Most fashions here on the Isle of Fire seemed to be Granomish, although last time Silverwind had been here there had been a preference for Orentan styles among the younger people. Silverwind didn’t know if that represented a change of taste or of season. Last time he had been here during the summer. Now it was winter. When he was ready, he carefully released the spell and was suddenly awash in a sea of pain.

“What’s wrong?” Ironblade asked with concern.

“Wrong?” Silverwind rasped. He was barely aware of his surroundings. What little he could make out was nearly obscured by blurry bands of color and the headache was of crippling intensity.

“You screamed. Silverwind? Can you hear me?”

“Hear you. Yes,” Silverwind replied haltingly. “That was a bad one.”

“What happened?” Ironblade asked.

“Some sort of magical backlash,” Silverwind lied. “Like a trap waiting for someone to probe. I think it’s safe now. Go ahead and try.” He knew full well that wasn’t the problem. This was the worse relapse of Arithan’s curse he had experienced yet. The spell was a simple one; he shouldn’t have had any trouble at all. Getting Ironblade to do the investigative work here gave him time to pull himself back together.

“The Bond of Aritos has been used here,” Ironblade told him at last. “It is similar to the version we found at sites where people have disappeared, but not identical. Would you like to take a look?”

“Later, perhaps,” Silverwind demurred. “I’d better hold off for a bit, but let’s have Oceanvine and Blizzard take a look. Candle too, I think the experience will be good for him.”

“Yes,” Ironblade agreed. “He seems very proficient. You say he’s only been your apprentice a little over a year?”

“About fourteen months now. He’s a quick study at least with magic. He started late so it’s just as well that he learns fast. He’ll need to be ready for the University in a few years and he’s had little formal schooling. Ah!”

“Another headache?” Ironblade inquired. Silverwind nodded, his eyes clenched shut. “You don’t look good. Maybe we’d better get you back to town.”

“It was terrible,” Silverwind confided to Oceanvine that evening after Candle had gone to his room in the suite Ironblade had arranged for them. “As bad as the nightmares ever were.”

“Maybe you should take a day or two off,” she suggested. “You can work with Candle.”

“I’m feeling much better now,” Silverwind insisted.

“Okay,” Oceanvine replied skeptically. “Care to try a little spell?”

“If you insist. Anything you’d like in particular?”

“How about a simple curtain ward,” she suggested. “Nothing fancy just a sheet of energy.”

“Not a problem,” Silverwind told her. He cocked his head slightly and with no other sign of effort tried to cast the spell. “Ow!” he cried softly. “Correction; big problem! Let me try that again.”

“I don’t think that’s a good idea, dear,” she told him.

“I just wasn’t ready for it,” Silverwind replied with more confidence than he felt. “Here goes.” And suddenly a small sheet of red light appeared on the other side of the room. “There,” he said with just a slight rasp, “I can do it. Just takes some concentration.”

“You don’t usually need to concentrate all that hard,” Oceanvine reminded him.

“True, but that’s all I need to do and I don’t see an alternative.”

“Have you thought of consulting one of the medical mages here?”

“The first time I had this problem I went to Wizard Suture in Farmist. There wasn’t much he could do and if he couldn’t I doubt there’s anyone around here that can. There’s only one master here anyway. Magic normally is not a part of medicine on the Isle of Fire.”

“But I thought...”

“Most of the mages at the Department of Health were on loan from Security and Justice. The fact they were there at all shows how desperate the doctors here were.”

“I didn’t realize that, but what are we going to do if you cannot cast spells?”

“I still can, but I just have to work at it, just like you do. I’ll manage. So tell me what you and Blizzard did today.”

Oceanvine was silent for a bit and studied Silverwind. “We went out to investigate a new disappearance in the west end of the city. We spent most of the day there, but I don’t think we learned anything new. We’re going to visit Lieutenant Amanser Amaniev at the hospital tomorrow morning after the meeting. Would you like to come along?”

“Yes, I think that would be a good idea. Has he shown any sign of improvement?”

“No, but we hoped we might be able to see if he is still suffering from the same curse as caused the disease.”

“It’s a possibility,” Silverwind commented. “Hasn’t anyone tried to cure him yet?”

“I’m sure they have, but he’s still incoherent and shows no sign of improvement. Maybe there is something else going on.”

“The curse might have unhinged him, you realize,” Silverwind pointed out. “He may never recover.”

“That may be the case, but we don’t know that yet.”

“I hate hospitals,” Silverwind grumped.

“Too many sick people?” Oceanvine asked lightly.

The hospital had been designed to look sterile even if it did house the victims of a wide variety of illnesses. White tiles covered the floors and continued on halfway up the walls where they gave way to white plaster. Iron beds were made with white sheets and uniformly tan blankets. In fact some of the most colorful objects in the building appeared to be dark wooden desks and chairs placed in the rooms and the nurses’ stations, although here and there every so often there was a painting or etching on the

walls, but even they seemed to be subdued.

“The smell of antiseptic, actually,” Silverwind explained. He and Oceanvine continued down the hall they had learned would bring them to the room of Amanser Amaniev.

Originally their plan had been to bring Candle with them but at the last moment Ironblade asked Blizzard to take a look at the results of another investigation and she offered to show Candle some of the forensic spells she relied on. Silverwind thought that was a good idea so instead of all four of them visiting Lieutenant Amaniev only he and Oceanvine eventually went.

“There are worse smells,” Oceanvine told him.

“They’re here too,” Silverwind commented sourly, “Trust me. They’re here.”

“And so are we,” Oceanvine concluded. “Room 237.”

Silverwind opened the door and held it for Oceanvine then followed her in. There was a man dressed in a loose, light green disposable tunic and trousers and he was examining Lieutenant Amaniev.

“Who in the Five Hells are you all?” he demanded when he looked up. He was human, in his mid thirties, a bit shorter than average but with dark red hair and blue eyes.

“This is Wizard Silverwind,” Oceanvine replied politely, “and my name is Oceanvine.”

“Is that supposed to mean something to me?” The man asked antagonistically. Oceanvine was surprised at that. After all the attention they had received, she had grown used to warm receptions because of Lady Ysemay’s dreadful books. Here, obviously was not one of her fans. In spite of his belligerence she felt an irrational warmth toward him.

“Obviously not,” Silverwind chuckled. He explained why they were there.

“We don’t hold much with magic cures here,” he told them.

“Even for diseases caused by magic?” Oceanvine asked.

“You think that’s what my patient’s problem is?” he asked. “I know the healers in Bellinen and Emmine use magic, but here most physicians have been trained in Querna and Granomish medicine rarely uses magic.

“All things in their place and time, Doctor...” Silverwind started, waiting for the doctor to introduce himself.

“Athelsson. Egon Athelsson. And you’re right that is how I was taught. You’ve spent some time there, have you?”

“A fair amount,” Silverwind admitted. “And Oceanvine here received her masters degree there.”

“How unusual,” the doctor replied. “I hadn’t heard the University there had started admitting women. We usually send our female candidates to Bellinen.”

“I was the first,” Oceanvine said with just a touch of pride in her voice.

“Although that may change soon,” Silverwind added. “His Majesty recently sent the dean of students a note mentioning that he was not adverse to women being admitted to the school so long as they were at least as qualified as any of the young men who matriculated.”

“Sounds like there’s a lot of room in that requirement,” Egon replied skeptically.

“Ksaveras thought so too, especially since it has been traditional for the king to keep his hands off the university. So he had a second letter drafted just in case. It had something to do with how the University’s royal charter will be up for review in a few years. I imagine the Dean will be persuaded by the second letter if he is inclined to ignore the first.”

“Yes, that may do it,” Egon agreed. “So what do you propose to try on this patient’s behalf?”

It took a while to explain about the curse that caused the recent plague, although Egon had accepted that it was cured by magic. Even though his medicine was strictly physical, he was not so close-minded as to deny the hard fact that magic had done what his physic could not.

“And you believe this case is related to the plague? He’s shown no symptoms. Perhaps he was a carrier only?”

“Perhaps. It could be that his case has only a peripheral connection to the plague, but it looks like the plague has a tenuous connection to a series of disappearances the police have been investigating. In fact this man was on that case at the time he was struck down. Master Ironblade tells us his partner disappeared that same night as well and that when he examined Lieutenant Amaniev here, he thought there were spell traces similar to those associated with both the disappearances.”

At that moment Amanser Amaniev suddenly screamed and struggled against the leather straps that held him in his bed. Egon, Ocenavine and Silverwind rushed to his side, but rather than doing anything to calm the man, his shrieks grew even louder and his struggles against the leather straps more frenzied.

“There he goes again,” Doctor Athelsson sighed. “He seems to be trapped in a nightmare.”

“That is exactly what’s going on,” Silverwind said determinedly. “The spell traces Ironblade detected indicate the same influence as that of the plague which we are fairly certain is associated with the demon Arithan. I too had an encounter with Arithan with similar results.”

“You had to be tied to your bed?” Egon asked.

“Not quite, no, but the nightmares were pretty fierce.”

While they were talking Oceanvine sat down, cross-legged on the floor next to the bed and magically examined Lieutenant Amaniev. She saw a magical string that appeared to be attached only to the lieutenant. The loose end of it was whipping around frenetically. From the look of the spell, she didn’t dare try to tackle it on her own, but cast a tranquilizing spell and Amanser grew calm.

“Well done, Vine,” Silverwind commended her.

“Oceanvine!” she snapped at him automatically without coming out of the diagnostic spell she used to examine Amanser. “Care to take a look for yourself?”

“Hmm, yes! Very interesting. It is nearly identical, isn’t it?”

“What’s that loose string? It isn’t like the one I saw on Ksana when she was cut off the Hook. It doesn’t seem to be shrinking or growing, just whipping around back and forth.”

“No it’s something different. Don’t know what though. Maybe if I try the same trick you did with Ksana though and take a hold if it, I can dissipate the spell.”

“Are you sure that’s safe?”

“Anything but sure,” he replied, “but we need to do something, don’t we?”

“Maybe I should try it,” Oceanvine suggested nervously.

“No need,” Silverwind replied. “I’m fine. Really!” he insisted. It was true. Unlike the previous day he really did feel fine. There was no trace of a headache or nightmare. Confidently he observed the spell that affected Lieutenant Amaniev. Within it he could see the patterns that were common to the curses of Arithan. Slowly he began to understand the curse. It was a tightly woven spell that held within its mesh Amaniev’s very soul. No wonder he behaved like a tortured soul. His soul was literally being tortured. He continued to examine the curse.

“Well?” Oceanvine asked a moment later.

“Don’t rush me, Vine,” he snapped without taking his attention off the curse. “This is complex stuff. It’s bound to take me a minute or two.”

“Silverwind, you’ve been in a trance for over an hour.”

“My, how time flies when you’re having fun,” he replied acidly. “I’ll be a bit longer.” Then he continued his study.

Finally, he found a weakness in the curse. In the metaphor he had chosen it was the key spot in the weave of the curse. Cut the pattern at that spot and the whole thing would gradually unravel and to do that, he had to magically grab on to that loose spell thread.

“Here goes,” he said out loud. Then he took a deep breath and began. The pain and nightmare imagery began as soon as he tapped into the spell. It was nearly unbearable, but he focused all his will on holding on and doing what he had to. He kept his purpose in mind and then sent his Counter-curse right at the weak spot. The weak spot dissolved and just before he lost consciousness he saw the curse begin to unwind.

Seven

“All right, Candle? What do you see?” Blizzard asked. They were looking at a collection of several knives and one gold ring in the forensics lab in the Police Department building. There were two long tables and they sat together between them looking at the objects on one. Blizzard had shown Candle how to examine auras and what they were trying to do was find the knife in the collection whose aura most matched that around the ring.

“I don’t think any of them match exactly,” he opined. “The second one from the left has the same color,

but it doesn't feel right. The one in the middle is a better match but I don't think it's the right blade."

"Why not?"

"Because the person who owns the ring probably never used that knife."

"That's true," Blizzard admitted, "but how do you know that?"

"I don't know how," Candle replied. "I just do."

"All right we can come back to that. So which knife do you think belongs to the owner of the ring? That is if you think any of them do."

"Oh the second one from the left. Obviously."

"Why is it so obvious?"

"Well for one thing the aura is the same color as that of the ring and neither object has an inherent aura of its own."

"How can you tell that?" Blizzard asked. Learning that had been one of the toughest lessons she had to learn. Candle seemed to be doing it entirely by instinct.

"That's where the feel of the aura comes in," Candle tried to explain. "Both the knife and the ring feel the same all over. If either had an aura of its own and not one gained by the law of contagion, the feel would be different, kind of bumpy. Is that wrong?" he asked seeing an odd expression on Blizzard's face.

"Wrong? No, not really. We each need to find a metaphor with which to work such diagnostic spells, you seem to have chosen to incorporate your sense of feel. I suppose you could just as well use smell and taste."

"I do that too," Candle admitted.

"You do? Then you are inspecting these objects on several levels at once. That's very good. We have journeymen in the department who haven't mastered that."

"It seems easy enough," Candle replied.

"Because you've chosen the right metaphor. That's a great talent. I'll have to try suggesting this viewpoint to some of the officers who have trouble with this. Let's get back to the knife though. Why doesn't this knife feel right? You've already said, and correctly at that, that the knife is owned by the same person who owns the ring."

"Well, yes, but it doesn't feel the same. The ring's aura is stronger and smoother," he replied and then added, "to me."

"And the knife?"

"The aura is thinner and a little bumpy. What does that mean?"

"I don't know, Candle. It's your metaphor. But differences are caused by a variety of conditions. If I

had to guess, I would say the ring's aura is thicker because the owner wore it all the time, while the knife's connection to him is not as strong. Also auras by contagion differ in the way the object was used. The ring was used for personal adornment; the knife was a murder weapon. Maybe it had other uses too, but we know that much. Now does knowing that help at all?"

"Maybe," Candle told her, "but I guess I'm going to need a lot more practice before I can do this."

"You're not too bad already," Blizzard laughed. "I could give you a job right now if we didn't have a department policy against hiring underaged apprentices." She didn't tell him she thought he might be wasted as only a forensic mage. Anyone who could learn magic as fast as he did was obviously going to go far. That he would eventually be a master she never doubted. *He'll probably be a wizard one day*, she thought privately.

"So what else can you tell from this spell?" Candle asked.

"That's pretty much it for this one. All we're really doing is comparing auras, but if you really concentrate you should be able to make out a very faint string coming from each object. It will look like a very thin extension of the aura."

"Hey! The string on the knife on the far right is connected to you."

"Right. As it happens that's my knife. I added it to the collection so you'd have more to examine. This sort of examination can be used to connect an object with its owner, but only if there's been a strong, or at least a long time association. If I buy a new knife, use it once a few hours later and then throw it away only a very accomplished mage would be able to connect it to me and then only if it was found and examined very soon after I had gotten rid of it."

"Is that why this knife," he indicated another one in the collection, "has no string and very little aura?"

"Yes. This one has been here in the lost and found for a few years, I think. You can see the vestigial aura, but any other connection with its owner has long since disappeared."

"If you already knew which blade was the right one why did you include all these others? Was it a test?"

"Well, I guess it turned into one, didn't it?" she replied with a warm smile. "But this is how we make certain of an identification. You see, one mage, knowing what he is dealing with might make an error because of a false assumption, so after an initial investigation is conducted we have another mage look at the object in question along with several similar ones and see if he can pick out the right one. If no one can, then we can't consider it as evidence. In this case the knife in question was discarded near the crime itself. The ring we got when the suspect was arrested."

"But couldn't you connect the knife to the suspect by the thread?"

"In this case, yes. And that is much stronger evidence, but sometimes we don't have the suspect yet and we need to connect two different objects to aid us in an investigation. This was just a simulation I set up for you. The best way to start, really, since this way I knew the right answers and could correct you if you were wrong. You weren't, of course, but you might have been. Now are you ready for a real case?"

"Okay," Candle nodded.

"Over on this table," Blizzard said turning around and beckoning Candle to do likewise, we have a

number of objects that were found at the scene of a crime.”

“What sort of crime?” Candle asked.

“For what we want to do, it doesn’t matter, but since you ask there have been a series of robberies in the last couple of weeks all in the same area of town and not just simple robberies. The man committing them seems to like beating his victims up. One woman has been killed as well. We don’t have a suspect yet, but we do have a number of items that he may have discarded nearby. Take a look.”

“This isn’t as easy,” Candle noted.

“No, it isn’t, is it?”

Candle looked at the items for a long while. Before him were five right-handed gloves, a pair of matching daggers, several bronze coins and a piece of paper with a note on it composed of words and letters cut out from the local newspaper. At first he couldn’t make out much of anything on any of the artifacts except for the two dagger which both had strong auras but they didn’t match although outwardly they were twins. After a longer look, he began to make out very weak auras on the gloves. Three of the five were exact matches although none of them matched the daggers. The coins were even harder to analyze. They all had auras but Candle was certain they had each been handled by many people. The note appeared to have no aura at all. He reported his findings to Blizzard.

“Hmm, yes, I see what you mean about the gloves and I think you are right. The daggers are probably not connected to anything here. The coins though, I think there may be some traces there. See if you can match any of them to the three gloves you picked out.”

Candle looked harder and asked, “Is there a way to block out all the auras of everyone who ever handled the coins?”

“Yes, it’s called a filter. You want to try to set up a ward that will block everything but the aura you hope to see. That may be more than I can ask of you though. Such a selective ward is pretty advanced stuff.”

“Oceanvine’s been teaching me about wards,” Candle told her, “including some types she says I must never try without her or Silverwind around.”

“Master level?”

“I guess.”

“Well if we need that sort of tool here, I’d have to call Ironblade in to supervise anyway. But that shouldn’t be necessary, at least what I have in mind isn’t. What we need to do is set a simple curtain ward between us and the coins and gloves that will let us see the auras on the gloves but hopefully nothing else. Do you think you can do that?” Blizzard knew she ought to be the one to cast such a spell but she was honestly curious about Candle’s abilities.

“I don’t know. I’ve never tried to do that sort of thing yet,” he answered honestly.

“Well, maybe I ought to do it. Then afterwards if you want to try there will be less chance of spoiling the evidence,” Blizzard decided. She used the rubber eraser end of an Orentan writing stick to move the three gloves she wanted to concentrate on away from the others and closer to the coins. Then she cast

the sort of selectively permeable ward she wanted. Testing it she saw she could still see the pale auras around the gloves.

“Hey that’s neat!” Candle said enthusiastically. “Yeah, some of the coins have the same sort of aura and they feel right too.”

“Which ones?” Blizzard asked, mostly just to verify her own results. “No. Don’t touch them. You might contaminate the evidence. Use this rod here to move the ones that don’t match away.” She handed him the rubber-tipped rod and he moved the non-matching coins away. “Are you sure about that one?” She asked after retrieving the rod from him and using it to point with.

“Oh yeah. The feel is there. It’s very weak, like it’s been a long time since it was handled, but it’s definitely the right feel.”

“I think you’re right there, but if you hadn’t pointed it out I might have missed it,” she admitted. “Thank you Candle. You were a big help. Now we need to put these articles away and write a report.” She pulled out a pair of paper bags and using the rod again, slid each item that matched into one bag and the rest into the other. Together they left the laboratory and walk a short way to Blizzard’s small office.

Candle waited patiently while Blizzard wrote up the results of their examination. Every once in a while she would stop and ask him a question, nod, and then return to writing. Eventually she finished and handed him the sheet of paper.

“What do you think?” she asked at last. “Did I forget anything?”

Candle looked at the report. He didn’t understand much of it. Blizzard had used a lot of words he had never read or heard before. But after a while he was able to make out some of it from context. “It’s okay,” he said.

“Just okay?” Blizzard asked laughing. She had only shown him the report out of professional courtesy. She’d have done the same with any partner.

“I don’t know what a lot of it means,” he admitted.

“I did use a lot of specialized jargon.” She spent a few minutes explaining it in detail and eventually he agreed that she had covered the subject.

“Blizzard? Can... May I ask you a personal question?” Candle requested.

Blizzard gave him an appraising look, then shrugged. “Sure, go ahead.”

“Why did you choose the name ‘Blizzard?’ It makes you sound very cold, but I don’t think you’re a cold person.”

Blizzard smiled. “Thank you, Candle. You seem like a nice person too. Actually I didn’t choose the name. It was sort of given to me by my classmates in Merinne University. I guess it started as a joke. There I was, a troll in the middle of the land of elves and from one of the most northern settlements in the world. I guess they thought it was funny. To tell the truth, my first year at University was not a happy one. The Orenta in Bellinen aren’t as accepting of Granomen as they are here in Rjalkatyp and I suffered more than a bit of hazing from my fellow students. Some of them were quite nasty, in fact. But I swallowed my pride and put up with it and then one day I discovered I had a friend there after all. She was a girl from

Tinse and actually fairly popular. When a couple of the boys tried to dump some evil-smelling goo on me, she turned the tables on them with a simple telekinetic spell so the goo spattered them instead.

“I think she was just tired of the childish behavior but it was the start of a very close friendship. It turned out we had similar interests. In fact she pretty much has the same job I do on Tinse these days. Anyway, she was the one who started calling me ‘Blizzard.’ She thought that with my white skin and being from the far north it was appropriate. Once she came up with that, most of the others joined in and I decided it was a better name than some of the others I had considered. How about you? How did you choose Candle?”

“I didn’t choose that either. It’s the only name I’ve ever known.” He explained how he had run away from an orphanage and grown up on the streets of Tarnsa working for “Daddy Fox” who taught him and a host of other boys how to steal and bring what they stole back to him.

“That’s horrible!” Blizzard exclaimed. “But how, uh why, did Silverwind ever take you as his apprentice?”

“He caught me stealing from his wagon one night. I had run away from Daddy Fox not too long before that and I was very hungry. I was really just looking for something to eat, though finding money to buy food with would have been just as good. Well, maybe not just as good. I was very hungry by that time. He said he was going to turn me in at the next village we passed, but I started asking questions about magic and he decided to apprentice me instead.”

“And you’ve more or less behaved yourself since?” Blizzard asked, teasing him gently.

“More or less,” he laughed. “At first I didn’t really have much choice. The apprenticeship spell didn’t leave me many options.”

“Apprenticeship spell? Silverwind used one on you? That’s a bit old fashioned. I don’t think many mages use it any more.”

“Probably just as well he did,” Candle admitted. “For the first week or so I’d have run off again at the first opportunity. I’m better off now. Really I am.”

“I think so too, Candle,” Blizzard told him, smiling.

Just then someone knocked on the office door. Blizzard opened it to find Oceanvine there. She came in and sat down next to Candle and Candle knew immediately there was something wrong.

He asked, “What is it?”

“Silverwind is in the hospital,” Oceanvine told him quickly.

“What happened?” Blizzard asked a heartbeat ahead of Candle.

Oceanvine told them.

It wasn't sleep.

Silverwind was awash in a storm-tossed sea of twisted images. This was not the simple nightmare he had been experiencing before the dream in which he met the Orentan goddess Wenni. This was all the worse because there was nothing on which his mind could fasten. Images would form – friends, enemies, casual acquaintances, locations, anything – but before he could get more than a glimpse of them, they would distort out of all recognition to form another image which would last just as long before distorting again. For a man who prided himself on his mental control, this was far worse than a collection of horrid pictures.

It was futile, he knew that, but he kept trying to get a handle on what he was seeing, but no matter how hard he tried it was impossible. It would have been easier to hold water in a sieve.

I could have always frozen the water, a distant part of him mused before that thought too was swept away on the storm tide of his mind.

The chaos was timeless. He didn't know if he had been like this for a few minutes or for years on end. He couldn't even hold on to that thought for more than an instant, but in an attempt to gain control he tried to cast various spells. Light spells appeared to do nothing. Spells to raise and lower temperatures he could feel the effect of but otherwise did nothing to help him. He tried to cast various illusions but saw none of them. He was about to try to cast a fire spell but that same distant part of his mind that thought about carrying frozen water in a sieve advised him it would not be a good idea.

An eternity later the chaos faded away and he fell exhaustedly into a thankfully dreamless sleep.

He opened his eyes to find himself surrounded by Oceanvine, Blizzard, Doctor Athelsson, a vase full of flowers, an orange and purple striped unicorn and a large block of ice that a pair of orderlies were attempting to break into manageable pieces.

The doctor got in the first word. "How are you feeling?"

"That all depends," Silverwind replied hoarsely. "What's with the unicorn?"

"An illusion," Oceanvine told him. "Silverwind, I swear you are the only mage who can cast a spell in his sleep. It's a good thing you don't sleep-walk."

"Oh." He closed his eyes and the unicorn vanished. He was immediately rewarded by another wave of pain that sloshed back and forth between his temples. "Ow! I should have lived with the unicorn." Just then the men working on the ice managed to break the remaining chunk in two and were able to slide the melting blocks out the door.

"More pain?" Oceanvine asked, but didn't wait for his answer. "It's getting worse, isn't it? Curing Amaniev must have been the last straw."

"Maybe," Silverwind conceded. "I haven't completely recovered from that bout. I'd better take it easy for a day or two."

"Silverwind," the doctor informed him, starting to check his pulse. "It's already been a couple of days."

"Ah. How about the ice? Is that real too?"

“Definitely,” Oceanvine said acidly. You cast the most intense cold spell I’ve ever seen. Completely unfocused. I diverted it into that corner but it was so cold there a lot of moisture condensed into ice.”

“It was terribly dry in here for a while,” Blizzard noted, “until Candle thought to open a window. Of course that made it colder for a while too, and the ice block got still larger until Oceanvine found a way to disperse the cold spell, but at least you didn’t die of dehydration. The flowers are real though. Ironblade sent them as a get-well gift.”

“I’m just surprised you didn’t start throwing fireballs around,” Oceanvine commented.

Wisely, Silverwind kept his mouth shut. Instead he asked, “Where is Candle?”

“He went down to the cafeteria to get tea and coffee for us,” Oceanvine told him.

“I need something to eat too.”

“I’ll bet you do,” Egon commented. “I’ll have a nurse bring you up some broth for starters. Your stomach has been empty for a while. Best not to shock it too badly. If you react well to that, we’ll see about other foods.”

“I need something more substantial than that.”

“Yes you do, but that’s how we will start,” The doctor told him firmly, moving on to take his blood pressure.

“Very well,” Silverwind acquiesced suddenly. Just then Candle came in with a tray full of cups.

“”You’re up?” he asked unnecessarily. “How are you feeling?”

“I’ll survive,” Silverwind told the boy. “How are your studies coming along?”

“Okay, I guess.”

“He’s doing marvelously,” Blizzard put in. “He seems to be a natural with the forensic spells we’ve run past him so far.”

Silverwind looked at the tray Candle was holding and did a quick calculation. “Didn’t you bring any coffee for me?”

“You may have mine,” Blizzard offered. “I’ll get another cup.” Suiting her actions to the words, she got up and left the room.

“I suggest you use extra cream in that,” the doctor warned as Silverwind put the cup of black coffee to his lips, “and a bit of sugar wouldn’t hurt you either.”

“I like my coffee black,” Silverwind grouched.

“The cream and sugar will help your empty stomach acclimate to food all the faster. You’ll be eating a steak in no time.”

“I’ll bet you say that to all the wizards,” Silverwind grumbled.

“Every single one I’ve met,” Egon replied with a chuckle. “Well as far as I can tell, physically you’re just fine, aside from being a bit hungry. I would like you to spend the night here and I’ll discharge you in the morning.”

“Why stay tonight if there’s nothing wrong?” Silverwind asked.

“I could be wrong. Just the one night,” he told him and then left.

“How is Lieutenant Amaniev?” Silverwind asked Oceanvine.

“Not as well as you are,” Oceanvine replied. “He isn’t screaming any longer, in fact he appears to be resting comfortably.”

“Or as comfortably as anyone can in this place,” Candle interrupted.

“Right,” Oceanvine sighed. “He’s still unconscious though and not showing any signs of waking up.”

“Did you check him out magically?”

“Yes, dear, I did. You really did manage to free him of any trace of Arithan’s curse, but he’s very weak. I tried siphoning some strength into him, but I only had so much to spare. We’re just going to have to wait.”

“Well, he’s been through a lot,” Silverwind admitted. “We’ll just have to wait. So Candle’s now a forensic mage? Good, good. How are you doing with wards?”

Candle shrugged, so Oceanvine spoke up, “He can cast a ward in any shape you please and send the energy flow anyway you want, too. He might be up to the alternating current wards, but I haven’t had a chance to show him how to cast one yet. However what he hasn’t mastered yet is the ability to link another spell with his wards. Until he can do that, he just has a pretty energy construct. That may be useful if he can harness enough energy to make it destructive, but most mages would be able to dissipate it. He needs something with a bit more subtlety.”

“Seems strange to hear you talking about being subtle, Vine. As I recall you fried that mage who was trying to use the Hook on Candle in Tamsa.”

“I’m not a very subtle person,” Oceanvine reminded him, “but Candle might be. He can certainly be devious when he wants to.” She disarmed that barb with a slight smile. “I figure he needs to learn all the tools and then he’ll be able to pick and choose which ones suit him best.”

“I’ve also been practicing that fireball spell of yours,” Candle added. “It’s fun. How big a fire can you throw that way?”

“It’s like the wards, Candle. It all depends on how much energy is available to you. Normally that won’t be much larger than a double crown. Why? Planning to burn the town down?”

“No,” Candle replied, “but I was able to get some about twice the size of my head, so I just sort of wondered.”

“Hmm, you must have been tapping into the volcanic potential of Mount Rjal. How appropriate,”

Silverwind chuckled. "This is the Isle of Fire after all. Well, do try to be careful then. Fire is an easy spell but very dangerous. Work on pinpoint control; try for a specific size and make sure you can manage it every time.

"Now, what don't I know about the missing person's case?"

"As much as we don't know," Blizzard told him as she returned. "There hasn't been anything new since you..."

"Stepped out for a while?" Silverwind suggested wryly. "It's as good a euphemism as any. And I guess it was too much to hope that there'd be any real breakthroughs while I was out."

"There may be something for you to consider tomorrow though," Blizzard told him. "Detective Sergeants Boris and Villenov were sent out to investigate another possible disappearance this afternoon."

"Good!" Silverwind exclaimed, then corrected himself, "Well maybe not so good, but if we're lucky we'll learn something that will help."

Eight

Doctor Athelsson didn't let Silverwind check out of the hospital until midmorning, which did nothing for the wizard's disposition. However when he tried to cast an illusion that would let him sneak out of his room, his vision blurred and the pain returned before he could do more than start to concentrate, so he was forced to wait.

"He could have at least been there first thing this morning," Silverwind grumbled a while later as he and Oceanvine were being driven to the site the two detectives had investigated the day before.

"He's a busy man," Oceanvine replied.

"So am I."

She remained silent on that but a few minutes later she changed the subject. "Blizzard and Candle won't yet have arrived on the site, anyway. They can't be much more than a quarter hour ahead of us."

"Is Candle as good with the spells Blizzard taught him as she thinks?"

"Maybe better," Oceanvine replied. "She said he was able to spot some connections she might have missed and she's supposed to be the best the Department of Security and Justice has. At least that's what Ironblade says. He thinks she ought to be a master herself but she's been too busy to work on a thesis and hasn't wanted to leave the Isle of Fire long enough to get the degree, at least not until this case is solved - although this is the third such case she let get in her way."

"Maybe she just doesn't think she's ready, like a certain other mage I know."

Oceanvine blushed a bit at that. "Could be. In any case, she's a marvelous teacher. I've learned a lot from her as well. She really knows her forensic spells. I've only had experience with some of them and most of what I learned was in other applications."

“Good, because you’re probably going to have to be my magical eyes and ears for a few days at least.”

“As bad as that?”

“So far,” Silverwind admitted. “If I concentrate and work through the pain and disorientation I can probably work magic, but I think I’d better hold back what I can do for an emergency. I’ll probably improve in a day or two, but until then it’s probably best if I don’t force myself.”

“We probably shouldn’t make that public knowledge,” Oceanvine suggested. “There’s no need to let whoever is behind this...”

“Arithan, quite likely,” Silverwind told her. “There’s no need to be afraid to speak his name. He can’t hear you unless you happen to be within normal hearing distance. That is unless you try to summon him.”

“I wouldn’t know how,” she replied.

“It’s not all that hard. I’m sure you could figure it out if you wanted to.”

“I cannot imagine wanting to. Anyway, there’s no need to let Arithan know you’re out of the picture for however long or short a time it turns out to be.”

“You’re probably right,” Silverwind agreed. “Ah. I believe we’ve arrived.”

The carriage driver had stopped just outside a small breezeway on the east end of the city. The buildings here were mostly two stories tall and there were a few empty lots every so often. The streets were a little wider than in the center of town as well.

“Is this an old section of town?” Oceanvine asked as she stepped down to the sidewalk.

“No, I think it’s fairly new. Why do you ask?”

“The buildings don’t seem to be as well made as in most of the city and the paving stones on the street and sidewalk aren’t set very carefully.” The gaps between them were not even and some rocked a bit as they stepped on them.

“Okay so this isn’t the fashionable side of town,” Silverwind replied. “I’d pretty much concluded that already.”

“Silverwind, Oceanvine!” Blizzard called from within the breezeway. “In here!”

They followed her voice and found her and Candle a little better than halfway back to the next street. Someone had drawn some chalk outlines where various objects had been found. From the shapes, Silverwind concluded that there had been a long dagger and a hammer as well as a number of other objects that he couldn’t identify by their outlines.

“So what do we have here?” Silverwind asked.

“A Miss Tira Tarabawa was last seen entering this breezeway. Orentan in her mid-twenties, stenographer for the Court of Appeals. We assume she was taking a shortcut to her apartment on the other side of this block. Witnesses saw her enter the breezeway, but she was not seen coming out.”

“Has anyone taken a look at her apartment?” Oceanvine asked.

“Not yet. Her landlady never saw her arrive, although she admits that wasn’t unusual. Sergeants Boris and Villenov knocked on her door but received no answer. We didn’t have permission to enter until this morning, so that will be our next stop. Meanwhile I thought you might like to examine this site. Gastao and Afonso retrieved a few objects and left these outlines to mark their positions. You’ll note there are still some spell traces that connect this site to the other disappearances.”

Oceanvine did a magical examination of the site while Silverwind quietly went through the motions of doing the same. She saw the unmistakable signs of a spell connected to Arithan.

“What’s this string connected to?” Candle asked.

Oceanvine and Blizzard looked where he indicated and saw an almost invisibly thin spell string leading across the breezeway where some wooden boxes had been stacked up. They moved the boxes and found a single brass button behind them.

“Let me pick it up,” Blizzard told them firmly. She pulled a parchment envelope out of her purse and by holding it open on the ground next to the button, she was able to use an Orentan writing stick to push the button in. “We’ll take a look at that back in the lab, but it looks like it came from a uniform to me.”

“Why don’t we check out Miss Tarabawa’s apartment,” Silverwind suggested.

“Just a minute or so,” Blizzard requested. She pulled out a pad of paper from her purse and wrote down a few notes. When she was done she explained, “I needed to document which objects had residual auras associated with them. Otherwise this whole trip would have been wasted. Oh just a second. There, I’ve noted the location of the button. The sergeants are building a model of this crime site back at the office, we’ll be able to add this to it accurately now. Let’s go.”

A few minutes later they were inside Tira Tarabawa’s apartment. It was not a large living space, just a combination living/bed room and a small kitchen area that shared a common bath room with the other apartments on the floor. It was sparsely furnished, but neat and orderly.

“No sign of violence here,” Blizzard commented. “Whatever happened to her, it was probably out there in the alley. Not many foreign auras around either.”

“Foreign auras?” Oceanvine asked.

“Ones that weren’t obviously imparted by the person who lived here. There are a few here and there, mostly items that were blessed. You can make out the standard blessings easily enough. If she made it back here, she went out again without anyone seeing her.”

“But how could she just vanish in the middle of that breezeway?” Candle asked.

“I supposed she might have been translocated,” Blizzard replied, “but that sort of spell, assuming there’s anyone here who knows how to cast it - I sure don’t – would have left traces all over the alley. More likely she was taken in the breezeway and dragged out on this side of it.”

“I thought witnesses didn’t see her coming out,” Candle pointed out.

“They didn’t see her exit the way she went in, but the breezeway cuts through the block as you well

know since we just walked through it. We couldn't find anyone who saw her come out on this side of the block, but that doesn't mean she didn't go in either direction, just that no one saw her."

"Or at least no one admits to seeing her," Silverwind added.

"Hmm, yes," Blizzard nodded. "But I can only work with the evidence I have."

"Who does all the footwork?" Oceanvine asked. "I've only worked one crime-related case, but I know someone has to knock on all the doors to try to find witnesses, talk to relatives, employers and anyone else who might add something substantial."

"That job belongs to Sergeants Boris and Villenov," Blizzard explained. "They've been putting in a lot of overtime lately and occasionally have had various patrolmen assigned to them as backup. It's a big job. Over two dozen people missing in the last year and we're still no closer than we were before."

"Well, does anyone see anything that might be of value here?" Silverwind asked. "If not I suggest we go back to the lab and have a look at the stuff our intrepid investigators took from the alley, not to mention that button."

"Oh certainly, that button is from a captain's uniform of the Emmine Navy from the last century," Sergeant Yakinsson said authoritatively.

"It's remarkably polished for a fifty-year old brass button," argued Gastao. "I think it's a Granomish guild button; probably the Jewelers Guild of Palsondir."

"Not a chance," Afonso put in. "That button is the mark of a Bellenin Senator."

Oceanvine and Silverwind exchanged a glance that spoke volumes. Meanwhile police officers stood around the button with their own opinions of where it had come from. After a while Chief Rostik came out of his office to see what was causing all the noise.

"Are you all out of your minds?" he asked after a quick glance. "It's a local button. It's comes from an officer's uniform in our own army." That set off another round of argument, but Rostik quietly leaned over to the mages and said, "It's an easy mistake for them to make. These new buttons have only been in use since the Triumvirate established the new government. Considerably afterwards, actually. That symbol on the button is the new badge of the Army. Most of the men and women in this department haven't had to deal with the military like I have. You may have noticed there aren't a lot of military personnel on the streets of Rjalkatyp. It's part of the agreement between Vogt Andriy and General Hervasiv. Soldiers may enter the city on leave, but otherwise they stay in a large encampment all their own a few miles beyond the western edge of town."

"Is that so the Vogt doesn't feel threatened by the military presence or so the army will be close at hand if there is unrest among the populace?" Oceanvine asked softly.

"Both probably, though if the General wanted to take over I don't see what could possibly stop him. The Vogt's guardsmen would be hopelessly outnumbered. Silence!" he shouted at the arguing policemen. "Get back to work. Now, what else do you have, Ironblade?"

“Not much more than we had before, except that the dagger is also of military issue, but not recently. It was one of those given to the veterans of Fire Company two centuries ago,” Ironblade replied.

“An antique blade? Could that have a connection to all this?”

“Possibly, but why would anyone discard an old heirloom?”

“Might have been stolen,” Blizzard suggested. “The influence of Arithan is on it, but the aura is thick and complex. Many have held that blade and for many reasons.”

“Just as likely the blade was dropped accidentally,” Silverwind surmised, “perhaps at the same time that button flew off the uniform it must have been attached to. I think Miss Tarabawa must have struggled before she was made to vanish. In the fracas, that dagger fell to the ground and the button flew off. Somebody got clumsy.”

“That may be a first,” Blizzard commented. “Only a few of the other disappearances exhibited any signs of struggle.”

“Could be they’re getting clumsy?” Candle asked. “Maybe they don’t care about stealth anymore?”

“Maybe,” Chief Rostik replied. “It could be that whoever is behind this has been clumsy all along. It wouldn’t be the first case we thought we were up against someone clever who turned out to be just plain stupid. That’s the problem sometimes. You tend to assume anyone who can fool you is smarter than you are and start attributing cleverness where it may not be at all. I’ve seen several cases where we had trouble catching our quarry because we overestimated him.”

“Do you think we’re dealing with a simpleton?” Blizzard asked.

“Not a simpleton,” Silverwind replied. “Not a simpleton at all. But not someone thinking the same way we do. We’ve seen the influence of Arithan throughout this case, but is it not possible the influence may be more direct that you’ve been assuming?”

“The demon is actually on the Isle of Fire, Silverwind?”

“Why not? He was here sixteen years ago, when Windchime and I faced him.”

“Surely not!” Rostik exclaimed.

“Surely so, Chief. I ought to know. Windchime and I managed to defeat him but it was a near thing and we weren’t in a position to banish him permanently. He may even have an affinity for this land. Anyway, he was the cause of what you folks refer to as the Great Fire.”

“That fire was caused by a lava flow from Mount Rjal,” Rostik argued.

“The eruption was caused by Arithan,” Silverwind explained, “but he did a fair amount of destruction directly as well. When Windchime and I caught up to him he was destroying buildings one by one as he walked the streets. I’m sure you’ve heard the stories, but the Senate did their best to hush it up. I’d say you could ask old Iceflow, but I understand he died a few years ago. But that journeyman who worked with him, I think his name was Cable, could tell you what we dealt with that night.”

“Cable left the Isle years ago,” Ironblade noted. “Just before I returned with my master’s degree.”

“Master Cable teaches at University in Randona,” Oceanvine told them. “He’s considered the top teacher in illusions.”

“Now that I come to think about it,” Ironblade mused, “I don’t think there’s a single mage in Rjalkatyp who was above apprentice level who is still here. Not that there are all that many of us at any given moment. Most of the department mages are only apprentices as it is.”

“Well, I think we have two leads here,” Silverwind brought them back to the main reason they were there. “Sergeants Boris and Villenov, I’d like you to see if you can find the owner of that dagger. It may have been stolen, although I think we might have heard from the owner if it had.”

“Not if they didn’t know it was missing,” Gastao disagreed, “but those daggers aren’t all that uncommon. Most of them are counterfeits. You can buy one in almost any pawnshop.”

“That’s something we can look into,” Afonso said. “Check the pawnshops in that area and see if someone bought one recently.”

“Good, do that,” Silverwind told them. “Now the other lead is the military connection. I intend to go and meet General Hervasiv. Perhaps we can get more help out of him than we did out of Vogt Andriy.”

“You aren’t going alone,” Oceanvine told him in a firm but quiet voice.

“Good idea,” Chief Rostik agreed. He glanced around at the crowd then said, “I thought I told you lot to get back to work!”

Gastao muttered something about getting right on checking out the dagger and he and Afonso rushed out the door. The other officers quickly followed suit and soon only Chief Rostik and the mages were left in the room.

“Good. I hope I wasn’t too obvious there. We need to talk, Silverwind.”

“Perhaps Blizzard and I should leave?” Ironblade suggested, starting to back away.

“Not necessary. I know where you two stand politically. Everyone sit.” He waited for them to sit down around the end of the lab table. “The simple fact is, we don’t really know what is going on between the general and the vogt these days. The revolution or coup, or whatever you want to call it, began pretty much like the one on Ellisto two centuries ago. A popular call to arms with promises of a better life. Temporarily sacrifice our personal freedoms for permanent security. That sort of thing. I think we only got temporary security and may have permanently given away some vital freedoms, not that we were all that better off with the Congress, corrupt as it was. I was happy to hear that some of the better men made it to safety however.

“The way I see it, you had a member of my department with you when you attended the vogt. That means I can send Blizzard with you again to General Hervasiv. If anyone questions it, we are simply showing Hervasiv the same courtesy we showed Andriy. That also means, though, that perhaps I can get an idea of which way the wind is blowing.

“I hate playing politics. Our job is to solve crimes, preferably we ought to prevent them, but we’re only mortal. But it would be useful to be able to understand the men who rule us. It might be vital, in fact, to

know what the two remaining Triumvirs intend to do next.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask,” Silverwind began. “What happened to the third Triumvir, Senator Lavro?”

“Nobody knows,” Rostik replied, “not for certain. We’ve been told he retired to his estate a few hours up the coast, but no one I know has heard from him in months. There were also rumors of his death, but there was no public announcement. It might be worthwhile to know if he is still there. He was the money man behind the revolution, you know. Now that Andriy and Hervasiv are in power I wonder if they still think they need him. I wonder if they think they need each other. These are nervous times on the Isle of Fire.”

“I suppose we ought to go out to the military camp this afternoon,” Silverwind commented.

“Hmm? No,” Rostik contradicted him. “It’s too late in the day, you wouldn’t get there until after dark. That wouldn’t be safe. Judging by what I’ve seen here in town the soldiers are as nervous as we are. Best not to roll up to the gates of their camp at night, unless it’s an emergency. Best to leave tomorrow morning. I’ll have a department carriage available for you first thing in the morning. Blizzard can pick you up at your hotel.”

Nine

It was snowing lightly as Silverwind, Oceanvine and Candle trudged out to the carriage Blizzard had driven to the front door of their hotel in the predawn light. The carriage was a small one, drawn by a pair of dark brown horses. The design, with two bench seats, was such that Blizzard could drive from under the retractable canvas roof, and isinglass windows protected them from the weather on two sides and the back so that only the front was open.

“Good morning,” Blizzard greeted them cheerfully. Their responses were mostly grunts. “I packed a breakfast for us. It’s going to be a long ride and I doubt you’ve had much this early.”

“Just a cup of coffee,” Silverwind replied. “Tea for Oceanvine and Candle.”

“Well, we have that plus some biscuits and butter and bogberry preserves. It’s a simple breakfast but tasty and filling.”

“Sounds wonderful,” Oceanvine told her. “We’d better have the tea and coffee before it gets cold though.”

“Not to worry. They’re in a pair of thermal vacuum bottles from Querna. They’ll be hot for hours, but don’t let that stop you if you want some right away.”

She did and a few minutes later they were enjoying the biscuits as well. They were briefly distracted by a deep rumbling from the north. Looking in that direction they saw a thin plume of ash and smoke rising from the top of Mount Rjal.

“Don’t worry,” Blizzard told them. “Rjal’s been smoking like that off and on for two years now. So far nothing has come of it. We only get a big eruption on the average of once per century and the last one was about sixteen years ago.”

“Eruptions aren’t as predictable as all that,” Silverwind commented, but otherwise let her blasé dismissal of the volcanic activity pass. At the moment they were more at risk from an avalanche caused by the minor eruption than they were from the direct action of the large volcano.

The trip out to the army camp took just under two hours. During that time the snow began to fall harder so there were several inches on the ground when they arrived at the camp gate.

“Are you all expected, sir,” one of the guard asked Silverwind after getting his name and reason for visiting the camp. The soldiers all wore light gray woolen capes over very dark red uniforms.

“I’m afraid not,” Silverwind replied. “There was no time to send a messenger ahead of us and as our mission is urgent we hoped General Hervasiv would meet with us.”

“You’ll have to wait here until we can get you clearance, sir.”

“I understand, um,” Silverwind paused to look at the guard’s rank insignia, “corporal.”

The corporal, wrote a quick note on a piece of paper attached to his clipboard , then tore it off , folded it up and shouted to one of the other gate guards, whose insignia showed him to be a private. “Todey! Run this up to the Officer of the Day and wait for instructions.”

Todey replied in the prescribed military fashion and then slipped through the barely open gate and rapidly disappeared within.

“Nice walls you have here,” Silverwind commented conversationally to the corporal. The walls were native stone and about ten feet high, and ran at that height around a plot of land that appeared to be several hundred acres.

“It gave us something to do last summer,” he replied nonchalantly.

“You built all these walls over a single summer?” Oceanvine asked.

“This sort of stone wall goes up fairly quickly. We have a lot of stone . It grows around here, ma’am, uh, Master?” his fumbling over her title spoiled the joke, but it was a very old joke so Oceanvine smiled anyway.

“Whatever makes you most comfortable,” Oceanvine said with a shrug. She thought she saw where Silverwind was going with the chit chat. Either he was trying to smooth feathers or perhaps he was truly interested in the walls. Either way it didn’t hurt to be polite or at least not pick fights.

“They’re a bit rough,” the corporal continued,” but next summer we plan to face them inside and out with brick. That should make them a bit more finished to the eye. Not like they’re defensive any more. A good sized cannon could punch holes in them in fairly short order.”

“Then why build them at all?”

“Orders, ma’am.”

It took nearly half an hour, but eventually Private Todey returned and handed the corporal a different sheet of paper. He read that and waved at the other guards to open the gates.

“Here, sir,” he handed Silverwind the paper. “This is your pass. You may be stopped inside but if you show this to whoever stops you he’ll let you move on. Just follow the, well, it’s not quite a road, more like a well-worn path especially when the paving stones run out a hundred feet in. But just follow it straight onto HQ. It’s the brick building. You can’t miss it, sir.”

“Thank you, corporal,” Silverwind replied and Blizzard drove the carriage into the camp.

They weren’t sure what to expect, but from the description of the headquarters as “the brick building” it seemed obvious that most buildings would not have brick work. Instead they found rows and rows of thatched sod houses.

“How quaint,” Silverwind commented. “No wonder they had plenty of stone for the walls, they must have denuded the area of sod to build all these. I’d be surprised if there was much vegetation growing in what soil was left. Probably just a few scattered weeds. Good thing we have all this snow on the ground. Looks almost normal that way.”

“Sod houses are old traditional lodgings on the Isle of Fire,” Blizzard remarked, “though they haven’t been used much except in some of the more isolated communities in over a hundred years. They are reputed to be quite comfortable.”

“We may have to find out for ourselves,” Silverwind replied, noticing it had started to snow even harder. “Any more of that coffee left?”

“No,” Oceanvine replied, “you finished that an hour ago. Besides, there’s the HQ just ahead.”

The army headquarters building was the only two-story building in the camp. Built of the same brownish gray bricks common in Rjalkatyp, it had little style or aesthetics in its design. This was a building that had been built with function alone in mind. It was large compared to its neighbors, however, a large square-shaped structure about one hundred feet on each side.

“Well, that’s ugly,” Candle opined. It had not been a happy trip for him. Silverwind had used the opportunity to drill him on the lessons he had been learning since they had arrived in Rjalkatyp. Most of what he had learned from Silverwind, Oceanvine and Blizzard he had picked up with amazing ease, but he continued to have trouble casting more than one spell at a time and had been forced to work on that all the way out to the camp.

“Shh, Candle,” Oceanvine hushed him. “We aren’t here on an architectural appreciation tour.”

“Besides, there’s not much here to appreciate,” Silverwind laughed, earning a glare from Oceanvine and a quiet chuckle from Blizzard.

Outside the headquarters building they were met by a young soldier who told them he would move their carriage to a sheltered area and take care of the horses. “The general is waiting for you inside,” he added.

Inside, the building was nearly as stark and utilitarian as its exterior. Rough wooden trim edged plain white plaster walls, but the vast expanses of plaster were broken by occasional framed drawings and paintings. There seemed to be no common theme to any of them. They just seemed to have been placed on the walls without much thought.

Just inside the door was a fair-sized room that was mostly empty except for a pair of desks near the

center. A man at one of the desks greeted them with polite formality and informed them the general would be with them presently. While waiting they took the time to look at the artwork, there not being much else to see in the room.

“Do you like our gallery?” a deep voice asked them a few minutes later. They looked to their right and saw a powerfully built Granom in a dark red uniform with many ribbons and other military decorations on it. “All the artwork here in HQ was created by members of the army. We’re a fairly long way from the city so not everyone cares to go all that way when they have leave. General Hervasiv, at your service,” he concluded with a bow.

The general appeared to be of middle age and had a ragged scar that ran across his forehead and disappeared into his gray hair. Silverwind introduced himself and the others and the general nodded politely to each in turn.

“I had heard you were on the Isle of Fire but hardly expected to meet you, sir,” Hervasiv told the wizard. “Isolated as we are here we have not had any outbreaks of the plague.”

“We discharged that commission fairly rapidly on our arrival,” Silverwind replied, “but acquired a new one from the Department of Security and Justice.”

“The police can afford your services?” the general mused. “Well, never mind. Why don’t you all come back to my office and you can tell me about it.”

He led them down a corridor lined with more artwork and after a few doors, turned left into a stairwell. At the top of the stairs they turned left and stepped through the next door into a large corner office. The office had glass in only one large window that overlooked what Silverwind thought must be a parade ground. It also faced Mount Rjal, which could now barely be seen through the snow. The other windows were covered by sheets of oiled parchment. They would let a little light in, but not as much as glass would.

“Too bad it is snowing today,” the general commented seeing them look out the window. “It’s normally a lovely view of Rjal. Did you see the eruption? Yes? Well, let’s hope that’s the most excitement we get from that quarter, hmm? I hope to get the other windows glazed this next year, but I’m more concerned with getting better barracks built for the army. All this was done very quickly during our rather short summer. I think we’ll be using the sod houses for some time yet, but my men deserve better and they’ll get it.

“Now, to what do I owe the honor of your visit?” Hervasiv asked.

“You are aware of the series of missing persons cases?”

“Roughly two dozen over the last year or so? Yes, I am. A terrible business but how does that connect to me?”

“To you personally? Possibly, there’s no direct connection, but we found a pair of items at the scene of the last disappearance than may connect it to someone in the army.” As he said that, Blizzard brought out the parchment envelope that held the button and another, larger pouch, leather lined with parchment, which held the dagger. She carefully spilled the button out on the general’s desk.

“Please do not touch it, General,” Blizzard said softly just as Hervasiv started to move his hand toward the button. “Direct handling might contaminate the evidence.”

“I see why you came here. That’s definitely a button from one of our uniforms. And it has to be someone currently serving as we have not had any enlistments end since we adopted that design. Unfortunately we also have a force of twenty-five thousand. Doesn’t narrow your search down by much.”

“No it doesn’t,” Silverwind agreed, “but how many were outside the camp long enough to be in town over the last three or four days?”

“That should be a fairly small list,” the general nodded. “I don’t know if anyone was on leave. Barring family emergencies, there shouldn’t have been anyone as far as I know. I can get you the names of anyone who has been on leave since last weekend.”

“Thank you,” Silverwind replied, “but that may lead to another problem. You don’t think anyone was on leave? Out of twenty-five thousand men?”

“And women, wizard. We Islanders do not share the prejudices of Granom and Emmine,” he told them proudly. “However, yes. As it happens I ordered war games for this week. All units are either in camp or on maneuvers, and before you ask, those maneuvers are taking place to the east of here, even further from Rjalkatyp than the camp itself.”

“Any chance of desertion?” Oceanvine asked quietly.

General Hervasiv’s face turned dark and stormy as he struggled to keep his temper. “No!” he exclaimed at last. Then on a more reasonable tone, “Sorry for the outburst. We have not had that problem since shortly after the coup. That was a messy time.”

“I thought you and your fellow Triumvirs were referring to it as a revolution?” Silverwind made it a question.

“Words!” the general half spat and half laughed. I don’t fight with words, Wizard. My weapons are swords, halbards, cannons, that sort of thing. It was a coup whether we call it one or nor. Might as well call it one,” he added with an amiable shrug.

“Good point,” Silverwind agreed. “So there’s no chance, you believe, that one or more of your men might have gone absent during the war games with plans to turn up again later? It wouldn’t be hard to say they just got lost.”

“It wouldn’t be at that,” Hervasiv agreed reluctantly. “But if that’s the case your list just got a lot longer. Half my troops are out in that blizzard.”

“Will they be all right?” Oceanvine asked. “It looks pretty dangerous out there.”

“It is, and I’ll admit I’m a bit worried, but the officers have their orders to find shelter when weather like this rolls in. There is plenty of natural shelter to the east of here. They should be fine. I still worry though.”

“I think we can screen the men as they return to camp,” Silverwind said to Oceanvine. “One of your special wards should do the trick.”

“One that incorporates Blizzard’s diagnostic spell,” Oceanvine agreed, catching on. “But we’ll need more than one, or am I wrong, General, in assuming a camp this size has more than one gate?”

“Four, in fact,” Hervasiv replied. “One on each side. In theory they should all return via the same gate, the eastern one, but in this weather they are likely to return from every direction except the west. No, I can’t rule that out either if a unit gets lost in the storm and misses the camp and has to double back.”

“We can cast a ward on each of the four gates and set it to make anyone who sets it off to glow bright green until we find him,” Oceanvine replied.

“Why green?” Blizzard asked.

“Why not?” Candle laughed, speaking for the first time since they had entered the office.

“Actually the color doesn’t matter,” Oceanvine explained. “We just want something that stands out. We probably want to do it, though before men start returning to camp.”

“Wait a minute, what will such a spell do to the man it changes and what about the rest of the soldiers who walk through it?”

“What I have in mind will do nobody any harm. Anyone connected with the button will glow a bright color and that only until I dissipate the spell. Everyone else won’t even know they walked through the ward.”

“If you’re certain. I warn you, Master Oceanvine, I will hold you personally responsible for any harm done.”

“Understood. I’m absolutely certain there will be no problems.”

“General, if Vine says there will be no problem you can take it to the bank. I don’t think anyone knows wards as well as she does.”

The unexpected compliment surprised her so much she didn’t think to correct his use of the nickname “Vine.” Instead she simply whispered, “Thank you.”

“Before you go,” Hervasiv held her back, “what is in the pouch?”

“Ah!” Blizzard replied. “This probably has no connection here at all but it’s of military origin so we brought it along.” She pulled out a pair of gloves and put them on, before reaching into the pouch and pulling out the dagger.”

“My dagger!” Hervasiv gasped. “Is this some sort of trick?”

“It is *your* dagger, general?” Blizzard asked, her voice betraying her surprise.

“You all really didn’t know? No, judging by your faces, I guess you didn’t. I’d have to take a closer look at it, but yes I believe that’s my dagger. It was stolen several months ago.”

“Here in the camp?”

“No, I was in town at the time, meeting with Andriy. We do that from time to time. It’s part of running a country,” he added with a smile.

“I imagine it must be,” Silverwind replied in the same dry vein. “Can’t say I ever wanted to try it.”

“Can’t really tell you why I did,” the general replied. “It was just the right thing to do at the time. I can verify whether that dagger is mine, but I’ll need to take it apart.”

Blizzard handed him the gloves. “Use these,” she instructed. “They have been specially prepared for just that purpose.”

He put the gloves on then hesitantly reached for the knife. Blizzard nodded encouragingly and he picked it up. “See, the pommel is threaded on. This was one of the first such blades to attach the pommel in that manner, before that they were either pinned or friction-fitted in place.” He unscrewed the pommel from the back of the haft and then slid off the ivory handle. The cross piece came loose as well, but he left it where it was. “Yes, this is mine. The blades of this series were numbered. See these runes on the tang? Number twenty-nine. One of my ancestors served in Fire Company, or so I’ve been told.” He reassembled the blade. “I know more than a little about police procedure, Journeyman. I realize you need to take this back to your department. How long before I can retrieve it?”

“I’m not really sure, sir,” Blizzard replied as she took back the gloves and packed up the dagger. “I’ll speak to Master Ironblade and he can speak to Chief Rostik, although it may be a while yet. This is evidence of a crime and we haven’t even found a perpetrator yet.”

“I understand.”

“Speaking of finding a perpetrator,” Oceanvine cut in, “Blizzard and I had best see to setting up those wards.”

“May I come along too?” Candle asked. “Maybe if I watch you I can get it right next time I try a ward like this.

“Of course, Candle,” Blizzard replied as she scooped the button up in its parchment envelope. “You can try one for yourself if you want.”

“You may not be up to what I have in mind,” Oceanvine commented. “I haven’t taught you how to cast an alternating current ward yet, but the act of binding another spell is very much the same.”

“Alternating current?” Blizzard asked curiously as they left the office. Oceanvine’s reply was lost as the door closed behind them.

“Silverwind, it is nearly time for the mid-day meal,” Hervasiv said. “Would you care to join me?”

“Delighted, General.”

“Please call me Hervasiv. There are so few people in this world I can think of as peers that I’d hate to get caught up in formality when I meet one.” They left the office together and walked back to the stairway. On the first floor they strolled back to the large front room and then outside into the swirling snow.

“I think it may have gotten a bit warmer,” Silverwind remarked as they walked around the building.

“That would be good,” Hervasiv commented. “And not unusual. We’re surrounded by the ocean here and storms tend to come up from the south. When they do, temperatures rise as they approach. This storm could turn to rain yet, but I don’t think it will. Most storms at this time of year stay all snow. In a

couple months they can go either way. It gets very muddy out here then. When we finish the walls we'll have to pave the streets more thoroughly. Eventually we'll have a real city out here. I've been trying to encourage some merchants from Rjalkatyp to set up shop here. We really are too far from town and more urban-like services might be good for the troops."

"Why did you set up out here in the first place?" Silverwind asked.

Hervasiv answered with practiced smoothness. "It was decided that the presence of the army too close to the city would alarm the populace. In view of our isolation from the recent plague, it was a wise decision, I think." Silverwind just nodded.

Behind Headquarters was a huge gray tent. The snow wasn't sticking to it. In fact what moisture was on the canvas was evaporating in wisps of steam. Inside, it was warm and filled with the cheerful conversation of the men and women seated around the long tables. Food was being served cafeteria-style at the far end of the tent. They shook the snow off themselves and entered.

"Next spring as soon as the ground thaws and dries up a bit," Hervasiv commented, "we'll start the construction of a real mess hall. We probably should have done so sooner, but the building season is really quite short here." He led the way to the serving area.

"What's being served today?" Silverwind asked. Having eaten army rations before, he had some doubts as to the quality.

"Not sure, we'll ask."

The first soldier on mess hall duty told them, "Bread, cheese, a turnip and beef pie, peas and carrots and we got a load of fresh fish in late yesterday so the cook made a batch of chowder. The chowder is very good, sir."

"Thank you, private," Hervasiv replied. He and Silverwind made their way down the line and then found an empty table.

"Your men don't seem particularly demonstrative," Silverwind noted.

"Hmm? Oh, that's just in here. It would be a real bother to have to salute my way down the line every time I wanted a snack, so I made it a general order that saluting in the mess was not required. I also had to order the officers not to cut ahead in line. Eventually they'll have their own mess but until they do the privileges that go with rank will be ignored in the mess hall. It seems to have worked out. A few of the officers grumble when they don't think I can hear it, but the rest of the army seems to appreciate it. The only concession to rank in here is this table. It's the officers' table. The tent is usually much busier but with half the camp out in the war games, the crowd is not quite so large.

"The mess never quite closes either," Hervasiv continued. "We don't have any other entertainment facilities here yet, so this doubles as a recreation hall. Late at night there's not much to get but coffee and tea, but there is always someone here. We can only fit in twenty-five hundred of us at a time so meals tend to be spaced out. Breakfast is served until noon, then lunch starts. Sometime around dusk, the lunch metamorphoses into dinner which is available until midnight or until the food runs out. It's generally considered bad manners to linger here during the busier times, so men often take their food back to their barracks."

"Where is it all cooked?" Silverwind asked.

“There’s another tent just behind this one. Quite a production facility I can tell you. I’m always amazed the food turns out as good as it does, but it does and it’s always available on time. I swear our head cook is a wizard.”

Silverwind chuckled. “On other issues, I had hoped to ask you something that probably has nothing to do with this case,” he asked after a pause. “I hope this isn’t a sensitive subject.”

“What is it?”

“Senator Lavro, your third Triumvir. Nobody seems to be able to tell me what has become of him. He seems to have just disappeared.”

“Why, nothing’s become of him,” Hervasiv replied with an easy shrug. “He’s an old man. After things settled down last year he retired to his estate, just as it was announced he was doing. You can visit him yourself if you want. It’s just a few miles out of your way back to Rjalkatyp. In fact maybe you should.”

“Why’s that?”

“That button you found. They were originally procured through his offices. Supposedly all of them were delivered to the uniform makers who accounted for all of them as they were used, but if there was an over-run or some that went to some other use, not that they were supposed to, of course, he ought to know. I’ll write you a letter of introduction. That should get you past any of his servants. I understand they guard his privacy these days better than a dragon guards his hoard.”

“Thank you, I think we will pay him a call,” Silverwind replied. Then he spotted Oceanvine, Blizzard and Candle just getting in line. He waved to them and after being served they joined him and the general at the table.

“All set?” Silverwind asked.

“Yes. We even got to test one. A couple of companies returned through the East gate just as we finished there. So far nothing, but that’s no surprise,” Oceanvine reported.

“We added in a little extra spell to let us know if someone trips off the main detection spell,” Blizzard added.

“How about you, Candle? Did you learn what you needed to know?” Hervasiv asked.

“I think so,” Candle replied, “but they wouldn’t let me try one for myself.”

“Later, Candle,” Oceanvine told him. “You can try with a more normal ward.”

Men straggled in for the next two days until everyone was accounted for, but it turned out that no one set off the alarm in the wards.

“Well, I can’t say I’m completely sorry to hear that,” Hervasiv said as they stopped by to make their farewells. “It means my men can be trusted. You have taken down your wards?”

“We have,” Oceanvine reported. “And everyone who was inside the camp was here at the time the last disappearance happened?”

“Except for those few you have already interviewed, yes. Well, good luck and I hope you catch your criminal very soon.”

Ten

“Isn’t this a very tenuous lead?” Oceanvine asked.

“I doubt we’re going to learn anything, but the chance that we might is worth taking an extra hour or two and as Hervasiv said, it isn’t very far out of our way,” Silverwind replied.

“Hardly out of the way at all,” Blizzard added. “Just a matter of taking the Old Coast Road back.”

The coastal road was not as wide as the one they had followed to General Hervasiv’s camp and was not as straight a path either, following the shape of the coast as it did. “But it’s actually better maintained than the other road,” Blizzard had told them. “It’s an older road and more care went into its construction. The camp road is so new it doesn’t even have a name yet and was built in a hurry. I hear it doesn’t even have a proper foundation. In a year or two it will need to be entirely rebuilt.”

The Coast Road, they noticed, was smoother and had none of the occasional potholes of the newer road. Soon they saw Senator Lavro’s compound, although it was still a half hour distant. “Seems to be a couple of cliffs and a fair amount of water in our way,” Silverwind commented dryly.

“It’s only a small fjord,” Blizzard replied.

There was a quiet rumble that passed almost as quickly as it had started.

“What was that?” Oceanvine asked.

“A small tremor,” Blizzard remarked unconcernedly. “They happen a few times a year on the average. It’s probably nothing to worry about.”

“Candle, what are you up to back there?” Silverwind asked a few minutes later.

“Shh!” Oceanvine hissed. “He’s working on his wards. I think he’s very close.”

“Darn!” Candle exclaimed a moment later. “I can cast dual spells, but I can’t maintain them. They go away as soon as I try to look at them.”

“You need to think of the finished construct as a single piece, Candle,” Oceanvine explained gently, “even though you cast both spells at once. Keep trying. You’re making a lot of progress.”

“Right,” Blizzard agreed. “You’re attempting advanced magic now. Just relax and keep at it, it will come to you.”

Candle said nothing in reply and went back to his exercise. He wished he was back to his other lessons. Reading the literature Silverwind bought him had filled his few moments of spare time while sailing from Bellinen, but he had read them all and this was the only magic Silverwind and Oceanvine had assigned him to practice since he had learned some of Blizzard’s forensic magic. Then something occurred to him

and he reached into his pocket and pulled out a small milky quartz pebble. It wasn't the stone he had learned to levitate over a year ago. That had been destroyed defeating the demon in North Horalia, but Candle had picked this one up in the same courtyard from which the original had come. While journeying to Querna, he had frequently levitated this stone whenever he had a particularly tough problem to solve. He had stopped doing that months ago as he began to get a sufficient handle on how magic worked, but had never discarded the small white stone.

He looked at it fondly for a moment and then with only the faintest conscious effort caused the stone to float up and out of his hand. He mentally guided the stone out of the carriage and let it circle it three times, then without even looking to see where it was, he stuck his hand under and out the isinglass window and caught the stone. The ability to do that a year ago would have astonished him. Now he did it as a matter of course. His next lesson after levitating the single stone had been to levitate two stones at once. He had learned to how to levitate two objects independently of each other. That had been difficult but now it wasn't any great shakes. So why couldn't he cast a ward melded to another spell? Shouldn't that be pretty much the same thing?

He closed his eyes and slid into what was now a familiar trance-like state. The key to magic was a combination of concentration and relaxation. When he hit a major snag relaxation became a problem so this sort of self-hypnosis was essential. Many mages never grew out of this. Oceanvine used the technique as a matter of course for the more advanced forms of magic. Even Silverwind did so when performing particularly tough spells or when he needed to be absolutely accurate in magic application at least when doing so for the first time.

He knew how to cast a simple ward. He knew how to levitate a stone. In fact, he could do the latter with barely a thought. That gave him an idea, why not build a ward that would levitate the stone?*No, that isn't right*, he thought,*the ward needs to hold the levitation spell so that when triggered the stone will float.*

He tried to imagine how that would work and had a strong image of the stone rising out of his hand when something went through the ward. Then he imagined himself building a small ward that would do just that. It couldn't be that easy, but he went ahead and cast the spell. Opening his eyes, he saw a small wall of throbbing red light stretching from floor to ceiling between him and Oceanvine. He realized he was holding his right hand palm upward with the pebble in it and he couldn't close the hand or move it. It was part of the spell.

"That's an impressive light show," Oceanvine noted with a smirk. "What's it supposed to do?"

"Stick your hand through it and find out," he suggested tauntingly.

"What's going to happen, Candle?" She said in her "no nonsense" tone.

He grinned at her challengingly. "Scared?"

"Not of anything you can come up with, squirt!"

"Oh ho!" laughed Blizzard from the front seat.

"Go ahead, Vine," Silverwind prompted her.

"That's Oceanvine!" she corrected him, and promptly stuck her hand through the ward. Nothing happened and Candle's face fell a notch.

“Now just disrupt the ward honestly,” Silverwind told her, “without using our neat little trick for passing safely through wards.”

“That sounds like a neat trick to know,” Blizzard commented. “How do you do it?”

“I’ll show you later,” Oceanvine told her, then turned to face Candle. He was still smirking at her. “This better not make my teeth orange or my hair green,” she told him fiercely and used her hand to disrupt the ward.

And the small white pebble floated up and out of Candle’s hand. Instantly Candle felt his muscles relax and he could move his arm and hand again. The pebble remained floating even though he wasn’t using any magic to keep it there and the ward had disappeared.

“Oh,” Oceanvine said, a bit embarrassed at her previous defensiveness. “Very good. I don’t think I’ve ever seen a ward used that way. So how are you going to get the pebble to stop floating?”

“Huh?” Candle asked.

“Well, you set the ward to cause the pebble to levitate, right?”

“Uh, yes.”

“As it is your first successful one, I imagine all you had in mind was a floating pebble, right?”

“Well, yes, but...”

“So you didn’t plan any particular time limit to the levitation spell, did you?”

“Well, no, but...”

“Tell me,” Oceanvine pressed on. “Our carriage is currently moving. Is the pebble motionless relative to the carriage, or will it keep on moving when we finally stop?”

Candle thought for a moment, aghast at his error. Finally he replied, “It will stop when the carriage does.”

“Are you sure?”

“I am,” he told her confidently. “The ward was defined by the floor and roof of the carriage. It would have stopped with the carriage, so the pebble should too.”

“Shall we stop the carriage and find out?” she challenged.

“Sure,” he replied with a confidence he didn’t really feel.

“Blizzard,” Oceanvine called, “Could you stop the carriage for a moment?”

“Sure,” Blizzard replied and reined back the horses until the carriage slowed to a halt. The pebble stayed where it was.

“See?” Candle asked, greatly relieved.

“Not bad,” Oceanvine admitted as Blizzard started them forward again. “Now get it back down again.”

“Simple,” Candle replied. Oceanvine laughed.

Tentatively Candle tried just grabbing the pebble with his hand and pulling it down. It came easily enough but when he opened his hand the stone floated back up to its place. Then he started working on it magically. He was still trying to release it when they arrived at the outer gate of Senator Lavro’s estate.

They were stopped by two guardsmen in military-looking uniforms, but not the dark red of the army. These uniforms were the color of bright scarlet and trimmed in gold. The livery colors of the Isle of Fire.

“Sorry folks,” one of them said, “but we have our orders. The Senator sees no one.”

“Perhaps he will see us,” Silverwind replied. “Why not try asking?”

“No one!” he repeated firmly.

“General Hervasiv evidently thinks otherwise,” Silverwind informed them and showed them the letter with the general’s seal on it.

“That’s real,” the other guard whispered. “I’ve seen the seal before.”

“Let me see that,” the first guard demanded. He took the letter and examined the seal. “Wait right here,” he told them and stepped back inside the gate and into the small gatehouse. A few minutes later he came out with another man wearing sergeant’s stripes. The letter had been opened and the sergeant came forward holding it as though it was a bomb about to go off.

“The general sent you, sir?” he asked.

“That’s right,” Silverwind replied with just a touch of anger in his voice. “Is there a problem, sergeant?”

“This is very unusual, sir, but if General Hervasiv sent you, we have to let you in.”

“You read the letter,” Silverwind said, implacably.

“Yes, sir.”

“Then you know your duty.”

“Yes, sir! Uh, sir? May I ask you a question?”

“What is it?” Silverwind said with just the right combination of patience and boredom.

“That pebble, sir? Why is it just floating there?”

Silverwind said nothing but instead locked eyes with the sergeant until he looked away embarrassedly.

“Open the gate!” the sergeant ordered the two guardsmen. Blizzard drove forward, but they heard him mutter to one of the guards, “Did you see that rock? Damn, I hope I did the right thing!”

“Well, that was odd,” Oceanvine commented once they were well out of earshot.

“Indeed,” Blizzard agreed. “The senator must really like his privacy.”

“Assuming he’s the one who gave them their orders,” Candle countered.

“Candle!” Blizzard gasped. “What a thing to say!”

“Candle may have the right of it. We’d better be careful about what we say until we leave,” Silverwind counseled. The others nodded silently as the carriage pulled up to the front door of a large manor house. The man who opened the door for them was dressed like a household servant, but otherwise looked as much like a soldier as the guards had.

“You have business here, sirs and ladies?” he asked sternly, implying that the gate-guards must have been asleep at their posts.

“Of course they do, Ewald,” a high female voice said from across the wide gathering room. They looked over to see a tall Orentan lady with long silver hair, wearing a Granomish-style woolen dress, walking toward them. “Wizard Silverwind! “How delightful to meet you again! And who are your companions?”

Silverwind introduced the rest, resisting the temptation to ask who the lady was.

“And of course you’re here to see my husband,” she concluded. “Come along. Lavro is in the solarium. I’m sure he’s anxious to meet with you!” She dragged them through the house and as soon as they were away from the doorman she whispered, “You won’t remember me, I’m sure, but we really have met before. It was some years ago at a ball held by His Democratic Majesty. I’m Ielena. Lili to my friends. My husband and I were introduced to you in the reception line and you signed my copy of ‘Silverwind and the Serp Master.’”

“Oh yes,” Silverwind replied. “I do remember. Well, I remember signing the book, anyway. I do apologize for not remembering you on sight.”

“No need, it’s been years and I was just the wife of a very junior senator. My how times have changed,” she added bitterly. “Oh, tell me, how is dear Master Windchime? He was very charming and spent most of the evening singing folk tunes to my niece as I recall.” That last was said in a much louder, conversational tone.

“He is well,” Silverwind replied, raising his voice back to a normal volume as well. “He married a very nice lady named Elewys and together they have a very nice business that deals in unusual commodities, mostly food products from all over the world. They even have part of a small ship.”

“So he’s happy?”

“Yes, very much so.”

“I’m so glad,” she replied, sounding as though she meant it with all her heart.

They eventually ended up in a large glassed-in room on the south side of the house. There a lean and elderly Orentan man stood by a glass wall, looking out at the sea. Unlike the woman, he was dressed in robes decorated in a fashionably bright Orentan flowery print.

“Look who has come to call, dear,” Lady Ielena said cheerfully. “Silverwind the Wizard! And this is Master Oceanvine...”

“Oceanvine, lady,” Oceanvine corrected her gently.

“Oh, excuse me,” Ielena apologized sincerely, “and please, please call me Lili.” Oceanvine nodded. “This is Master Blizzard.”

“I’m only a journeyman,” Blizzard whispered shyly.

“Journeyman Blizzard,” Lili corrected, patting Blizzard on the hand fondly. “And this is Candle, Silverwind’s apprentice. I got that right, didn’t I?” she asked with a wink at Candle. Candle laughed and nodded.

“My friends,” Senator Lavro began in a full resonant voice, “It is so nice of you to honor us with your presence this morning. Please let us all be seated.” He gestured to a half circle of chairs that had been placed around a low table. “This room is one of my favorite places in the entire world,” he continued after they had all been seated. “I find the surf out there endlessly fascinating. On the stormy days when the waves are breaking as far as the eye can see and on the calm days when the sea is like glass with just a few small waves that lap gently on the beach; whenever I watch the sea I find peace.”

Just then a servant came in and asked, “Senator, would you like luncheon served here today?” The words were polite, but the tone didn’t quite match. Silverwind and Oceanvine exchanged a quick glance, but neither of them were able to figure out just what was wrong.

“Yes, please. That would be nice,” Lavro replied simply. He said nothing else until the servant had left. “So what can I do for you all?” He asked at last.

“Have you heard about the series of missing persons cases?” Silverwind asked.

“Gods! Is that still going on? Tell me about it.” Together, all four quickly brought Senator Lavro and his wife up to date. “So, you recently found this button and Hervasiv’s dagger in connection with the most recent occurrence,” Lavro concluded. “Well, I can’t say anything about the dagger. I’ve never seen it before, not that one anyway, but I do recall the buttons. It was difficult finding a manufacturer to turn them out for us.”

“Who did make them, Senator?” Blizzard asked.

“Panas and Saba, Ltd. on Cable Street in Rjalkatyp. That was the amusing part of it all. We sent queries to Querna and Killo and it turned out the best manufacturer was right in town. Until that time I didn’t know we had anyone on the Isle of Fire who even made brass buttons. So we ordered some three hundred thousand buttons for army dress uniforms and a fair amount of replacements of course. Buttons have been known to fall off every now and then.”

“So this button could have come from any of the thousands of uniforms or even from among the extras?” Oceanvine asked. “Why didn’t the general tell us?”

“We did check the uniforms of those soldiers who had been out of the camp,” Blizzard reminded her, “and the quartermaster swore that he had every button accounted for, at least from among those that the army accepted delivery of.”

“And were there any others?” Silverwind asked.

“There was a slight over-run of a few thousand buttons. They were ordered destroyed,” the senator informed them.

“Fat chance that happened,” Candle opined. “More likely whoever got the job of destroying them, turned around and sold them pocketing whatever he got for ‘em”

“Silverwind, your apprentice has the mind of a thief,” Lili laughed.

The wizard chuckled. “It has to do with his upbringing. But I think he may be right. Those extra buttons probably went to pad someone’s pocket. But that doesn’t explain why the general sent us here.”

Just then several servants entered carrying trays of food and drink. Silverwind thought he saw Lavro’s eyes quickly glance at them, then to his wife and then back to Silverwind, but the action was so fast he thought he might have imagined it.

“I imagine Hervasiv sent you here because he knows there were extra buttons, but may not know they were supposed to be destroyed,” Lavro replied as the servants placed the food out before them. “Your apprentice may be correct, but I really have no way to verify it one way or the other.”

“I don’t see what all the fuss about buttons is anyway,” Candle said. “I mean I understand why you wanted new buttons with a new symbol on them or something like that, but why try to destroy the extra ones and why keep such careful track of the rest?”

The servants had finished serving the food and had retreated to the perimeter of the solarium, but didn’t actually leave. Lavro’s eyes flickered at them once more before answering Candle’s question. This time Silverwind was certain of that.

“There was a problem during the revolution,” Lavro explained. The only way to differentiate between our troops and those of the president was by the use of gold colored armbands and there were more than a few cases in which we found spies in our midst. It wasn’t hard to counterfeit a gold armband. Hell even our own were in every shade of gold you could imagine. So it was decided once the fighting was over that we should produce uniforms that would be harder to copy exactly. The buttons were just one item. The insignia are more tightly controlled, though if you ask me a good seamstress could duplicate the uniforms, and in the dark, any brass buttons might do the trick. I said so at the time, but I was outvoted two to one.”

While they ate, their conversation turned to more trivial matters and it wasn’t until the servants had cleared the table and left the room that Senator Lavro returned to the matter they had come to ask him about.”

“Arlo Hroreksson,” Lavro told them. “He’s the man I appointed to destroy those extra buttons. He’ll know if they still exist or not.”

“The Minister of War?” Blizzard asked.

“Yes, that’s the man. He was appointed to that post just before I retired.”

“Thank you, Senator,” Silverwind told him. “We’ve enjoyed your hospitality, but I fear we must continue

on our way back to Rjalkatyp.”

“Of course,” Lavro agreed reluctantly, “but before you go I know my lovely wife would be delighted if you could sign one of her books about you, and the library is right on the way back to the front door.”

Silverwind managed to smile as he agreed to do so and they all followed Lavro and Lili to the library. Once there, the senator made a big show of searching for just the right book and finally found a copy of *Silverwind in The Ellisto Caper*. Silverwind took the book and signed it with a special wish of good health and happiness to Lady Ielena and then handed it back.

Then Lili and Lavro escorted them all to the front door. Ielena kissed each of them on the cheek and Lavro kissed the ladies and shook hands with Silverwind and Candle. With some warm farewells Silverwind and his party got back into the carriage and Blizzard drove back toward the gate. The guards there opened the gate for them and they continued on toward town.

“That was pleasant,” Oceanvine commented once they were away from Lavro’s estate. “But what did we really learn. I don’t think Senator Lavro was giving us any straight information.”

“He wasn’t,” Silverwind agreed, “but you can’t blame him. He wasn’t really free to speak in front his jailers.”

“Jailers?”

“Of course. He is obviously under house arrest, exactly why, I’m not sure, but it is probably political in origin. I suspect Vogt Andriy is keeping him isolated, I’m surprised he didn’t have Lavro killed, but I’m sure he has his reasons. I also think Hervasiv really sent us there to make sure Lavro is still alive.”

“But why?”

“The honeymoon is over. I guess it was over when Lavro was retired, but now Hervasiv and Andriy are watching each other like hawks, wondering when the other is going to make a move to completely take over. Or maybe he had another reason. Hard to say. I don’t know him all that well, although he was certainly charming enough while we were with him.”

“But what makes you so sure the servants in the house are Senator Lavro’s jailers?” Blizzard asked.

“When we shook hands at the door he passed me a sort of note. Well, not a note, really, but while we were in the library he evidently tore the title page out of a book. That was the folded piece of paper he passed me. The book it came from is *The High Tower*. Candle you’ve read it, care to give us a book report?”

“It’s about a king who was kept prisoner several years before he was executed,” Candle told them.

Eleven

“Where have you all been?” Ironblade demanded as they entered his office. Blizzard started stammering apologies, but Silverwind smoothly cut her off and quickly explained why they were delayed and what they had learned. “You all should have sent word even so,” Ironblade insisted although somewhat less emphatically. “Considering we are investigating multiple cases of missing persons, I was about to send

out someone to see if you ever arrived at General Hervasiv's camp."

"My apologies, Master Ironblade," Silverwind replied. "That is my fault. It just never occurred to me that we should send word. Even so there was no one with whom to send it until early this morning and they would only have preceded us by two or three hours."

"Next time, if there is a next time," Ironblade requested, "please find a way to let someone know where you are. Oh, very well. It sounds like you've learned a lot. So that was Hervasiv's personal dagger?"

"Personal?" Silverwind mused. "I don't know if he wore it on a regular basis, but he did say it was a family heirloom. Evidently he had an ancestor who belonged to Fire Company."

"How ironic," Ironblade murmured.

"Why so?" Oceanvine asked.

"You do not know the history of Fire Company? Oh, I suppose there is no reason you should. Two hundred and seventeen years ago the Senate faced a constitutional crisis not unlike the one we just lived through or maybe we're still living through it. The Senate has had a long history of alternating corruption and reform and this happened during a period of particularly open corruption. The Senate as an institution was in disrepute and there was a grassroots movement that demanded the impeachment of a large number of senators. It was in this atmosphere that a group of colonels plotted to overthrow the government. Many captains chose to keep their companies out of the coup by marching them out into the back country. That wasn't technically mutiny as the leaders of the coup decided not to let the captains know until just before the actual move, but rumor travels fast in the army so over half the army was out on an impromptu "war game," when the colonels were ready to move. Even with less than half the army they had more than enough men to march up the Hill and arrest the President and the Senate. The stories that came out later about how the colonels planned to kill them were pretty horrendous. Their first move was to murder the General of the Army and the Grand Admiral of the Navy. The navy was ordered out to sea in the admiral's name which kept them out of the fray. Even the primitive cannons of that time could have gone a long way toward aborting the coup.

"However when they marched up the Hill to the Senate, that large building next to the Vogt's palace, there were roughly five hundred men blocking their way. They were all members of the army too; privates, corporals, sergeants and a few low ranking officers. Actually there were more than a few sailors mixed up in the group as well. Some had been on leave when the ships were ordered out of port. Half a century later, there was a poet who put the whole thing to verse. The way he told it you'd think the whole battle was fought with words and the flexing of muscles. I suppose there may have been some of that too, but the fighting was fierce.

"The passage up the Hill as you've seen is narrow in several places. Five hundred men can indeed fend off an army for hours. During the fighting some of the attackers deserted and ran off into the moors, where they encountered the troops on their so-called war games. The captains there heard about the fighting and decided to come in on the side of the Senate. It took them until after dusk to arrive, but by the time they did, the colonels had withdrawn their forces leaving roughly one hundred of the defenders alive. It took two weeks for order to be restored, but in the end the colonels were arrested, tried and executed.

"The men who defended the Hill were from nearly every company and ship in our armed forces and according to tradition exactly one hundred survived. I've always had my doubts about that number, but it sounds good, doesn't it. Anyway, the Senate voted those men the highest awards it was within their

power to grant. Among other honors they were named the Fire Company partially because they had defended the Isle of Fire against incredible odds and partially because the survivors, if they were of the same unit, would have made a full company. That special dagger was commissioned and each survivor was given one as a mark of his service.”

“No wonder the general values it so highly,” Oceanvine said at last.

“Indeed. That dagger is priceless and, no doubt, has even more sentimental value for General Hervasiv. But is it not ironic that a present day holder of a genuine Fire Company dagger was the leader of a successful coup?”

Just then a young man came in, handed a message to Master Ironblade and left as quickly as he arrived. Ironblade looked at the message and said, “This may be good news. Lieutenant Amaniev has woken up and is asking for me. His doctor says that he really isn’t strong enough yet for a prolonged debriefing and suggests we put off questioning him until tomorrow.”

“Just after breakfast then?” Silverwind suggested. Ironblade agreed.

“Just tell them what you told me last night,” Ironblade said to Lieutenant Amaniev.

When Silverwind and the others arrived at Amaniev’s hospital room, the lieutenant was sitting up in his bed and talking to Ironblade and Blizzard.

“I was working with a new partner, an Orenta who called herself Mace, when we were first assigned to investigate the disappearances. Most of the early ones involved children. I understand the more recent cases involve older individuals. It was Mace who managed to find a link between the missing people and various acts of vandalism at shrines within the New Forest. She said there was some sort of sign or symbol that had some mystic significance but would tell me no more.”

“Under my orders,” Ironblade told him.

“I know that. I still don’t understand why,” Amaniev replied.

“That sign is called the Bond of Aritos,” Silverwind told him. “The name alone should tell you more than enough to help you understand. Over the centuries mages have learned it is best not to even mention it unless absolutely necessary. Perhaps in this case we should have told you that much at least.”

“It doesn’t matter. Knowing its name would not have made any difference. After Mace reported to Master Ironblade he put some sort of protective spell on me. Said Mace could take care of herself. I’m sorry, Ironblade, but you were wrong about that.

“Mace and I were following a trail out of town that led into the New Forest. That part came as no surprise, since we already knew there was a connection.”

“Why didn’t you mention that to us?” Oceanvine asked Ironblade.

“By the time you all got here whatever had been happening there had come to an end and whatever the

perpetrators were working on had moved on as well. All the recent victims have been adults and we have detected no pattern that indicates any particular location,” Ironblade explained. “The last time Silverwind was here there was, unknown to any of us at the time, a demon cult that raised the demon Arithan. Actually until Silverwind informed me, I didn’t know which demon it was. Demons are not known for their gratitude and most of the Arithan cult was killed by Arithan himself shortly before his defeat at the hands of Silverwind and Windchime. I understand this was done in such a way as to make the demon stronger. However there must have been a few survivors.”

“Or perhaps just one,” Silverwind added.

“Perhaps. In any case we all know that these disappearances are connected to Arithan, so someone must have enabled him to return.”

“I’m not sure Windchime and I did any more than chase him off,” Silverwind commented. “We were in no condition after the encounter with him to do a proper permanent sealing spell. I suppose he might have come back on his own.”

“Then how could he have gained new followers?”

“How did he get them in the first place?” Oceanvine countered. “On the other hand, does he have new followers? I haven’t seen any indication to prove that.”

“Oh he does, but we’re getting ahead of Amanser’s story. Go ahead, Lieutenant.”

“Thank you. Mace and I followed that trail that only she could see and it led to a shrine to Wenni. That shrine was only meant to hold flowers, but there was a child on the stone when we got there. There were about two dozen men and women around the altar. They were wearing blood red robes and they had knives. They all had knives.”

“A special sort of knife?” Silverwind asked.

“Not that I could tell. From the brief look I had at them they seemed to be all different. As though the people holding them, just grabbed whatever came to hand. Maybe they did, I don’t know. Before I could do anything, they raised those daggers as one and plunged them into that poor child. I was about to run forward, but Mace stopped me. Instead she tried to cast a spell, but before she could one of the people in front of us, turned and cast some sort of killing spell. Mace died instantly. Whatever that spell was, I heard a sound like the cracking of every bone in her body.

“After that everything became a nightmare. The people in robes pulled back their hoods and they looked ghastly, like everyone of them was a demon.”

“Maybe they were wearing masks?” Oceanvine suggested.

“No. I’m sure that isn’t the case. Whatever killed Mace twisted my mind into a knot. I’m sure they were normal people, I just saw them as demons. I was frightened out of my wits and turned and ran as hard as I could. I thought I could hear them just behind me. I could feel their hot breath on the back of my neck. I could swear they were throwing balls of fire at me.”

“That they might have been doing,” Silverwind told him. “It’s hard to tell truth from fantasy in the condition you were in.”

"I dodged a lot," Amanser Amaniev continued as though he hadn't been interrupted. "I don't know how long I ran, but I eventually made it back into town. I kept trying to find real people but they all looked like demons. Everywhere demons! I couldn't get away. Nowhere to hide! Nowhere to run!"

He was becoming agitated and Ironblade cast a quick tranquillizing spell. Amaniev quieted down and closed his eyes. A moment later he was asleep. "Sleep well, Lieutenant," Ironblade said gently. "I've already told you all how we found him. He was curled up on the floor of a tavern. He'd screamed his voice hoarse hours earlier, but he kept trying to scream until he finally passed out. I've never heard of anything like it. Horrible."

"Indeed," Silverwind agreed with a shudder. "It's a good thing we had breakfast before we came here."

"Do we wait for him to wake up or go talk to the Minister of War?" Oceanvine asked.

"Minister Hroreksson? What connection does he have to this?" Ironblade asked.

"Senator Lavro said he might be able to tell us more about the army's buttons," Blizzard explained. "I suppose I should have mentioned that yesterday but it was late and you sent me off."

"You looked tired," Ironblade replied. "Never mind. Tell me about that now." After a quick explanation, Ironblade nodded. "Yes, finding out about those extra buttons sounds like a good idea. It may not lead anywhere, but if there are a fair number of them floating about, a case against Hervasiv or someone in the army may grow weaker."

"Do you really think General Hervasiv may be behind this?" Blizzard asked uncertainly.

"He's a suspect. We only have his word for that dagger having been stolen. I think there's a strong possibility the perpetrator may be a ranking officer."

"Some may be," Silverwind agreed, "but not necessarily all. Perhaps you forget, but we're dealing with a group of people here. A demon cult and we could have members from all walks of life."

"But their leader?" Ironblade asked.

"Could be anyone. I don't think we're very close to whoever that may be. We haven't even found any of his or her followers. Well, let's go meet with my old friend Arlo." With that Silverwind swept out the door, leaving Oceanvine, Candle and Blizzard to chase after him.

"Old friend Arlo?" Oceanvine asked as they caught up outside the hospital.

"Just an expression," Silverwind replied. "Actually Mister Hroreksson was a real pain in the posterior last time I was here. He was an assistant to the deputy minister of Internal Affairs at the time. Somehow he managed to place himself in our way every time Geraint and I turned around."

"Could he be a member of the demon cult?" Candle asked.

"He wasn't last time around," Silverwind told him. "He was just an officious, self-important, career politician. I suppose he might have changed, but I doubt it. That sort rarely does. Now as I recall the Ministry of War offices are about five blocks that way. Are they still there, Blizzard?"

"We're going in the right direction," Blizzard informed him. "It's in the same place as before the

Triumvirate. I guess that's the same place you remember."

Silverwind laughed, "Sorry I keep forgetting how young you are, Blizzard. Not that you aren't an adult, of course. It's just that I forget you were a young child back then. Now as I remember it, there was a pastry shop on the next block."

"That's still there too," Blizzard informed him. "At least there's a pastry shop there."

"And do they still make the best creampuffs in the world?"

"I wouldn't know," Blizzard laughed back at him. "I've only been here and Merinne and creampuffs don't hold up too well in the tropics, do they?"

"Not really, no."

"They do make the best in town though," Blizzard offered.

"Then let's find out, shall we?" Silverwind suggested.

They walked into the pastry shop and Silverwind said, "Yes, I remember this place. Geraint and I stopped here several times on our last trip."

"And I remember you, sir," a human woman said from behind the counter. She was a small round woman in her late fifties. "You didn't exactly hurry back did you?"

"A few other things came up," Silverwind replied. "And how have you been? And your family."

"I'm well enough, thank you. Willi, my husband, passed on a few years ago."

"I'm very sorry to hear that," Silverwind replied.

The woman smiled wistfully. "He always used to brag how he made pastry for Silverwind the Great." Silverwind returned her smile. "My daughter works here with me and my son went to sea. Merchant marine, but I think this may be his last trip. I don't think his fiancée will put up with that for much longer. He has a reserve commission in the navy and he's been offered a step up to lieutenant commander and command of his own ship if he joins up full time. He'll still be on duty most of the time, but he can stay at home when his ship is in port."

"Sounds good for all of you then. So tell me, do you still know how to make creampuffs?"

The woman laughed. "Of course! And would you like something to drink as well?"

Silverwind and Blizzard enjoyed cups of coffee with their pastry while Oceanvine and Candle had tea. When they were finished Silverwind promised to return soon and then they all continued on to the Ministry of War building.

Temperatures in Rjalkatyp had stayed below freezing since the most recent snowstorm and while the sidewalks had been shoveled, some had only narrow paths carved out of the snow. On some of the walks, they slipped a bit on the slate paving stones, but by treading carefully they eventually found their way to the front steps of the War Department.

The building was similar in construction to that which housed the Department of Health, surrounded by a colonnade of white plastered columns. However, while this building was larger, it was not as tall and the pillars reached to the top of the building. They entered the building and were immediately ushered to a waiting room.

“This is ridiculous!” Oceanvine exclaimed after half an hour of waiting. “We should have arranged a meeting ahead of time. I’m surprised we’ve been able to meet with the people we have met with so far. Any one of them could have claimed they were too busy.”

“On the contrary,” Silverwind replied. “If he wanted to ignore us and we sent a messenger, he would just refuse a meeting.”

“Oceanvine is right,” Blizzard put in. “The proper procedure would have been to arrange this meeting in advance. If necessary, we could have used the department to pressure him into meeting with us.”

“Of course we still might have to, but knowing it’s me, I suspect he’ll be curious and meet with us shortly. Last time around the trouble was getting rid of him.”

A few minutes later Silverwind was proved correct and they were escorted to Arlo Hroreksson’s office. The office, a study in wood and leather, was situated in a harbor-facing corner of the second floor.

“You’ve done well for yourself, Arlo,” Silverwind said by way of greeting.

“Charming as ever, Silverwind,” Minister Hroreksson replied tiredly. “I assume you haven’t decided to look me up for old time’s sake.” Arlo Hroreksson was a short and portly Granom with silver-shot black hair.

“Why not?” Silverwind pressed obnoxiously. “We had such fun together last time I was here.”

“All right,” the minister of war replied shaking his head. “You’ve made your point. Sixteen years ago I was a jerk. I’d like to think that maybe I’ve grown up since then. How about you?”

Silverwind stopped and stared at him for a while. “Well, maybe you have at that,” he replied finally. “You’ve heard about the series of missing persons cases?”

“How could I avoid it? *The Standard* has been covering it to the point of insanity.”

“*The Standard*?” Oceanvine asked.

“Local newspaper,” Silverwind told her quickly.

“Right,” agreed Hroreksson. “And even if I were not constantly beset from the gentlemen and ladies – and I use those terms very lightly – of the press, I’ve been getting memos from Chief Rostik, all but accusing me for encouraging whoever is behind these crimes and another from General Hervasiv asking me to press for the return of some dagger of his. So how about you and your friends here telling me just what is going on?”

Silverwind sighed. “I didn’t realize Hervasiv was in such a hurry, but of course you must realize that we cannot release evidence prematurely.”

“Of course I realize that, but you have to realize that the general is one of the three men who rule this

island. If he wanted to, he could just take that damned dagger back. I think he's being very understanding by doing this through channels, all things considered."

"Hervasiv impressed me as a decent Granom, not taken to living by the old 'Rank Has Its Privileges' code as so many others do," Silverwind replied, "although I am a bit surprised he wrote that letter immediately. I thought he understood and agreed that it might take a while to get it back to him."

"The general is a triumvir, Silverwind. He isn't supposed to have to wait for something he wants."

"Perhaps. And do you mean to say you haven't heard from the Vogt as well?"

"As a matter of fact, I have. His Excellency insisted I give you all the encouragement I can."

"I didn't know he cared..."

"... to finish up your business here and stop interfering with the legitimate business of his government," Minister Hroreksson finished.

"Ah. Yes, that seems more like the impression I got when I saw him last."

"Really and with your sweet disposition?" Hroreksson taunted, then shook his head and said, "Sorry. That was uncalled for."

"No need," Silverwind replied with a shake of his head. "You seemed almost human there for a moment."

Hroreksson smiled then asked, "So what is going on?"

Together Silverwind and the rest related the progress of the investigation so far, interrupted only occasionally but questions from the Minister of War. When they got to Senator Lavro's recommendation that they talk to him, Hroreksson looked startled.

"Me? Really? Well, yes I did have the job of disposing of the surplus buttons. I thought it was silly to be so protective of them at all. I mean how likely is it that anyone would want to impersonate one of our soldiers. We don't have any declared enemies and while I suppose relations with Ellisto could be warmer, the only governments who really are unfriendly are the Saindo and Wennil Archipelagos. I think the Navy is probably sufficient protection from them, but having a standing army is good insurance."

"Does it need to be so large?" Oceanvine asked.

"There is some debate about that," Hroreksson admitted, "but that decision is up to our leaders, not me. I just make recommendations and carry out policy. Anyway, that's just what I did. I had the buttons sent to the foundry and melted down for scrap."

"Could someone have pocketed some, as souvenirs for example?" Candle asked slyly. Silverwind realized suddenly that the boy had been abnormally quiet recently. Was he growing up too? He'd kept his mouth shut except when he had a question to ask, but obviously he had kept his eyes and ears open.

"Well, of course someone might have," Hroreksson admitted. "I didn't stand there and watch the things melt, but I have no reason to believe they weren't destroyed as ordered. There is another possibility, however. Do you have the button with you? Yes? May I see it?"

Blizzard opened the envelope and cautioned him not to actually touch it, then spilled it out on the man's desk. Hroreksson stared at the button silently for a few minutes, muttering things like, "Hmm," and "Maybe..." They were still waiting patiently when he asked, "Could you turn this over?"

"Of course," Blizzard said and slipped the parchment envelope partway under the button and flipped it over.

"Ah, yes," Hroreksson said immediately. "I thought so! This button is not one of the surplus ones. This is a prototype. See that little flame mark on the bottom of the button? It's a signature mark of the artisan who designed it. Tacyt Sylwester is his name. Anyway if you all had handled this button you'd have realized it is solid brass. The actual buttons the army bought were hollow. There were half a dozen prototype castings. I understood that they were kept in a safe at Panas and Saba Ltd."

"They manufactured the buttons," Silverwind stated.

"Right, and Sylwester works for them. Those prototypes were used to make the molds for the dyes which were used to stamp out the buttons."

"Sounds like we'll have to stop over there as well," Silverwind noted, "and find out why one of their prototypes went missing."

As they left the Ministry of War, they felt another tremor and looking north at Mount Rjal, they saw more smoke and ash rising into the air.

"That's just a small eruption," Blizzard assured them. "Nothing to worry about."

"The mountain's been more active than usual," Silverwind noted.

"Activity comes and goes," she replied, unconcerned. "We do have a more immediate problem, however."

"Oh?" Silverwind asked. "What is that?"

"Tacyt Sylwester, the man you want to see next? Well, I don't believe that's going to happen. You see, he's one of the missing people."

"How long ago did that happen?" Oceanvine asked.

"Six months ago," Candle replied. All three turned to look at him. "I, uh, noticed his name on the list of victims. I thought it was a funny sounding name, so it sort of stuck in my head. Anyway, Blizzard is right. He's not around for us to talk to."

"So what do you think?" Oceanvine asked Silverwind. "Coincidence or something else?"

"At this point I'm willing to believe anything," the wizard replied. "I think we need to take another look at that button."

“What’s so important about it?” Candle asked. “I mean I know this is a copy that ought not to be out of the safe at the factory, so it probably didn’t fall off a uniform, but...” he trailed off.

“Go ahead,” Silverwind encouraged him. “It sounds as though you’re about to answer your own question.”

Candle thought a moment and then continued. “It didn’t fall off a uniform so it’s possible that whoever kidnapped Miss Tarabawa was not in the army, although that isn’t completely ruled out, but it’s less likely because we never found a connection to the button at the camp. But there may still be an army connection because of the General’s dagger. We should have asked the General where he was when he lost the knife.”

“Or where the knife was,” Blizzard commented. “I think we can look that up at the Department. There should be a report about the theft on file, and by now Sergeants Boris and Villenov may have found a pawn shop that handled it as well.”

“Only if the theft was unconnected to the Arithan cult,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Oh good,” Silverwind commented sourly. “Now we’re all getting paranoid.”

“All?” Oceanvine asked. “What are you worried about?”

“I’m not sure,” Silverwind replied, “but nothing about this case smells right. I’ve never tried to solve a problem with so many clues and no connections. It’s a giant puzzle and we’re missing half the pieces.”

“But why would anyone want to steal a brass button, even one that was the model for the finished product?” Candle asked. “Wouldn’t it be easier just to buy one off a soldier on leave? The soldier could always say he lost the thing and get a replacement from the quartermaster. Seems to me that if he was clever enough he could make a fair profit at it too if the buyer wanted one bad enough.”

“Like I said,” Silverwind repeated, “we need to take another look at that button.”

“Before or after we visit Panas and Saba?” Blizzard asked. “It seems to me that if this button is as big a mystery as it appears we ought not be walking around with it. I’ll feel a lot better once I have it back in the Police Department vault.”

“Good idea,” Silverwind agreed. “Let’s stop for lunch, then we’ll examine the button again. We can visit the button factory afterward.”

Twelve

“Silverwind?” Blizzard asked, “Are you well?”

“Not really,” he replied. “This is giving me a major headache but it’s necessary.”

“I could do the looking.”

“I thought you were looking,” Silverwind countered.

“We all are. I just wish I knew what you’re looking for.”

“That’s the problem, Silverwind explained. “I don’t really know. Blizzard, have you thoroughly cataloged what we discovered from our earlier examinations?”

“I have,” she replied.

“Good. Okay it’s time to go to the next level. Candle, I want you to pay especial attention here. So far all our investigations of this button have been passive. I mean we have looked at its aura and deciphered it. For most forensic work we would have learned all we need to know, but sometimes aural analysis can be very complex, especially in a case like this. What we have here is a set of aural layers and the only way to see everything they represent is to carefully unwrap those layers until we have examined each one in turn.”

“How do we do that?” Blizzard asked. “I’ve never even heard of that sort of procedure.”

“Vine?” Silverwind asked. “Do you know how?”

“Never tried that, but you know my specialty is wards. If pressed, I suppose I might try a very small ward to act as a filter, but getting each filter perfectly matched to one of these layers you’re talking about... That’s tough!”

“Hmm, interesting notion, but unless you were very careful you would destroy components of the aura, rather than exposing them. That might change what you see and give you misleading results.”

“So you need to open up this aura like a flower bud opens?” Candle asked.

“Nice metaphor,” Silverwind commended his apprentice. “The mental picture I had in mind was more like a package with multiple layers of paper around it, but I like yours better. All right, everyone think of the aura around the button as a closed flower bud. It’s fairly tightly closed, but the outer layers are starting to open just a bit so we have a hint of what’s inside.

“Now the thing to keep in mind is that an aura can be manipulated in very much the same way Candle here can levitate a pebble. In many ways it is even easier, but the danger here is to keep from letting your manipulation do any more than just let this bud open up so we can see what might be hidden without changing anything about it but its shape. Understand?” They all nodded. “Okay, watch carefully.”

Silverwind turned his full attention to the button. His head was pounding and every effort caused a stabbing bolt of psychic pain to shoot between his temples, but he put that as firmly out of mind as he could. Slowly, gently, he caused the petals of this aural bloom to open.

“Now that’s interesting,” Oceanvine observed as the details of the spell came into view.

“I don’t understand,” Blizzard admitted. “What is this? An enchanted button?”

“That’s one way of describing it,” Oceanvine assured her. “Somebody cast a spell on this button. A very ugly spell.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Candle agreed. “Looks like the Bond of Aritos was a major component.”

“You’re getting very good at this, Candle,” Blizzard commended him. “But what does that particular spell do?”

“I don’t know yet,” Silverwind said tightly. “Just let me open it a bit more and... Uhh!” He grasped his head and a moment later slumped to the ground.

“Silverwind!” Oceanvine cried, rushing to his side. She knelt on the floor next to him oblivious of the presence of Candle and Blizzard beside her. She cast a diagnostic spell and examined him. His aura showed the effects of Arithan’s curse. She could see how it was attacking him, but was at a loss to find a way to counter it. In fact she could also see how Silverwind was fighting back against it. She decided it would be too dangerous to try to disrupt that. She just didn’t know enough. Absently, she wondered if anyone did.

“I think he just passed out,” Blizzard said from what seemed like the other side of the room.

Oceanvine looked up and saw her and Candle. “I think so too. He’s going to have a headache for days now. Candle, run back to the inn and get that Granomish pain medicine Silverwind’s been taking.” Candle nodded and dashed out of the police station.

“I’ll get a few officers to help us get him on a couch,” Blizzard said.

“No!” Oceanvine stopped her with just a bit too much sharpness. “I’d rather no one else knows about this.”

“Ironblade ought to,” Blizzard countered. “And I think you owe me an explanation too.”

“All right,” Oceanvine sighed. “Get Ironblade and I’ll tell you both what’s happening.”

A few minutes later they had Silverwind lying down on a couch and Oceanvine explained about the curse Silverwind had been living with since his last visit to the Isle of Fire. “So you can understand why we didn’t want anyone to know,” Oceanvine concluded.

“Indeed,” Ironblade agreed. “The people we’re trying to catch would only be bolder if they knew.”

“But if Silverwind is incapacitated, how can we handle a problem we need a wizard to handle?”

“I’m not entirely feeble,” Silverwind protested from the couch. His eyes were shut tightly and he kept his arm over them. “Could you close the shade on that window, please.” Blizzard rushed to do so. “Thank you,” he told her when that was done.

“A bad headache?” Oceanvine asked.

“No thanks,” Silverwind replied with a forced smile. “Already have one.” Then he seemed to think of something. “You haven’t taken a closer look at the button yet have you?”

“You can’t be that anxious to hurt yourself again!” Oceanvine said incredulously.

“Hardly, but just before I blacked out I caught a look at something you ought not to see without some warning and precautions. Take a look now, but before you do, cover the button with a screening ward and make it filter out the active component of the Bond of Aritos.” Oceanvine went to the table and did so. “It was the power of the Bond that knocked me out. Okay. Have it in place? Now take another look

at what's behind it."

"Oh my gods!" Oceanvine swore fervently.

"Good thought," Silverwind replied with a groan. "We could use their help. I could use one of those headache pills."

"I sent Candle to get them," Oceanvine told him. "But this..."

"This is terrible. Insidious," Ironblade cut in. "Blizzard, look at this. See how that spell was built? The Bond of Aritos must have been used to power it and give it intent. I can't see that clearly through the ward and I don't think I want to either."

"But that spell is meant to spread by contagion," Blizzard noted.

"Yes," agreed Oceanvine. "It passes its attributes to the molds and then the dyes used to stamp out the finished buttons. And the buttons are the actual intended carriers of the spell. No wonder you got knocked out, Silverwind. The power behind this must be incredible. It's more surprising we never noticed it before."

"The concealment from normal diagnostics was part of the spell," Silverwind explained as he tried to sit up on the couch. "The activation of the transfer is by the making of an impression of the design. A masterly work. Perverted and evil, but masterly."

"So the spell has been passed to every button on every army uniform," Blizzard concluded. "Why? What does it do?"

"I don't know yet," Silverwind admitted. "We'll need to look at one of the actual final buttons to figure that out."

"I can send a messenger out to Hervasiv's camp to request a sample," Ironblade offered.

"No, that might let someone know we're on to something and I think we're very close right now. Let's be a bit more subtle. How often do soldiers come into town on leave?"

"They mostly come in on the weekends," Ironblade told him.

"Any of them ever get drunk and disorderly?"

"Silverwind! They're soldiers," Ironblade replied. "Of course they do. Most of them, in fact."

"Well, the weekend starts tomorrow. Let's arrest a few of them. Just hold them until they sober up and let them go for all I care. Just give us a chance to take a look at the buttons on those uniforms."

"Speaking of buttons," Oceanvine put in, "I don't think we ought to go to the factory this afternoon."

"Maybe you're right," Silverwind agreed. "We'll do that first thing tomorrow morning."

“Are you sure you want to eat out tonight?” Oceanvine asked. “We can certainly bring something in.”

“No, I’m feeling much better,” Silverwind insisted as they left the police station, “And some good food and drink will do more to restore me than going to sleep early. Now where should we go?”

“I must admit I’m starting to tire of fish,” Oceanvine admitted. “The only other specialty here seems to be lamb and mutton.”

“I’m sure we could scare up a well-aged beefsteak, but it would have to have come from Granom and would be a bit pricey this late in the winter,” Silverwind pointed out. “Still, if that’s what you want...”

“No, lamb will do quite well. Where would you like to go, then?”

“Most of the local inns are pretty much alike,” Silverwind noted. “Do you have a preference?”

“Not really. Oh, here comes Blizzard. Maybe she can make a suggestion.”

Blizzard had just exited the building and paused to wrap herself a little more tightly in her woolen uniform cloak. Then with a look of determination she continued on down the stairs, not having noticed Silverwind, Oceanvine and Candle standing on the sidewalk a few yards down the street.

“Blizzard!” Oceanvine called. Blizzard looked in their direction and smiled. Oceanvine waved her over. “Been a long day, hasn’t it?”

“That it has,” Blizzard replied. “I’m just headed on home where I’ll find something to eat and curl up with a...” she paused with a look at Silverwind, “good book,” she concluded uncertainly.

“If I’m in it,” Silverwind commented wryly, having caught her glance, “it’s not all that good.”

“They’re fun to read,” Blizzard said defensively.

“We were just going to get dinner ourselves,” Oceanvine told her. “Care to join us?”

“Sure,” Blizzard replied enthusiastically. “Where are you all going?”

“That was our next question,” Oceanvine laughed. “Anyplace I can get something that isn’t fish.”

“That isn’t fish?” Blizzard repeated, then she flashed a mysterious sort of smile at them. “Ever had food cooked in the Palsondir style?”

“I haven’t. Silverwind?”

“That’s part of the Granom Archipelago. I hadn’t heard the food there was very different from the rest of Granom.”

“Oh it is. It is. Very hot and spicy. Are you game?” Blizzard asked.

“Can we get a good Granomishals to go with it?” Silverwind asked.

“Of course! It’s the only thing that will kill the heat of some of the hotter dishes.”

“Then lead the way!”

Blizzard led them around the block and through an alley, then took a right and went nearly three more blocks. She stopped at a bright orange door and just walked in. The rest followed.

The restaurant behind that door was as unusual as the color of the door itself had been. The walls were covered by boldly colored murals mostly depicting early Granomish warriors in armor, going forth into battle. Silverwind knew the artistic style well and noted how the painter had bowed to the conventions of the Isle of Fire enough to not actually show that these bold warriors were fighting equally early Orenta.

“I’ve eaten here before,” Blizzard told them. “I’ll do the ordering, if you trust me.”

“Not when you’re smirking like that,” Silverwind told her.

“He’s just kidding,” Candle told her. “Do your worst.” They all laughed at that.

Most inns in Rjalkatyp only served a few different dishes at any given time. There might be a special, usually based on whatever the inn keeper was able to get a good deal on recently, and then there would be two or three other offerings, usually something with fish or lamb or mutton, although occasionally beef or venison might also be offered. This Palsondir style restaurant, however, offered nearly twenty different entrees and a young waitress, the restaurateur’s daughter it turned out, brought them a printed menu describing all the food, but Blizzard barely bothered to glance at it before rattling off the names of four different dishes.

“And what would you like to drink?” the waitress asked.

“*Als* for me,” Blizzard told her.

“And me,” Silverwind ordered.

“Do you have any hard cider?” Oceanvine asked. The Waitress nodded and looked at Candle.

“Uh,*als* ?” he said with supreme uncertainty. She wasn’t much older than he was but the skeptical look she gave him was ageless.

“He’ll have a sweet seltzer,” Silverwind ordered for his apprentice.

“We have that,” the waitress told them, sounding excited. “So few people in Rjalkatyp have heard of it. It’s very Granomish. You’ve been to Granom?” She asked Candle.

“We were in Querna last spring,” Candle admitted.

“Ooh! I’ve never been to the capital! Just Palsondir,” she smiled, then rushed their order to the kitchen. A couple of minutes later she was back with their drinks. “I’m very busy at the moment but when it gets quiet would you mind if I come back here? I’d love to hear about Querna.” They nodded and she went happily back to her work.

They didn’t have much longer to wait before the food arrived. The food was as brightly colored as the murals. Blizzard had ordered two very spicy dishes, one that was moderately spiced and another that was mild but with a delicate complex of flavors.

“Hoo! That’s hot,” Silverwind exclaimed when he took his first bite. “I love it. It’s very similar to the food of Northwest Bellinen.”

“Yes,” agreed Blizzard. “After the wars with Bellinen, the Granomen of Palsondir brought back some Orentan spices, especially the peppers. Much to their delight they found they could grow those peppers locally so long as they started them indoors before their last frost of spring. What we have here is an interesting mixture of classic Granomish and Orentan cuisines. Good, huh?”

“I think I’ll stick to the milder dishes,” Oceanvine said after downing half her cider to counteract the first taste of one of the hot ones. “I do want to try that one too though.” She pointed at the second hot dish, a colorful mixture of meat and vegetables.

When they were nearly finished eating the waitress returned to their table and sat down next to Candle. “So tell me all about Querna,” she said excitedly to him. He started by describing the city and then the Wurra Palace, but when she realized they had been guests of the king her questions led to what they had been doing there so Candle described their adventures in search of a serial killer. She made an excellent audience, gasping, smiling and applauding in all the right places.

While Candle kept her entertained, Silverwind, Oceanvine and Blizzard moved to a table near a large fireplace and discussed some of the finer points of what they hoped to investigate the next day. By the time they were ready to leave it was quite late and the waitress’ parents were obviously waiting for them to leave.

Out on the street again, Blizzard said, “My place is actually just a block away from your hotel. I’ll walk you back.” But they were just passing the police station on their way back when a loud alarm siren sounded cutting through the night air.

“What’s that?” Oceanvine asked.

“That is the fire alarm,” Blizzard replied.

“Should we find out where the fire is to help out?” Oceanvine asked.

“Depending on where it is, the Fire Department may need to form a bucket brigade,” Blizzard considered. “Yes, I think we should. If we’re not needed, we’ll know soon enough.”

“Which way do we go?” Candle asked. Just as he finished speaking, however a horse-drawn wagon with a loud bell ringing drove by two blocks away.

“Follow that wagon,” Silverwind advised and they started off at a run.

After a few blocks they slowed down to a fast walk. They were passed by two other wagons, each carrying ladders, hoses and pumping equipment. They eventually caught up to the firefighters near the harbor area where a large brick factory building was burning, flames leaping out of the windows and through a large hole in the roof.

“We need volunteers!” a fireman told them and other people who had arrived on the scene. “We need as many bucket lines as we can fill between here and the harbor.”

“Good thing the harbor is only two blocks away,” Blizzard noted. “We should get at least three lines

going to start with. After that it depends on how many more folks show up and how long we all can keep going.”

They rushed forward to help form a line and ended up a little over a block away from the actual fire. Even before the leather buckets started to make their way up from the harbor, however, the firemen were already using their steam-powered pumps to send spurts of well water into the burning building. Then the endless work of passing buckets began.

They started with three lines of people and buckets and eventually grew to five lines all moving water at an excruciatingly slow rate. After a couple of hours though many people were succumbing to fatigue and they shut down one line to give people a chance to rest. Silverwind and company were taking a break when they felt another tremor shake the ground. Looking north they could see fire dancing on top of Mount Rjal.

“Lava fountains,” Blizzard noted. “I’ve heard of them, but this is the first time I’ve seen some.”

“Still think the mountain isn’t going to have a major eruption soon?” Oceanvine asked.

“Right now I wouldn’t put money against it,” Blizzard replied.

Dawn was just breaking at the end of the very long night when the firemen called for an end to the bucket brigade. The fire was still burning in a few places, but they were well within the control of the steam pumps.

“I think a few hours of sleep are in order,” Silverwind yawned. “What do you say we meet for lunch before going to investigate Panas and Saba?”

“What’s that you said, sir?” a fireman asked from nearby.

“Uh, Panas and Saba?” Silverwind repeated.

“Unless you’re investigating tonight’s fire, there’s not a whole lot left to look at in there.”

“You mean that’s whose factory was burning?” Oceanvine asked.

“One of several, ma’am. Yes.”

“Silverwind, we can probably sleep in all day,” Blizzard said sourly.

“No, we can still talk to the owners and anyone else who worked on the buttons,” he replied.

“Maybe,” Oceanvine told him. “But now we may never know if all the prototypes and dyes carried the curse.”

Thirteen

“I hope you all got more than an hour or two of sleep,” Blizzard told them blearily at lunch.”

“About three, maybe,” Oceanvine replied. “We’ll just have to go to sleep early tonight. It’s a good thing

you have such short days this time of year.”

“I had to meet with Ironblade this morning,” Blizzard told them. “He said he would make an appointment for us to meet with Vilma Saba this afternoon. He’ll let us know exactly by the time we’re finished eating.”

“I hope he can wait until my second cup of coffee,” Silverwind muttered.

“Heh!” Blizzard chuckled, “I don’t think he has a choice.”

Just then another tremor shook the city. The dishes rattled on the tables and in the kitchen, a large cast iron pan fell off a counter. Across the room a clay pitcher of water fell off a table and broke, leaving a large puddle of water and pot shards. Then after a minute the tremor stopped.

“They’re getting worse,” Blizzard noted.

“And more frequent,” Silverwind added. He looked out the window and noted, “Looks like the wind is going to drop the ash on the city. A plume from top of Mount Rjal is drifting toward the city.” Then there was a brief hail of pebbles.

“Glad we aren’t out in that,” Candle remarked.

“Could give me a worse headache than casting a spell at the moment,” Silverwind said.

“Looks like we were on the very edge of that pyroclastic hail,” Blizzard told them. “Just as well. Much larger pieces can kill you. I used to have to wear a hard hat when I went out during the last such bout. I wonder if my mom still has that hat. Might need it.”

“Going to be a dusty day though,” Silverwind said.

As they watched, the plume of ash covered most of the sky and the light became a gloomy dusk-like gray. Before they had finished their lunch, it got even darker as the ash started to reach street level.

“We can’t breathe that,” Blizzard told them. “Wait a minute.” She went and spoke to the waitress who had served their lunch. A few coins passed between them and when Blizzard returned she said, “We can take our napkins and use them as masks to filter out the ash. They aren’t the best for that, but they’ll get us to the department where we have better ash masks among our supplies.”

Holding the napkins to their noses and mouths, they left the restaurant and walked to the Department of Security and Justice. They entered and shook off the dust before walking up to Ironblade’s office.

“It’s nasty out there,” Master Ironblade observed. “Hopefully the ashfall will slack off before your appointment with Mrs. Saba.”

“When is that?” Silverwind asked.

“She sent word that she’ll have some time for you at four o’clock. Frankly, I think she was being gracious. By now I’m sure she’s quite busy with the fallout from last night’s fire just as we will be with the fallout from this eruption.”

At a knocking on the door frame they all turned to see Gastao. “There’s a herald downstairs who wants

to see Wizard Silverwind and Master Oceanvine,” he told them. “Looks pretty grim.” He chuckled and added, “Grimy but grim!”

“Sir Vlasu again?” Oceanvine asked.

“Yeah, that’s the one,” Gastao replied. “Slimy little git.”

“Ah! You know him?”

“Not hardly!” Gastao bit off. “Don’t want to either.”

“We might as well find out what he wants,” Silverwind sighed and they started walking back to the front desk. “Gastao did you and Afonso find a pawnshop that had sold that dagger?”

“No luck on that count,” the sergeant replied. “We tried just about every fence and pawnshop in town.”

“That’s all right,” Silverwind told him. “I didn’t think you had. We found out who owned it.” And he went on to let Gastao know what they mages had learned. “We’ll discuss it more fully at our next meeting. Tomorrow morning? Good. See you then.”

“Wizard Silverwind!” intoned Sir Vlassu formally when they entered the front room. “Master Oceanvine! You all are summoned to the court of His Excellency Vogt Andriy. To appear immediately and without any undue delay!” He had five large human and Gronomish men, dressed in armor, with him. Silverwind wasn’t certain whether they were bodyguards for the herald or just a formal party to enforce the Vogt’s summons.

“Okay, troops, let’s go,” Silverwind told his crew.

“Just the two of you,” Sir Vlassu said peremptorily. “I was specifically ordered not to allow Miss Blizzard nor the boy to come with you.”

“Whatever you like,” Silverwind replied and turned to Oceanvine, “Ready?”

“Wait!” Blizzard said suddenly. “You need ash masks. Surely that is not an undue delay.”

Sir Vlassu allowed that it was not as long as the masks appeared soon enough. Blizzard rushed out of the room and returned a minute later with a pair of masks for them.

“Good luck!” she told them. “I’ll take care of Candle until you get back. And we’ll keep the appointment with Mrs. Saba, too.”

They found the Vogt in his throne room again although this time the only other attendees of the court were a dozen guards. The man was scared, Silverwind thought, and doing his best not to show it.

“Your Excellency?” Silverwind greeted him with a nod of his head. That was as much of a bow as he would accord this man. Oceanvine followed suit.

“I have been keeping close track of your recent exploits, wizard,” Vogt Andriy told him coldly. “Very close track.”

There wasn’t much Silverwind could think of to say that wouldn’t have ended up with his having to turn the Vogt into the object lesson of the next generation’s fairy tale, so he kept his mouth shut.

“I’ve been receiving a lot of complaints.”

“Complaints, Your Excellency?” Silverwind asked.

“From the Ministry of War, from General Hervasiv and several ranking officers and most especially from Senator Lavro. How dare you come to my land and insult my fellow Triumvirs this way? For that matter you haven’t been particularly polite to me either. Showing up here months after my summons and then not even bothering to attend me immediately. Haven’t reported on your progress at all either.”

Silverwind caught a dangerous expression forming on Oceanvine’s face. Her behavior since they had left Querna had been decidedly mellow for her, but she was a fire-eater at heart and he was under no illusion that might have changed. She was starting to smolder and if she let loose, Vogt Andriy’s servants would be cleaning bits of him from the throne room for the next month or two. “Your Excellency,” he started hastily.

“Silence!” Andriy roared.

If he gets me angry I might just let Vine have him, Silverwind thought to himself, then perversely he imagined her correcting him, *Oceanvine!*

“You will listen to me! Your job here is done. I’ll give you just two days to get off this island. Two days! After that if you’re still here you can count on the hospitality of my dungeon! You may go now,” Andriy concluded softly.

Silverwind took half a step backwards before turning around. Oceanvine had a frozen expression on her face as she took a full three steps back and even then looked unwilling to turn her back on the vogt.

They both remained silent as they were escorted out of the palace. When they reached the outer door, the carriage that had carried them up the Hill was no longer there.

“No ride back to town?” Silverwind asked the guards as he put his ash mask back on. Neither said anything, but one shrugged apologetically. Silverwind sighed, “Nice day for a walk, if you like eating volcanic ash. Well, I guess it isn’t too bad, the fall seems to have stopped and there’s less than half an inch.”

“I suppose I could fly us down,” Oceanvine suggested.

“Fly? Vine, have you gone and sprouted wings since the last time I looked?”

“Oceanvine,” she corrected him without heat. “Well actually what I had in mind was really levitation.”

“And how far off the ground do you think you could keep us and for how long?”

“Oh, five to ten feet easily and it would only be for about five minutes or less. Think of it as sledding down a hill on an invisible sled.”

“Oh, I see what you mean. It might be fun. We’ll still need to walk to the right spot.”

“Fair enough. I noticed a good spot on the first switchback down slope.”

“Why are you so anxious to get back to town?”

Oceanvine took a quick look over her shoulder to make sure no one could hear her, then replied. “It’s more like I’m anxious to get away from the vogt. You noticed how I was about to lose my temper?”

“I’d have noticed had you been five miles behind me,” he replied.

“How nice of you to notice.” Amazingly she was smiling as she said that. “However, the reason I want to get away from here as fast as we can is I really did lose my temper and I was about to bounce that man off the walls a few dozen times, but just before I did, I took a good look at him or more specifically at his aura.

“It’s strong,” she continued. “And tainted.”

“Tainted?”

“With the Bond of Aritos. At first I thought I was looking at Arithan; the influence was that strong, but as I reigned in my anger, I got enough of a look at him and he’s human enough with the possible exception of his heart. He may not have one.”

Silverwind chuckled then abruptly sobered. “So you think we may have found one of the Arithan cult members?”

“I think we found the high priest, Silverwind.”

“Somehow I’m not surprised. So here’s the first switchback. What’s your plan?”

“Have a seat,” she replied gesturing at the ground. He did so and she promptly sat in his lap with her back to his front. Mischievously, she turned partway around and kissed him warmly.

“Nice plan,” he complimented her.

She turned back around and said, “Hold on to me now.”

“Gladly!”

For a moment they remained sitting in the volcanic ash on the road but then they began to rise up, still in a seated position.

“Very well done, Vine! It actually feels like I’m still sitting on something solid.”

“That was the plan, now shut up, dear. I need to concentrate or we may run headlong into a building.”

Together they turned and moved toward the edge of the road. They left the road and as they reached the slope of the hill they tilted and slid downward. Faster and faster they went. There was a slight bump as they crossed and recrossed the road as they went over it again at each switchback, but Oceanvine did

her best to smooth it out.

By the time they reached the bottom of the hill they were moving at an alarmingly fast rate. There was a slight rise as they approached the city, but it wasn't enough to slow them down. Oceanvine banked them into a long turn and they started following the main street into town again. They were slowing down gradually, but not soon enough so Oceanvine lifted them up until they were over ten feet above ground level. Soon they were skimming rapidly through town just over the roofs of wagons and carriages and still moving too fast to stop easily.

Finally, Oceanvine spotted a large open lot off to her right and she steered them toward it. A group of boys of all species were in the lot, playing some sort of game when they saw the two mages approaching. They scattered as Oceanvine and Silverwind slid through them and finally came to a stop just as they reached the middle of the lot.

"Safe!" several of the boys shouted gleefully.

Silverwind and Oceanvine looked around and saw the boys all running toward them. The field looked odd to Oceanvine. They had been playing some sort of stick and ball game. Boys and girls all over Maiyim played games that in some way involved hitting a ball with a stick, but the field was set up in a configuration she had never seen before. There were two sawed off boards set into the ground about sixty feet apart. Oceanvine had stopped directly over one. Around these two boards were similar boards set out in a sort of figure eight pattern. None of it made much sense to her.

"Hey! Are you Silverwind?" one of the boys asked.

"I seem to be," the wizard replied with a wink and a grin.

"Show us some magic!" another demanded.

"What do you think we just did?" Silverwind asked.

"What sort of game were you playing?" Oceanvine asked quickly to change the subject.

"Eight base, miss," one of the boys replied. He was a young Granom and was holding a strange wide stick with a wide triangular cross-section.

"How do you play?"

"We have two teams. Each team has a bowler; that's the guy who throws the ball. He stands on his home base and throws the ball toward the batter standing next to the other's home. The batter stays there until he hits the ball. When he does he tries to run to his first base." The boy pointed to one of the boards. "If he hits it really hard, he might try for extra bases. If a fielder, a player standing either by a base or in the field beyond catches the ball he is out and if he is tagged with the ball he is out. Then the other team has a chance to hit the ball from their home base. Whenever the ball is hit the runners on base for that team can try to take extra bases and the team scores one point for any runner that makes it back to home base."

"And you play for a set amount of time?"

The boys all laughed. "We play until we have to go home. Sometimes we stop for the night and pick up the same game the next day. Last summer we had a game that lasted all week!"

“Sounds like fun,” Silverwind chuckled. “That’s a wicked-looking stick you lads use.”

“It’s not a stick,” the boy who was acting as spokesman replied. “It’s a bat.”

“I’ll say!” Silverwind replied. “May I hold it?”

“You want a turn at the base?” another of the boys asked.

“Sure, why not?” Silverwind shrugged.

“Hey! No fair!” one of the other boys said. “Then you’ll have more players than we do.”

“Oceanvine can play on your team,” Silverwind suggested.

“Her?”

“What’s the matter,” Oceanvine challenged him. “Can’t girls play eight base?” She wasn’t really interested in playing, but didn’t like the fact that the boys didn’t think she could.

“Sure they can,” the spokesman agreed, “But can you?”

“How do you know Silverwind can play?”

“Good point. Do you think you can catch the ball?”

“I can try,” Oceanvine replied.

“Good enough for me,” the boy shrugged. “Go out there. To the far left. Okay?”

“Sure.” Oceanvine walked out to the position the boy had pointed her in. When everyone was in place, play started up again.

Silverwind had trouble hitting the ball even though the boy bowling at him threw it slowly and without much spin. The boy catching the ball saw what was wrong.

“You’re trying to hit the ball with the edge of the bat. It can be done, but it isn’t easy and doesn’t usually work too well either. Use the flat and don’t try to hit it with everything you got. This is your first time, ain’t it? You won’t have the control to hit that hard yet. Just try to give it a good hard tap, something to knock it out beyond the basement, but not out of the lot.”

“Okay,” Silverwind shrugged and shifted his grip on the bat. On the next ball he hit the ball directly toward one of the basemen, who caught it and threw it to the boy standing by the base Silverwind was running toward, who tagged Silverwind out.

Then it was Oceanvine’s turn to bat while Silverwind stood out in the field. She hit the ball on her third attempt. It sailed up and out a long way, but was caught by a boy who had to run a long way to get it.

“That was fun!” Silverwind told the boys. “Thanks for letting us play, but we need to get moving on.” The boys waved good-naturedly and started playing again as soon as they had left the lot.

“Too bad Candle wasn’t with us,” Oceanvine said. “He’d have loved that.”

“Yes,” Silverwind agreed. “Maybe he’ll get a chance to play in a day or so.”

“A day or so? Silverwind, we’ve been ordered off the island!”

“I’ve never been one for following orders,” the wizard replied. “How about you?”

“Hah! With my record? Have you forgotten why I spent my freshman year on scullery duty, not to mention whatever other menial chores my supervisor could find for me?”

“Hardly!” Silverwind laughed. “Well, let’s get back to the police station. It’s too late to join Candle and Blizzard on their interview, but they should be back soon.”

“Are you Vilma Saba?” Blizzard asked the young woman who greeted them at the door. Her hair was blond and shoulder length, but she was not quite pretty. Handsome was a more accurate description.

“No, I’m her niece,” she responded. “Aunt Vilma is in the library. Who may I say is calling?”

“Blizzard of the Department of Security and Justice,” Blizzard replied, pulling out her official badge for the young woman to see.

“I don’t know why I’m staring at that,” the niece said a few moments later. “I wouldn’t know a real one from a fake anyway. This is a very difficult time for my aunt. What do you want with her? Maybe I can just tell you without bothering her.”

“Her factory made some buttons for the Army’s uniforms. Do you know anything about them?”

“I’m afraid not. That would have been just before I came to live with her. Very well. Follow me. Please treat her gently. She hasn’t been well lately and the fire was a real shock to her.”

“I’ll try to be nice,” Blizzard replied warmly as she and Candle entered the townhouse. “It was a nasty affair. We were in the bucket brigade.” The niece nodded and gestured for them to follow her.

They walked to the back of the house and then into a room with bookshelves covering every inch of wall space except for the door, a fireplace and one large window. There was a hot fire blazing away, making the room comfortably warm, but the occupant, a small elderly lady was sitting in a large leather chair, staring out the window.

“Aunt Vilma?” the niece said as they entered the room. “There’s someone here to speak with you. Do you mind?”

“Not at all, dear,” Vilma Saba replied. “It’s nearly time for tea, is it not? Would you serve us, dear?”

“Of course,” the niece replied and left the room.

“Ivana is a dear girl,” Madame Saba said to Blizzard. “My only living relative.”

“Madame Saba, I am Journeyman Blizzard. I work for the Department of Security and Justice.”

“Ah the police,” Vilma translated the bureaucratic speech.

“Yes, ma’am. And this is apprentice Candle from Emmine.”

“Mages? Of course you are. No one else takes apprentices anymore, not here anyway.”

“True, ma’am.”

“And are you here investigating the fire? I thought that was the jurisdiction of the Fire Department.”

“It is, ma’am. We’re here to ask about another matter, at least I think we are.”

“You aren’t sure?”

“This may or may not be related.”

“Well don’t beat around the bush, girl! Get to it! Ask your questions! Oh, I get it,” Vilma said knowingly. “Ivana asked you to go easy on me, didn’t she?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Blizzard replied with a blush.

“Well, never mind that. Yesterday you might have needed to, but this is another day.”

“Very well. Your factory was commissioned to design and manufacture buttons for the Army, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. We make buttons for the Navy too, but the Army’s was a recent commission. Since the coup.”

“That would be the one we are interested in, yes.”

“It was a very strange way of doing business,” Vilma told her. “We were approached by an officer.”

“Who would that have been?” Blizzard asked.

“A captain attached to the War Department. Captain Sylwester, as I recall. They asked for a design, that was normal. The design was easy enough. We based it on the old badge of the President, but added the background charge of Mount Rjal. They loved the drawings and requested five prototypes. ‘Why five?’ I asked. They said the buttons had to be approved by a committee and wanted each member to have a button to examine. It was odd to me. The navy never needed more than one prototype, but if that was what they wanted, they were paying, so why not? We made them up and sent them to the Army. When they came back there were only four. They said one had been lost. At the time it didn’t matter much to me, but last week Captain Vilcek came to my office and threatened me.”

“Threatened you?”

“Not directly, of course. Nothing so crude as that. But the implication was that they would kill me if I ever spoke about the missing prototype with anyone.”

“Why?” Candle blurted.

“Never said,” Vilma replied. “Frankly I thought it was silly of them to bring up the matter in the first place. I hadn’t thought about that button in months. Not since we made the dyes and went into production.”

“The missing button was found at the scene of a crime.”

“Ah that would explain why they were so insistent. Bastards!” Vilma spat.

Ivana arrived just then with a pot of tea and a plate of biscuits. She put them down on a low table where several tea cups were already arranged and started pouring.

“So if they threatened you, why are you telling me this?” Blizzard asked Taking a cup from Ivana and waving away the offer of lemon, sugar or milk.

“They already tried to kill me. I figure I owe them nothing.”

“They tried to kill you?” Blizzard asked.

“That fire. I spend as many nights at the factory as I do here at home. There was a nice apartment there for when I had to work late. Now it’s all gone. I loved that factory, and if anything I can tell you helps to get back at the ones who set the fire, you can count on my cooperation.”

Candle decided to ask a question. “Were there any special enchantments or spells on those buttons you were aware of?”

“Enchantments? What sort of enchantments?”

“I don’t know,” Candle replied. “A blessing, perhaps?”

“On a button? Who would put a blessing on a button? Who would put any spell on a button?”

“It was just something I thought to ask,” Candle replied quietly.

A little while later when they were walking back to the police station, Blizzard asked Candle, “Why did you ask about an enchantment on the buttons? You knew there was one.”

“She seemed to be coming clean with us,” Candle replied. “I just wondered if she knew about the curse. I don’t think she did.”

“Oh, why is that?”

“Just gut instinct,” Candle explained. “I think she really meant it when she said she wanted to get back at whoever burned her factory. I just wish we knew why anyone would want to curse those buttons in the first place.”

“So do I, Candle.”

“Are you sure you shouldn’t be packing?” Blizzard asked, the next morning at their usual meeting.

“I hate packing,” Silverwind told her. “I came here to do a job, but when I got here that job turned into something else.”

“And we never got paid for it either,” Candle reminded him.

“Candle, this is beyond making money. There’s a demon loose somewhere on this island and I’m not leaving as long as he’s still here.”

“This is the same demon that you ran into last time you were here, huh? From what you told me, this ain’t gonna be no walk on the beach.”

“Candle!” Oceanvine said sharply, “Watch your grammar.”

“Next time,” Candle countered.

“Candle,” Silverwind told him, “I know this is not going to be easy, but it is something I have to do. You do not, however. Neither does Oceanvine.”

“I’m not goin’ nowhere!” Candle exclaimed.

“I’m staying right here!” Oceanvine replied simultaneously.

“Good!” Silverwind replied, surprising both. “I didn’t really expect you to say anything else. And I’m glad you have a notion of how dangerous this is. Both of you have, in the past, had to work at keeping control of yourselves and not over-reacting. Well, this time there’s no such thing. If and when we run into Arithan, there will be no such thing as too much force. No such thing as too nasty. He is mean and evil and totally without restraints. He’s also one hell of a wizard and has had tens of thousands of years to learn how to do what he does.”

“And brute force will work?” Blizzard asked nervously.

“It did last time,” Silverwind replied, “but I took him by surprise and he still nearly killed Windchime and me before we set him to rout.”

“What are his weaknesses?” Ironblade asked.

“He doesn’t have any,” Silverwind replied, “just strengths and his greatest strength seems to be in his ability to cast illusions. They are so strong that you won’t be able to tell what is and isn’t real. And they are more than just illusions. What he casts are nightmares. Just ask Lieutenant Amaniev here.” Amanser Amaniev had been part of the team since his release from the hospital two days earlier. He was still weak, but insisted on working. Ironblade, at Silverwind’s recommendation, had assigned him to coordinating everyone’s activities. The lieutenant might not yet be back up to legwork, but his mind was as sharp as it had been before his injury and was doing an excellent job.

“Is that what hit me?” Amanser asked.

“Sounds like it, yes.”

“I had wondered. I don’t really remember anything coherent but the nightmares from the time Mace died and the time I woke up in the hospital. But the nightmares are still lurking back there, just behind me.”

“That’s the way it works, yes,” Silverwind told him. I think Arithan hit you with the same curse he threw at Windchime and me. If you were a mage you’d probably still be out of action. It took me about two years and I’m still feeling the effects sixteen years later.”

“That bad?” Ironblade asked.

“Ironblade, I can’t cast even a simple spell without getting a massive headache and Oceanvine and Candle can both tell you how many times I’ve woken up screaming in the past few months.”

“He’s running on sheer willpower,” Oceanvine told them all. “I don’t know if there’s another mage in the world who could do even that much in these conditions.” Blizzard blanched at that, an interesting effect on a Granom. Her already white skin became slightly translucent.

“Let’s get back to business though,” Silverwind said. “The Vogt can threaten to put me in his dungeon...”

“Does he have a dungeon?” Afonso asked.

“First I’ve heard of it,” Sergeant Villenov replied.

“Who knows what little improvements he’s made up on the Hill,” Blizzard opined.

“It doesn’t matter,” Ironblade told them. “We know he’s behind all the missing people. The problem is, we can’t just walk up and arrest him.”

“No,” Silverwind cut in. “First we need to cut him off from his source of power, the demon Arithan. What we need to do next is somehow force Arithan out into the open.”

“How are we going to do that?” Oceanvine asked. “Getting his attention isn’t going to be easy.”

“Oh, I have a few ideas. We’re going to be like gnats to him. A swarm of really annoying gnats. Tell me. Those shrines that were desecrated in the New Forest, have they been rededicated to the Younger Gods yet?”

“Not yet,” Ironblade answered. “The high priests of the three cults have petitioned us to let them do that, but we’ve been afraid of destroying evidence.”

“That’s no longer an issue,” Silverwind told him. “Those shrines are currently dedicated to Arithan.”

“Are they?” Ironblade asked.

“If they are not, Arithan’s missed a trick this time around. Trust me, they are. Let’s tell each of the high priests to send their best exorcists with us and we’ll have those shrines back in order by nightfall.”

“Good! Hold on a moment,” Ironblade told them. He left the room for a few minutes and when he came back announced, “I’ve sent that message. I imagine you will want as many mages with you as possible?”

“We don’t have enough, not really, but along with Oceanvine and Candle I’ll take Blizzard. She’s been the key to this team all along. It would be a shame, and foolish, I think, to cut her out now.” He winked at Blizzard who blushed in response.

“And Sergeants Boris and Villenov should make an initial inquiry into Arlo Hroreksson’s death,” Ironblade added.

“What?” Silverwind asked.

“You hadn’t heard? He was found dead this morning in his bath. Slashed his wrists, it seems.”

“Now there’s a suspicious coincidence if I ever heard one!” Silverwind noted. “Maybe Blizzard or you ought to go along with them. I seriously doubt it was a suicide and only a mage may be able to tell the difference.”

“Blizzard and I are not the only mages in the department. We have several senior apprentices who would be up to this job. I’ll send one of them, but are you sure you don’t want me with you in the New Forest?”

“You’re the top mage in the department, Ironblade. We may need you in town, especially if what we’re doing gets a faster reaction than I expect. But what you can do is get the rest of your mages ready. Teach them some offensive spells if you can.”

“I’ll do that,” Ironblade nodded. “I’ll also contact some of the other mages in town and prepare them too. We’re going to need everyone, aren’t we?”

“Probably,” Silverwind replied. “Most probably.”

“Any idea what to expect?”

“You know what happened last time around?”

“I was at school but I do know and Master Eyesplice in Health was here. He’ll remember the injuries, I’m sure.”

They left Rjalkatyp an hour before dawn and were already inside the New Forest as the sun brightened the southeastern sky. It was nearly another hour before they reached Nildar’s shrine. The New Forest was actually three hundred years old and to Candle’s and Oceanvine’s surprise, there had never been an Old Forest. The largest woody plants native to the Isle of Fire were only ten to fifteen foot tall bushes, but three hundred years earlier the Senate had authorized the import of oaks, maples, beech, pines, spruces and ash trees from Granom and Emmine. Over the centuries the forest had been carefully managed by a select cadre of rangers and seedlings from the so-called New Forest had been used to start woodland areas in other parts of the island. It was also a place where the cults of Wenni, Nildar and Methis had chosen to establish special shrines in this place that they felt symbolized so fittingly the multispecies culture of the Isle of Fire.

“You were right,” Blizzard told Silverwind. “This shrine has been dedicated to Arithan.”

“It won’t be much longer,” the priest of the Nildar cult said grimly as he prepared to go to work.

“Vine, Blizzard, keep an eye on the shrine as he works. There may be some booby traps involved here,” Silverwind advised.

“Don’t come jumping in,” the priest warned them. “I know what I’m doing here, but be ready to lend me your strength.”

“How will we know when you need it?” Blizzard asked.

“You’ll know. Just try to stay relaxed and let me make the connection between us if I need to.” Blizzard and Oceanvine both nodded.

“Now Candle,” cautioned Silverwind, “I don’t want you rushing in to help. Your job is to just watch and learn today.”

“Why can’t I help?” Candle asked. “I have power to add if they need it.”

“Yes, I know you do, but power sharing is tricky stuff and you don’t have the experience with it. I suppose we should have worked with you on that, but it was just another advanced technique and we were already busy filling you up with others, and I would much rather have you master wards than worry about power sharing. In fact a ward isolating you and me from everyone else would be a good idea.”

“How do you want me to build it?”

“Make it sort of a half of a dome or a quarter of a bubble and let it be completely impermeable to magic energy. Let it protect us and the priestesses of Wenni and Methis.” Those two women were seated near them. “Can you handle that?”

“Is that all?” Candle laughed. That had been the first sort of usable ward he had ever constructed. In fact he hadn’t been trying to make it so impermeable; it had just come out that way, typical results for an apprentice just starting to master a new spell.

Candle was already seated on a stone bench beneath a tree in the park-like glade that held the shrine to Nildar. He crossed his legs and quickly slipped into a self-hypnotic trance that allowed him to both concentrate and relax. Visualizing what he wanted, he cast the spell with far more ease than he might have believed even a week earlier.

“Show-off!” Silverwind accused. “Did you have to add the sparkles?”

“I wanted to make sure you could see it,” Candle told him impudently, but a moment later he made the ward invisible to normal vision.”

“That’s better,” Silverwind told him.

As it turned out none of their precautions were necessary and the priest of Nildar completed his cleaning of the shrine without any complications. Then with several prayers, and after they all had helped decorate the shrine with flowers grown specially in the temple greenhouse in Rjalkatyp, he declared he was finished and the shrine was once more Nildar’s alone. The whole process had taken nearly an hour.

At that moment the ground shook and Mount Rjal belched out another plume of gas and ash.

“Coincidence?” Oceanvine asked, her tone suggesting she didn’t believe it.

“Maybe not,” Silverwind allowed. “Let’s head back to Wenni’s shrine.” At his suggestion they had started at Nildar’s shrine since it was the furthest out from the city.

At the shrine of Wenni, the priestess bedecked the altar with a few white flowers before cleansing it of Arithan’s influence. As she worked the flowers wilted, turned brown and finally burst into flame. When the flames went out, she used a broom to sweep off the ashes and threw a few more flowers on the altar and repeated the ritual. When they remained white, she smiled and brought out some different flowers, more colorful ones, and after a long prayer proclaimed the site dedicated to Wenni.

Another tremor and another plume from the volcano accompanied her words.

“I think we’re getting his attention,” Silverwind gloated. “Shall we go for three out of three?”

The Priestess of Methis had the longest most complex ritual of the three. Instead of flowers, she used various artifacts, starting with a small wooden model of the altar and various carpenter’s and mason’s tools which she laid out on the altar. Then she used magic to destroy the model of the altar by fire. The wood had burned off to reveal a stone core, and Mount Rjal started erupting more furiously. She gave a wicked chuckle and continued on. Taking the stone core of the altar model, she took several slats of wood and magically cut and placed them on the stony core. Then she used gold and silver wire and bars to hold the wood to the stone and to fully decorate the model altar. As she worked, the real altar she was using as a workbench began to change color from dull gray to a clean and bright white. Gold and silver trimmed the real altar just as they did the model. Finally, even as the ground shook beneath her, she intoned a long, impassioned prayer to Methis the Inventor in Old Granomish. When she finished everything was eerily quiet.

“Well, demon!” the priestess shouted to the air around them. “Want to try again? Hah!”

For several minutes, the mountain remained quiet and then the ground shook worse than before and a vast thick column of ash rose high over the mountain.

“Oh, I don’t like the look of that,” Blizzard said nervously. “It looks like the entire mountain wants to go up. Look! I think the top hundred feet or more is missing.”

“Looks like the north side of the mountain collapsed,” the priestess of Methis commented. “That happens sometimes with volcanoes. The pressure builds up until something gives way, in this case the side of the mountain probably slid free. Good thing it went inland. If it came this way the city could have been wiped out and the wave it might have caused if it made it to the ocean could have drowned islands as far away as Bellinen.

“The wind is going to make the ash drift this way,” Silverwind noted, “and that’s going to be a lot of ash this time even if a lot of it is headed away from us. We’d better get back to town. Do you need help reloading your tools?” he asked the priestess of Methis.

“No,” she replied. “They are part of the shrine now. They’ll stay, for now at least. The tradition is that any tools left after a consecration are left on the altar for any craftsman to use at need. It’s been a long time since we consecrated a shrine here. Centuries in fact. It’ll be interesting to see how long they stay here. Let’s just get going.”

“The day’s mostly over anyway. I don’t think we have more than an hour and half’s worth of daylight left.”

“Less, if that tower of ash comes this way,” Blizzard noted.

“His Excellency’s thanks for all your work and his regrets that you will be leaving on the afternoon tide,” Sir Vlassu told Silverwind and Oceanvine the next morning. He had come to their hotel early and waited until they came down from their rooms. He handed Silverwind a small, archaic-style pouch that felt as though there were some coins in it.

“You’re looking...” Silverwind paused to search for the right word, “quite gray this morning, Sir Vlassu.”

“The ash, sir,” the herald replied coldly, then turned around and walked swiftly out of the lobby.

“Not much of a morning out there, is it?” Silverwind asked Oceanvine and Candle. Indeed, it looked almost like midnight. The gas lamps had been left alight but the volcanic ash falling on the city had already accumulated to a thickness of over half a foot and it was still falling. The winds had turned southward overnight so the ash plume from Mount Rjal now covered almost all of the sky. Just a faint glow on the horizon to the south and southwest gave any hint that the sun had risen as usual.

“Candle, did you pack your bags?” Oceanvine asked him.

“I did, but I thought we weren’t leaving.” Meanwhile Silverwind was looking carefully inside the pouch Sir Vlassu had handed him.

“We aren’t, but we do want to look as if we mean to leave. What’s wrong?” she asked Silverwind.

“This pouch is full of halfpennies,” he explained. “What a sport! Here, maybe you and Candle should take a careful look at them.”

They both peeked inside the bag using their magically aided vision to examine the bronze coins.

“Oh, that’s nasty,” Candle noted immediately.

“An understatement,” Oceanvine breathed. “These coins have the Bond of Aritos all over them and the compulsion spell attached to it is strong but not particularly subtle. Good thing you didn’t touch them. The question is, what we should do with them.”

“Break the spell and destroy the coins, just to be on the safe side,” Silverwind replied. “What about the pouch?”

“Seems to have a containment spell on it,” Oceanvine told him. “Makes sense, so Vlassu could deliver it unscathed.”

“We’re dealing with nice people this time for sure,” Silverwind grumbled. “Let’s get breakfast now,

while we can.”

After a quick breakfast, they donned their ash masks again and made their way arduously through the thick ash cover to the police station.

“I didn’t think it would be so hard to walk through this stuff,” Candle grumbled. “It sticks on everything, doesn’t it.”

“It does at that,” Silverwind agreed. “With all the snow we’ve had here lately this is making several inches of instant mud.”

“Feels like glue,” Oceanvine commented. I’m glad you talked me into wearing boots, but this stuff is sticking to the boots adds a few pounds to them.”

“Good thing we’re here then.”

Someone had been shoveling the ash from the sidewalk and stairway into the Security and Justice building and left a stiff bristle brush by the door. They used it to brush the accumulated sludge from their boots and after patting as much dust off themselves as they could, they entered.

“Good to see you all,” the desk sergeant greeted them. “It’s going crazy out there.”

“Is it?” Silverwind asked. “How?”

“A lot of breakings and enterings, tavern fights, that sort of thing”

“Tavern fights?” Oceanvine asked. “This early in the morning?”

“So? Besides a lot of folks never went home last night. There’s word floating around town this is the end of the world.”

“What nonsense!” Oceanvine exclaimed.

“Of course, but folks will believe that in an eruption. The temples are full this morning too. We have a lot of worried people in this city, miss.”

They chatted another few minutes then made their way upstairs to Blizzard’s office, but Blizzard was not in her office yet so they went to see Ironblade.

“Oh, there you all are!” he said by way of greeting. “Good! You’ll be happy to know all ships have been ordered to stay in port until further notice, so even if you had wanted to leave today, you couldn’t.”

“Not that I was planning on leaving, but wouldn’t the ships be safer at sea?” Silverwind asked.

“From what I hear there’s a nasty ocean storm headed this way. Between that and the ash, it would be murderous out there.

“Yes, I imagine it would be,” Silverwind agreed.

“So what do you all have planned today?” Ironblade asked.

“Not really sure. I sort of hoped our little foray into the forest yesterday might bring things to a head. Maybe it did, but it didn’t annoy Arithan enough to bring him out into the open. I want to go over everything we know today and see if maybe I missed something. We pretty much know who’s in charge of the Arithan cult even if we don’t know who all the members are. Unfortunately he’s the one man we cannot arrest.”

“I’m sure you’ll find a way,” Ironblade told him with confidence.

“Here you all are!” Blizzard said from the door to Ironblade’s office. “Sorry I was late this morning. Slow going, walking through the ash, what?”

“We noticed,” Candle agreed dryly, but with a disarming smile on his face. “Blizzard, might I have another look at the button? After the meeting, I mean.”

“Sure,” she agreed readily. “What are you looking for?”

“I’m not sure, but Silverwind just told Master Ironblade we were going to take another look at the evidence so far, and that made me start thinking. It’s only a hunch, but I’d like to examine the button again.”

“That reminds me,” Silverwind said suddenly. “Take a careful look at the coins in this sack. Don’t touch them, whatever you do.” He handed the pouch to Ironblade, but gestured to Blizzard that she should examine the coins as well.

“I can see why you warned us not to touch them. What is this?”

“A little parting gift from the Vogt,” Silverwind replied grimly.

“Or maybe his friendly herald,” Oceanvine added. “It was delivered by Sir Vlassu. I don’t believe it for a minim, but it is possible Andriy doesn’t know about it.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Ironblade told her. “As the vogt’s herald, Vlassu speaks with Andriy’s voice. Andriy is responsible whether he knows about this or not. Besides I’m convinced he knows.”

“The question is,” Blizzard pointed out, “what did they hope to compel you to do, once you touched these coins?”

“You caught that, did you?” Silverwind asked. “Well it wasn’t subtle. The answer is ‘We don’t know.’ It’s such a powerful spell that part is probably open-ended. But somehow I doubt the intention was to make sure we left the island. Likely the opposite. Well, let’s get the whole team together and start going over everything we know. Amanser should be up to speed by now and he seems like a top-rate problem-solver in his own right.”

“He’s the best detective on the force,” Ironblade told him. “If he was a mage, we might not have needed your expertise.”

“Doesn’t surprise me in the least,” Silverwind nodded. “Well, let’s see if he can spot something we all missed.”

Silverwind took over most of the crime lab that day, putting his team to work on reanalyzing everything they knew about the case. After two hours of hashing and rehashing the data verbally, they broke up into

teams. Sergeants Boris and Villenov worked with Lieutenant Amaniev on the non-magical aspects of the case. Blizzard and Ironblade looked more closely at the cursed halfpennies Silverwind had been given and Oceanvine and Candle took a second look at the button.

“Could we have one of those coins here?” Candle asked. “I’d like to compare the curse to the one on this button.”

“I should have thought of that,” Oceanvine muttered. A moment later Silverwind carefully placed a halfpenny next to the button.

“What do you have?” he asked.

“Let you know in a minim,” Candle replied. “Yeah. Vine, look at that. It’s almost the same spell, isn’t it?”

“Very close, yes,” Oceanvine replied, concentrating so much she didn’t think to correct Candle on the use of her nickname. “In fact it might even be the same spell, but diminished because it was used to spread the spell by contagion. The spell on the coin is more concentrated. Ironblade, Blizzard what do you think?”

“I think you’ve summed it up excellently,” Ironblade told her.

“Did we ever get our hands on an actual uniform button?” Blizzard asked.

“No. Leave was cancelled for the entire army last weekend,” Ironblade told her. “I never heard why.”

“Another interesting coincidence,” Silverwind noted sourly. “I don’t like the sound of this though. A compulsion spell over the entire army?”

“And coincidentally on everyone who manufactured the buttons too,” Candle pointed out.

“Yes that too. Okay, let’s move on. Look at the other physical evidence and also try to explain what you see to Amanser, Afonso and Gastao. Maybe we’ll get some additional insights.”

They didn’t in spite of working late into the evening. By midafternoon, Chief Rostik called on the services of Lieutenant Amaniev and the sergeants to help with the growing restlessness in the city. Lunch was brought in late because they had to wait until a shower of pyroclastic pellets had ceased bombarding the city.

“That’s why we have slate roofs,” Blizzard told Candle when he commented on the noisy patter.

The noise got louder as slightly larger pieces started falling and Ironblade added, “And that’s why the roofers will be making enough money repairing those slate roofs to buy the Hill after this is over. Maybe I should change jobs?” Everyone chuckled appreciatively and went back to work.

Silverwind, Oceanvine and Candle borrowed hardhats and obtained fresh ash masks for their walk back to their hotel suite, but Ironblade insisted they ride back in a department wagon. It was late by then and they chose not to argue about it.

Silverwind, however was unable to sleep, so after Oceanvine and Candle went to bed, he stayed up in a leather reading chair to think in the dark. It was an hour later when he heard a muffled tramp of boots

outside. Looking out the window he saw a dozen men wearing the uniforms of the Vogt's Guards. They marched up to the hotel and came to a halt as several of their number walked inside.

"Wake up!" Silverwind told Oceanvine, giving her a gentle shake.

She snapped awake instantly with a ball of mage-fire in her hand. When she saw who had woken her she let it dissipate. "What's happening?" she asked.

"We have to get out of here," he told her as he headed for the door. "Grab some clothes and your hat and mask, but don't take the time to get dressed yet. I don't think we have the time."

He went into Candle's room where the boy was already in trousers and grabbing a woolen Granomish tunic. "I heard you waking Oceanvine," he explained slipping the tunic over his head.

"Grab your coat along with the hard hat and mask," Silverwind told him, then rushed back to Oceanvine and grabbed his own gear. Oceanvine had thrown a long woolen dress over her shoulder and was just picking up her coat and gear. "Let's go," Silverwind said hastily with a gesture to keep her from asking why.

Out in the corridor, he led them away from the stairs and at the end of the hall found a ladder that went up into the attic. They scampered up just as he could hear the guardsmen coming up the stairs.

"What's happening?" Oceanvine whispered in the dark attic.

"The Vogt's guards," Silverwind explained just as softly. "I suppose it is possible they didn't come for us, but better to be safe. Go ahead and get dressed if you think you can do it quietly enough." She nodded and moved quietly away.

They heard knocking on one of the doors on the floor below and after two minutes a crash as the guards kicked the door in.

"Damn!" one of them said. "They aren't here."

"Go downstairs and ask the landlord if they came back here tonight," another replied.

Silverwind looked around the attic now that his eyes had started to acclimate and saw windows at both ends of the room. He looked out the nearest one and saw some of the guards in the street below.

"Sir!" they hear a guard shout. "Landlord says they're here!"

"Search every room!" came the order.

"Candle, I'm going to close this door. I want you to slide the bolt on the other side into the locked position."

"You got it," Candle replied, and did so.

"I doubt that will fool anyone," Oceanvine said as she returned, now fully dressed. "Not for long, anyway."

"No, but I'm counting on that officer calling on all his men to help in the search." They watched and soon

all the guards in the street left the area that could be seen from the window. There was a lot of door knocking going on downstairs so Silverwind tried to open the window. It opened a few inches then got stuck. "I don't think this has been opened in a while," he said quietly.

"Allow me," Oceanvine whispered to him and used a telekinetic spell to lift the window the rest of the way. "I take it you mean to leave from here?"

"Yes, if we can get to that alley across the street, we'll be out of sight and can then look for a place to stay."

"I'll have to levitate us all down," Oceanvine noted.

"Candle can float himself down," Silverwind said.

"What?" Candle asked with a touch of panic. "I've never even tried that."

"It's exactly the same as floating a pebble, just float yourself instead. Just control the fall. Ready?" Candle gulped and nodded. "When you reach the ground make your way over to that alley as fast as you can without actually looking like you're in a hurry."

"Huh?"

"I'll explain later, just do it."

"Okay." Candle closed his eyes and lifted up from the floor and then out the window.

As soon as he was safely down, Silverwind felt himself being lifted and pushed out the window. As he gently floated downward he looked up and saw Oceanvine already out of the window and floating down as well. They reached the alley without incident and walked through it and out to the other side of the block.

"Why didn't you want me to run?" Candle asked at last.

"It might have attracted attention," Silverwind replied. "As it is, once we were at street level there was no easy way for them to know who we were. So long as we didn't act abnormal it's possible that if a guard spotted us he might not have realized who we were."

"Where to now?" Oceanvine asked.

"We'll head toward the police station," Silverwind decided.

"They'll look for us there, if they haven't already," she pointed out, "and while I trust our friends there, they'll have to arrest us if they've gotten the word to do so."

"Good point. We'll send Candle in for us."

"Candle? That's worse. What if he's arrested?"

"I doubt he will be. So far every communication we've had from the Vogt has been addressed to you and me. Candle's never been mentioned."

“It’s a good risk,” Candle agreed, “and I can always try to run for it.”

“You might get hurt doing that,” Oceanvine told him.

“I’ll definitely get hurt if I fall into the Vogt’s hands,” he pointed out.

The city was not quiet this night, even though it was nearly midnight. In the distance they could hear occasional shouts and screams. There was also the sound of a distant explosion and the ground shook once as Mount Rjal rumbled anew. Silverwind glanced to the north and saw another lava fountain at the top of the peak, a peak that appeared to be shorter than it had been a couple of days earlier.

“Good thing the eruption was mostly to the north of the volcano,” Oceanvine remarked. “We’d probably have lava flows running through town, if there was a town left here.”

When they were a block from the police station, they stopped outside a small restaurant that was still open. It appeared to be the sort of small establishment that made a living from being open all day and night. By day and early evening it was probably a local pub; at this time of night it was a haven for anyone seeking a quiet drink.

“Candle,” Silverwind told him. “We’ll be in here when you get back. See if Blizzard or Ironblade is still working, or anyone else we know. Don’t actually ask but keep your ears open to see if there’s an arrest warrant for us filed with Security and Justice.” Candle nodded and sped off. “They should have some coffee brewing and hot water for tea if you want it.”

“At the moment, I recognize the merits of a stiff drink,” Oceanvine remarked, “but I’d prefer tea anyway.”

There was only one man inside and he was behind the counter. He smiled when they came in but it was a nervous sort of smile. He relaxed a bit when Silverwind ordered coffee, tea and some biscuits. He and Oceanvine were just starting their second cups when Candle found them.

“You want tea or coffee?” Silverwind asked Candle.

“No thanks, I’ll just have some biscuits,” Candle replied and sat down. “Most of the constables are off, trying to quiet the city down,” he reported after a biscuit. “There are a lot of fights and burglaries going on. We’re going to have to be careful. Anyway, neither Blizzard nor Ironblade were in.”

“That’s no surprise,” Oceanvine noted.

“No,” Candle agreed. “Lieutenant Amaniev was though and I spoke to him for a bit. Someone threw a rock at him. His head was bandaged, but he seemed okay other than that. He told me where Blizzard’s apartment is. It’s just a block away from here.”

“Think she would mind company?” Silverwind asked, glancing at Oceanvine.

“I hope she won’t be too put out,” Oceanvine replied, “but so long as she has enough floor space for us, I’ll be happy enough.”

“The police don’t know the Vogt wants us arrested either,” Candle continued. “Amanser told me they’ve been having trouble with units of the Vogt’s Guards moving through the city. They evidently won’t tell the cops what they’re doing. They just order the police officers away. I think we’re just part of

what they're trying to do tonight."

"Interesting," Silverwind noted. "Well, let's finish up here and pay a social call on sweet Miss Blizzard."

Fifteen

"What are you all doing here at this hour?" Blizzard asked sleepily when she opened the door.

"It's a long story," Silverwind replied. "May we come in?"

"Of course. I don't have a lot of room, but my home is yours. Please, come in!"

It took a while, with a lot of interruptions and additions from Oceanvine and Candle, not to mention another tremor, but finally Silverwind managed to explain to Blizzard why they were there so late. "And that's why we'd like to stay here tonight," he concluded.

"By all means," Blizzard told him. "You and Oceanvine may use my bed and Candle can sleep here on the couch. I'll sleep in the chair tonight." Blizzard had a small flat with a bedroom, private bath, a small living room and an even smaller kitchen. Small it may have been, but it was also warm and comfortably furnished and what little room was left over was full of books. The walls were as covered with books as Madame Saba's library had been, but there were also stacks of them on the floor almost everywhere, with just enough room to move around them. Blizzard consolidated a few such stacks to make a bit more room for everyone.

"No, you take the couch," Candle told her. "Considering some of the places I've slept, that chair will be very comfortable for me. Or I can sleep on the floor. This is a nice thick rug you have here, if I move a few more of the books. Very good for sleeping on. Trust me."

"If you're certain," Blizzard told him.

"Absolutely," Candle assured her.

"Well, considering what is going on in the city, we'd better get what sleep we can. Tomorrow promises to be one hell of a day," Silverwind said. The rest agreed and they all went to sleep.

Sometime later an alarm went off outside, waking Blizzard and Candle up.

"That doesn't sound like the fire alarm," Candle noted sleepily.

"It isn't," Blizzard replied. "I hope someone is just playing silly buggers."

"Silly...?"

"Nevermind," Blizzard cut off Candle's question and was about to continue when Silverwind came out of the bedroom only half dressed.

"Can't have been more than an hour," he said. "Am I still dreaming or is that the invasion alarm?"

"It is," Blizzard confirmed. "I'm going to have to go in to work. You may stay here."

“No, I think we best go in with you,” he disagreed.

“What if the police have orders to arrest us?” Candle asked.

“You’ve already been in the station,” Silverwind told Candle. “You can go in with Blizzard. Oceanvine and I will wait until you signal the all clear. Here, let me grab the rest of my clothes so Blizzard and Oceanvine can get dressed in the bedroom while we boys get dressed out here.”

A few minutes later they stepped out the door of Blizzard’s flat and into chaos. Ash had stopped falling on the city because the wind had shifted again, but there was the stench of burning buildings in the air and they could hear screaming a few blocks away in every direction. More alarms could be heard all over the city, both invasion and fire.

“The weather appears to be crazy out tonight,” Blizzard muttered.

“Excuse me?” Oceanvine asked.

“I mean there’s something very bad happening,” Blizzard explained. “Listen to that. Invasion? Who’s invading? Why? And why now? Let’s hurry to the station. We can go most of the way by breezeways, there’ll be less dust.”

“And possibly more people,” Candle pointed out.

“Oh. Yes. You’re right. We’ll stick to the streets. It’s only two blocks anyway. Let’s go.”

They walked as swiftly as they could through the accumulated ash and were soon outside the Security and Justice building, but they weren’t outside alone. Several dozen police officers and constables were forming up ranks in the street.

“Silverwind!” They heard Ironblade’s voice call out. “Over here!”

“So much for sending Candle in cautiously,” Silverwind muttered to Oceanvine as they walked toward him.

“At least we know we didn’t need to worry.”

“Are you kidding? Now I’m really worried. The Vogt’s guards are at opposition to the police force. That can’t be good.”

“I was hoping you’d show up when the alarm went off,” Ironblade told them. “I had to send the rest of the Department’s mages over to Health tonight. Too many injured people showing up and probably more to come.”

“What’s happening?” Blizzard asked as several groups of men started marching away.

“Rioting, killing, and a few cases of arson as well,” Ironblade answered bleakly. “We’ve been getting reports of bands of men in the uniforms of the Vogt’s Guard, but with all regalia removed, moving about the city, killing anyone in their path. One got into a bad fight with a neighborhood vigilance group. Half of both groups were dead before that ended.”

“And somewhere in all of this, we’ll find Arithan,” Silverwind added.

“That’s how I see it. The seeds you planted in the New Forest are reaping a harvest of violence tonight.”

“A day later than I expected.” Silverwind told him.

“Yes. I had Chief Rostik prepared for last night but when nothing happened then or today, he had us stand down from alert status.”

“He must be really embarrassed now,” Candle commented.

“Oh, he is, lad. He is. He already apologized to me in front of the whole force who hadn’t already been sent out on patrol. No need to rub his face in it. It’s the first time I’ve ever heard of him making a public apology. Enough of that, though. We need our own strategy. We’re going to have to track Arithan down.” Behind him the rest of the assembled men marched out into the chill night.

“Do you have any notion what that means?” Silverwind asked quietly.

“I think so. We’re up against the worst sort of evil short of Aritos himself.”

“Maybe more so,” Silverwind commented.

“What do you mean?” Ironblade asked.

“Just something I heard from a colleague a few years back. It doesn’t apply now. You’re right he may well be the most evil creature alive and the most powerful we’ll ever meet.”

“How did you defeat him last time?”

“Geraint got his attention by dropping a couple buildings on him while I fed him a few lightning bolts.”

“And he lived?” Blizzard gasped.

“Demons are tough. They were made to be immortal. Maybe even the Gods cannot kill them. It is thought that They can only imprison them and only then when they are on their own island. We managed to weaken him and drive him away for a while. I thought it would be more lasting, but I was wrong. I wonder if he ever did more than just go into hiding.”

“Following your encounter with him,” Ironblade said, “we rounded up and tried all the members of his cult. They were executed for crimes against Maiyim. We had hoped we got them all, but maybe some escaped.”

“Or maybe just one,” Silverwind replied. “It would only have taken one to rebuild the cult, especially if Arithan hadn’t really gone away. Well, one thing I can tell you, we can’t just cast our thoughts about to find him. He’ll follow our thoughts back to us and crush us like bugs if we try. We’re going to have to find him the old fashioned way. Listen to the reports that come in and apply a lot of footwork. Let’s go inside. We’re going to need a whole urn full of coffee.”

“To get through the day?” Blizzard asked mischievously.

“To get me through to dawn.”

Chief Rostik had set up a “war room” in the crime lab where desk officers had hung a detailed map of the city on one wall and were using color-coded pushpins to mark where disturbances were taking place. At Silverwind’s suggestion, they marked where disturbances had been cleared up and as the night wore on they began to see a pattern.

“I think I have it down to one of three places,” Silverwind announced.

“Let me see if I see what you do,” Ironblade interrupted. “We have two wide areas in which a good three quarters of all the disturbances are, or have been, taking place. Further, they almost touch at this point here,” he put his finger down on a blank spot on the map, “which seems to be the center of it all. So do you think our quarry is in the center or one of the wings?”

“My guess is the center,” Silverwind replied, “but now that I think a bit, he could also be anywhere along this axis.” He indicated the line of points equidistant from the two areas of concentrated disturbance. However, the center of this wing is fairly close. Let’s check that area out first.”

They rushed out of the building and started out. It wasn’t long, however, before they ran into a small band of the Vogt’s Guards. The guards attacked them on sight, but Oceanvine cast a quick impermeable ward to protect them and Blizzard put them gently to sleep with a knock-out charm.

“I suppose we ought to move them out of the street,” Blizzard commented.

“Why?” Candle asked. “They wouldn’t have done the same for us.”

“We’re better,” Blizzard told him primly. “Come on, it’s a simple levitation spell.” A few seconds later their erstwhile attackers were piled up on a nearby sidewalk.

“How long will they stay asleep?” Candle asked her.

“A few hours. With luck, some of our people will find them and lock them up, but we don’t have time for that now. Do we?” she asked Silverwind.

“Not at all,” he replied.

They forged on. Most people ran away when the mages came into view, but the guards invariably attacked. Oceanvine and Candle took turns casting wards and Ironblade and Blizzard took turns knocking the attackers out.

“I’m a bit worried about you, Silverwind,” Oceanvine said as they neared the center of that area. “You can barely use magic in your condition.”

“Who says?” Silverwind asked. “I’ll admit that I probably only have one good spell before the pain and nightmares close in, but I plan to make it a good spell.”

“Are you sure?”

His response was to try to stare her down. She didn’t bother meeting his gaze, but she’d had her answer. If he was certain, he would have said so. If he had been truly well, he would have cast some sort of flashy spell.

A while later, Ironblade concluded. "I don't think he's anywhere around here."

"Agreed, let's move on toward the center," Silverwind replied.

Their progress was slow until they reached an area of relative quiet. There had been rioting in this part of town earlier, that was obvious. Someone had set several wagons on fire and broken some shop windows.

"Doesn't look like there has been much looting," Oceanvine noted seeing that there were still display goods visible inside those broken windows.

"I'd have been surprised if there had been," Ironblade informed her. "We have a relatively low incidence of burglary here, but I'm sure there has been some. There always is."

"How long until daylight?" Candle asked suddenly.

"The sun rose two and a half hours ago," Silverwind told him. "The ash plume is making this seem like night, just like yesterday."

"Does sunlight have any effect on the power of a demon?" Candle asked.

"Not that I'm aware of. Why?"

"I don't know. I just thought that something so evil would work best at night."

"No," Silverwind shook his head. "It would be nice, even appropriate, I suppose, but unfortunately that doesn't make it so. What is that buzzing?"

"I don't hear anything," Candle replied.

"I do," Oceanvine said, her head cocked to one side trying to detect the origin of the sound."

"Must be out of my hearing range," Ironblade conjectured.

"Not mine though," Blizzard reported. "I think it is coming from that direction." She pointed vaguely toward the Hill.

"Could he be on the Hill and the pattern we saw just a coincidence?" Oceanvine asked.

"I don't see why not," Silverwind replied. "Let's start heading that way." A few minutes later he stopped them and announced, "I know what it is now. It's a summons. Can you feel it?"

"Yes, I feel like I'm being pulled forward," Oceanvine replied.

"It's a gentle tug," Blizzard agreed.

"It will get more insistent the longer it goes on," Silverwind told her. "That's the nature of a summoning charm. The interesting thing is that neither Candle nor Ironblade have been summoned. That must mean whoever is summoning us is calling us specifically."

"It's nice to be wanted," Oceanvine observed acidly.

“Why us?” Blizzard asked. “Why not Master Ironblade or Candle?”

“I think this may have something to do with our activities around Rjalkatyp,” Silverwind replied after a moment. “The three of us have been traveling around together much of the time. Candle has been with us but he is an apprentice. It is probable his abilities have been severely underestimated.”

“And I have not been seen working with you publicly,” Ironblade added.

“Exactly. The summons is from Arithan, I can tell that now that the call has become stronger. He knows three of us are coming. He probably doesn’t care if Candle shows at all, which shows how arrogant and ignorant he can be. Candle is as disciplined as any journeyman. His only weakness at this point is in his lack of magical breadth, he has a lot to learn, but what he does know, he does very well indeed. As for you, well he doesn’t even know you’re working with us. Ignorance of the presence of a fully accredited master level mage is a major mistake on Arirthan’s part. Now all we need to do is exploit that error.”

“You make it sound so easy,” Oceanvine muttered. “We still don’t know where we are going.”

“No, but Candle and Ironblade can hang back a bit and then circle around where ever it turns out to be to help take Arithan by surprise. Let’s keep moving. It’s not like he doesn’t know we’re coming.”

They started walking toward the summons on a street that was still heavy with fallen volcanic ash.

“Do you hear that?” Candle asked a few minutes later.

“Hear what?” Blizzard asked, then answered herself. “I see what you mean it’s almost quiet now.”

“The riots are still going on, but not near here,” Oceanvine noted.

“Arithan wants us,” Silverwind told them. “He wants to be certain he has us. He knows how he was able to come back here. He doesn’t want that happening to him sixteen years from now.”

“It won’t be sixteen years from now,” Candle said confidently. “It’ll be tonight.”

“Holy Methis, make it so!” Blizzard prayed fervently.

They continued on and soon found themselves near the same empty lot where Silverwind and Oceanvine had interrupted the eightbase game. The call was strong now, but Silverwind was able to get them to stop for a minute.

“I think he’s in the field just around the corner,” Silverwind said. “Candle, take a very careful peak, please.”

Candle nodded and ran up to the next corner. He was back a minute later and reported, “There’s someone there. Doesn’t look much like a demon though. He’s not a giant like the last one.”

“That will be Arithan then,” Silverwind nodded. “Last time around he was about seven feet tall with gray skin, black eyes and flame red hair.”

“I couldn’t tell that from the corner,” Candle told him, “but that’s probably how tall he is.”

“I think that’s his natural appearance, or maybe just the guise he prefers,” Silverwind observed. “Or perhaps he wants me to be sure who he is.”

“Is he that sure of himself?” Ironblade asked.

“I told you he was arrogant.”

“That you did. Candle and I will circle around the east side of that field and come in from the north.”

“The summons is getting much stronger. I’m not sure how long we’ll be able to resist it,” Silverwind said. “Better hurry so you’ll be ready to act when we finally have to show ourselves.”

“Anything in particular you want us to do?”

“Whatever comes to mind,” Silverwind replied. “Just hit him with everything you’ve got, the more powerful the better.” Ironblade nodded and hurried off with Candle.

A few minutes later Oceanvine gasped and said tightly, “I can’t hold out much longer.” Blizzard grunted and started walking toward the field.

“Then let’s go,” Silverwind replied. Put your best shields up. This is going to be rough.”

They walked rapidly forward while Silverwind prepared a spell, reaching out with his mind all around him. As they turned the corner he saw the figure of a tall man standing in the middle of the field with his back to them. He held back letting the spell grow ever stronger. Now they could see clearly enough in the dim light. It was, indeed, Arithan, and when they were thirty feet away from him, he began to turn around and Silverwind let his spell loose.

A great bolt of lightning flashed down from the sky and enveloped the demon in its power. Silverwind screamed and, holding his head, fell to the ground unconscious.

Arithan screamed too for a long moment, and he curled up in pain. Oceanvine and Blizzard felt the summons dissipate. They were free to act. Then Arithan seemed to absorb the lightning’s electricity and straightened up. Oceanvine threw the most intense fire at Arithan she could muster. A year earlier she had reduced a rogue mage to ashes in a second with a spell not even half as powerful, but the demon met the spell and deflected it into the sky. Blizzard tried using levitation to throw boulders at him, but he met that attack with levitation of his own and bombarded both of them with the same nightmares that had crippled Silverwind and Lieutenant Amaniev. They both screamed and started to run away, but Arithan stopped them with still more levitation and dragged them back.

Behind him, Ironblade and Candle began their attacks. They had joined their power and Ironblade had caused a fissure to open up beneath Arithan’s feet. The demon fell into the small chasm and they closed it back up again. They started forward, but had only taken two steps when the ground suddenly exploded and the demon came soaring back out again with a deafening roar. Once again he cast his best spell, the one that caused the crippling, nightmarish illusions and caught both Candle and Ironblade, then without even bothering to use magic he marched over to them where they were trying unsuccessfully to hit each other in their confusion, and dragged them bodily over to where he was magically holding Oceanvine and Blizzard. He lined them up and without ever slacking off on his psychic attack inspected them each in turn.

“Yes!” he gloated. “That felt good. Silverwind, you miserable old man,” he said turning toward where

the wizard was still sprawled unconscious in the dust. "Didn't you think I'd be ready for that this time? Old fool! Now let's see what you have for allies."

He swaggered toward the groaning foursome. "Local talent," he said dismissively as he looked at Ironblade. With a mere mental shrug, he sent Ironblade unbearable pain, and the master fell to the ground. Arithan moved next to Candle. "Ah, the wizard's apprentice. Time for another lesson boy!" he concentrated then sent his curse at the boy. "There, now you're just like your master." Candle collapsed to a sitting position. He wasn't unconscious; his eyes were open and he was staring at horrors only he could see.

"And now the ladies." He stopped in front of Blizzard and said, "I'll save you for later, my dear. We'll have some fun. All three of us will, but I'd like to start with this one," he tilted his head over at Oceanvine. "Don't be jealous. Ah now, Oceanvine," he said running one hand down the line of her jaw. She screamed as burning pain scorched her nerves where he touched her. "I have waited so long now to meet you. Oh yes, I've known you would come to me one day. Yes." He reached forward again and reveled in the scream.

Behind him, however, Silverwind was just coming around. The nightmarish illusions were still with him and as strong as ever, but unlike with the others they were practically old friends of his. Over the years he had learned how to distinguish the demon-spawned illusion from reality and how to operate through the pain and disorientation. He had never told Oceanvine, but he felt that was why he was one of the few mages able to cast a spell while drunk. Compared to Arithan's curse, getting drunk was a minor nuisance. Even so, he knew he was probably incapable of using magic in his current condition but decided to attempt it anyway.

As he started to stand up, however, his hand touched a long object that had been hidden under the ashfall. Still on the ground, he picked it up and discovered it was an eightbase bat, the odd club with a round handle and a wide, flat triangular cross section. He used it to help himself to his feet, then held on to it as he inched forward to where Arithan was torturing Oceanvine.

"Oh, yes, I think you'll last a few years at least," Arithan was chuckling as he held Oceanvine's hand and raised it to his lips. They never quite reached, however.

Silverwind had briefly been tempted to get Arithan's attention either by clearing his throat and saying something silly like, "Excuse me," before bringing the bat down on the demon's head, but he knew that would lose him a vital advantage, so instead he just gripped the bat and swung it sideways, edge-on into Arithan's head.

The demon screamed and tried to turn around so Silverwind hit him again, and then once more. "Now that feels good!" Silverwind said and hit him again. With each successive hit he could feel the demon's curse withering away until several hits later it was entirely gone.

Arithan jumped away and roared shakily, "Fool! I am invulnerable! Do you really think I can be defeated by a child's plaything?"

"No," Silverwind responded striking the demon with the bat again, "You're not invulnerable, just indestructible and I'll bet you can't work too well with a concussion." He swung the bat twice more. The bat broke on the final stroke. "Ah, I had been wondering why the kids left that here. I guess they knew it was cracked already." He looked at the handle and shrugged. "Just one thing more to do with this, I guess," muttered and whipped the end of the handle across the demon's face and as Arithan's mouth came open to scream he shoved it in as hard as he could.

Arithan choked on the bat handle, but managed to bring his hand up and take it out of his mouth, then turned toward Silverwind. Silverwind was ready for him though with a pair of spells. He cast the first one immediately. Arithan cast his favorite curse again at Silverwind. Silverwind brought his hands up to his head and screamed.

“Foolish mortal! You’ll never be free of me!” he shouted and began to laugh.

“Wanna bet, bright eyes?” Silverwind replied with a taunting half smile as he lowered his hands. “And did you really think *you* could catch me like that twice? You know Arithan, old buddy, I’ve come to the conclusion that you are not the brightest candle in the chandelier. What are you? A one-trick pony? Do you even know what a one-trick pony is? Hello in there! Anybody home?” Silverwind brashly reached out his hand and knocked on Arithan’s head. Arithan snarled. “Well what do you know,” Silverwind continued to taunt the demon. “*It is* hollow!”

Arithan changed shape, growing another foot taller and letting his hands lengthen into great sharp claws. He stepped toward Silverwind and took a great swing toward the wizard. As he did, Silverwind cast the other spell. It was a ward, one of Oceanvine’s special alternating current wards, and he set it up directly in the path of Arithan’s hand. As the hand intercepted the surface of the ward, the demon suddenly froze. His hand turned green with pink spots then the color spread up his arm and rapidly covered his whole body.

“Well, well!” Silverwind chortled. “So much for legends. I thought you were supposed to be immune to that sort of magic. Somehow I thought that part was overblown. I could use another bat. Hold on a minim, would you please?” Silverwind concentrated briefly and a fresh eightbase bat appeared in his hand. “I used to have to be drunk to do that,” he told the demon, who was still frozen in place and bright green with pink dots.

“That’s a good look for you,” Silverwind told the demon. “Well, time to end this.” He released the ward that held the demon frozen in place and Arithan screamed wordlessly in rage. He shrank back to his usual size and shape but couldn’t get his skin back to its normal gray color. Then he gestured as though trying to call down all the power in the world on the wizard, but a moment later his eyes bulged out and his hands went to his head as his screams turned from rage to pain.

“What have you done?” he demanded of Silverwind. “What have you done!”

“Me?” Silverwind replied as confused as Arithan. “I didn’t do a thing.”

“No,” a voice said from behind the demon. He turned to see Candle standing there with an expression so fierce on his face even Oceanvine might have quailed before it. The other mages were standing ready behind him. “I did it. Thought you might like a taste of your own curse. Pleasant dreams, bosco!”

“No!” Arithan shouted. He tried to curse Candle anew and screamed in pain once more. “No!”

“Okay,” Silverwind said to the others, “all together now.” But before they could react Arithan screamed once more and started running. After three steps he shot up into the air, still screaming and disappeared into the volcanic plume. “I’ll track him,” Silverwind told them. He went into a trance, one of the few Candle and Oceanvine had ever seen him go into. Still in the trance he sat down on thin air, levitating a couple feet above the ground. After a few minutes he said, “So that’s how he got here. Via the volcano.”

“Mount Rjal, Silverwind?” Ironblade asked.

“Sort of. Not really, of course but someone, maybe the first cult here, used the power of the volcano and the symbolism inherent in the break in Mayim’s crust to provide Arithan with a mystic passage to the island. No wonder he returned here. It was probably his path of least resistance. Well we can put a stop to that. Everybody, link hands. I’m going to need all our power to close that path.”

They linked up in a circle and Silverwind drew on their power as he went to work. In his mind’s eye he could see Mount Rjal in its entirety. He saw how the throat of the mountain was a long pipe filled with lava that stretched down into the surface of Maiyim until it reached the hot magma below the world’s crust. Then he reached out with all the power at his command and began to close that pipe. He caused the molten rock to cool and solidify all the way down and as it cooled, he let the material of the cooling lava meld with the surrounding rock so that what was once a volcanic pipe was now an immense plug; one that would never come out. And he completed the process all the way down to the magma.

“Mount Rjal,” he told them, “will never erupt again.”

“Look!” Blizzard said pointing toward the north. “You can already see clear sky beyond the plume.” There was a thin patch of clear sky to the north, but it was darkening with the now setting sun.

“We’ll see the stars in a while,” Silverwind added, “and the sun tomorrow morning. Feels good to be alive, doesn’t it?”

“But you can’t just stop volcanic activity like that,” Ironblade argued. “The pressure will build up until there is a massive explosion.”

“I checked that too, there’s a weakness in the crust that looks like it was ready to become a new volcano anyway. It should begin to erupt in a few years more or less and will be a few miles off the southeast coast of the Isle of Fire. It might be a good idea to keep an eye on it. I imagine it will be a nasty shipping hazard during eruptions.”

“I supposed so,” Ironblade agreed.

“Candle,” Silverwind said turning to his apprentice, “you did fantastically today. I’m very proud of you. And you are going to have to tell me how you cast Arithan’s curse back on him.”

“It wasn’t much,” the boy said, “I just analyzed the way he made me feel and made him feel the same way.” Silverwind and Oceanvine exchanged a glance.

“No,” Silverwind disagreed, “there was more to it than that. Well no matter, we have the journey home to figure out how you did it. And we should. It might come in handy again someday. We didn’t destroy Arithan after all, but we did banish him from the Isle of Fire. If he wants to come back here he’ll have to swim.”

“Can demons swim?” Blizzard asked.

“Damned if I know,” Silverwind shrugged and laughed. Then he suddenly became much more serious as he turned toward Oceanvine. “Vine, these last few weeks. I don’t know what I would have done without you. I doubt I’d be here right now in any case. In the years we have worked together, I have come to value and depend on you. At first a lot of that was because of Arithan’s curse; there was so much I needed help with, even if I wouldn’t admit it. Even now that I have completely and permanently thrown off his curse I cannot imagine life without you. I should have told you this in Querna, but...”

“Silverwind,” Oceanvine interrupted him. “You don’t need to say this. I understand. Really. I mean, after your marriage to Ysemay...”

“Oceanvine,” Silverwind cut her off, “will you marry me?”

Oceanvine stared at him. She knew what was coming, how could she help not knowing? But it was still a surprise and all words suddenly fled from her, so she did the only thing she could think of: wrapped her arms around him and kissed him soundly. It was only a few minutes later, after the long kiss that she breathed, “Yes!”

Sixteen

“I wish we could have slept at the hotel last night,” Oceanvine sighed as they got up the next morning. They had spent the night at the Department of Security and Justice. The first several hours they helped Blizzard and Ironblade with the obligatory paperwork, then because there was no telling if it was safe for them to go back to their hotel, they slept on cots in the crime lab.

“I know what you mean,” Silverwind said, trying to stretch his sore muscles a bit. “This was not exactly restful was it? But I’m sure the Vogt would have been glad to accommodate us if we had asked.”

“Yeah, in his dungeon,” Candle put in. “Not that he could have put us there if we didn’t want to go, nor kept us if we wanted to leave.”

“Oh, you are feeling your oats this morning, aren’t you?” Oceanvine bantered.

“Well, couldn’t we?” he countered.

“I guess we could, but it’s just as well we’ll be going up the Hill this morning after getting a few hours of sleep.”

“Even wizards,” Silverwind told Candle, “can be overwhelmed by numbers or make fatal mistakes when tired.”

“Are you all awake yet?” Blizzard asked, poking her head in the door. “Better hurry up, we’re just about ready to march.”

“March?” Oceanvine asked.

“Up the Hill. Well actually we’ll be riding, but the constables have already set off with a contingent from the Navy.”

“A full-scale raid is it?” Silverwind asked.

“We’re not taking any chances. We’ve managed to calm down most of the city, but there have been reports that soldiers have been causing disturbances on the Hill. That’s really a matter for the military police, but they’re still back at General Hervasiv’s camp.”

“Has anyone sent word to Hervasiv?” Silverwind asked.

“Sergeant Villenov rode out at dawn, but it will be hours before we can get help from the Army and Chief Rostik wants us to re-establish order in the city. It is our job after all. So it looks like you all are dressed. Come on! I have breakfast waiting in the carriage.”

Blizzard had obviously been looking for something special and found it by returning to the bakery they had visited several days earlier. She explained that the bakery had been broken into the previous day but the owners came in that morning, cleaned up the broken glass and went right back to work. By the time Blizzard had arrived, there was a long line of people waiting for service. “Very happy people,” she had said.

The carriage soon caught up to the column of policemen and sailors and found themselves in what felt like a festive atmosphere, as though they were in a parade rather than an advancing military force. Cheers erupted from the crowds lining the street as they passed until they reached the base of the Hill. From there on they had only the long, empty, winding, uphill road.

The column came to a halt at the top of the hill and stepped aside to let the wagons carrying the mages, Chief Rostik and the Navy captain in charge roll forward. At the top of the road they discovered why the men had stopped when they reached a hastily erected gate manned by a full company of soldiers. A captain came forward to ask their business and Chief Rostik spoke to him at length.

“You, of course, may enter, sir,” the captain told him, “but for the time being I am under orders to prohibit all vehicular traffic in this area. I will assign men to tend your vehicles and horses, of course.” Then he recognized Silverwind and added, “Lord Wizard! I’m certain the general will be anxious to see you and your people. He is in the presidential palace, sir.”

“Thank you, captain,” Silverwind replied. “So it seems reports of rioting soldiers were false after all,” he said to Blizzard and Ironblade.

“Just as well,” Ironblade replied. “I wasn’t really looking forward to having to fight our way in.”

The captain assigned one of his men to escort the party to the palace and he saw to it that they got in without having to wait. The general, however, was not in the Vogt’s throneroom as Silverwind had expected, but in one of several meeting rooms, deep in conversation with several of his officers and Senator Lavro.

“That was fast!” Hervasiv commented as they walked in. “I just sent you all messages a few minutes ago.”

“I believe they came here on a somewhat different mission, Hervasiv,” Lavro told him with a smile. “Happily, that has already been attended to, gentlemen. We just convened this impromptu meeting, so you all haven’t missed much. We need to decide just how to go about re-establishing the Republic.”

“Most of you all I know,” Hervasiv said, getting to his feet, “although I don’t believe we have met, Captain.”

“Martyn, sir. An honor, sir”

“The honor is mine, Captain. We have sent for Admiral Vasylo, but I hope you will remain with us at least until he arrives and perhaps later. This matter needs the Navy, and representatives from all departments as well. We hope to begin in earnest in the Senate chambers this afternoon.”

“I fear it will take weeks before we’re done,” Lavro added. “So much to do.”

“May I ask why you and your troops are here?” Silverwind asked Hervasiv. “I thought you and Andriy had an understanding.”

“For that matter,” Oceanvine added, “where is Vogt Andriy?”

“Vogt, no longer,” Hervasiv replied. “And that is part of the tale. Please sit down, everyone and we’ll swap tales, no doubt. I am most interested in hearing what happened in the city these past two days as well.

“Silverwind and his team came to my camp some time ago investigating a button. I wish I had known more about it at the time, but it all worked out well, so I guess that doesn’t matter.”

“We didn’t know very much about it at the time,” Silverwind explained, “and by the time we did...”

“Yes, that happens sometimes,” Hervasiv replied. “I must admit I used you too. You see, I didn’t really know if Senator Lavro was still alive. I sent and received messages from him, but none of my messengers ever actually saw him. The button gave me a good excuse to send you to see him. If you had failed to do so, I was certain you would have gotten back to me.”

“And your visit in turn gave me the chance to tell someone the true situation,” Lavro added, “and incidentally thrilled my wife.”

“She is well?” Silverwind asked.

“Quite well, thank you. She is in our temporary apartment here in the palace.”

“So tell me,” Hervasig continued, “what did you learn about the button.”

Silverwind quickly sketched out what they had learned from Senator Lavro, Arlo Hroreksson, and Madame Saba. It was Candle who described the compulsion spell that had been placed on all the buttons.

“Yes, that also explains our presence here at this time,” Hervasiv told them. “When Mount Rjal began the recent major eruption, I and every other member of the army felt an irrisistable urge to march into the city. Since I and most of our officers were so ensnared, anyone not in full uniform at the time was so ordered and we began our march into Rjalkatyp.

“It is important to realize that while we had no choice about what we were doing, we were fully cognizant of what it was and that it was against our wills. We arrived here and marched up the Hill sometime before dawn yesterday and Andriy gave us our orders to bring the city under control. His control.”

“He called you all the way up here and then sent you back down again?” Silverwind asked. Hervasiv nodded. “Foolish of him. He didn’t need to speak to you directly, he could have ordered you remotely just as he did to call you here. He ended up wasting precious hours that way.”

“And just as well, but I was not entirely without volition. While I suspected what he wanted us to do, I resisted it long enough to stall until he gave a direct verbal order. We marched back down the Hill and

began securing the city block by block. That is a slow and meticulous process. Of course this is relatively friendly territory, we didn't need to go at it so carefully, but once more it was the only resistance I could put up, so I did.

"Suddenly at nightfall yesterday the spell broke and we were freed from all compulsion. I gathered my forces back up and once more we marched up the Hill. Didn't take anywhere near so long as the first time, of course. I decided the best thing to do would be to secure the Hill and root out Andriy and his sycophants. There was some fighting with what was left of his guards, but not much. Most of them had jumped off the cliff. I believe it was at the same time the spell on us was broken."

"My guess is that it was also the moment when Silverwind vanquished the demon Arithan," Ironblade commented.

"Many of those men were probably part of the demon's cult," Silverwind added "maybe most of them. Their minds would have been shattered when he fell. That's what happened last time. Arithan takes that sort of control over his followers and when he is wrenched away, they suffer."

"Makes sense and it certainly explains much," Hervasiv nodded. "We rounded up the few sane ones. There will be trials later. Not too much later, but we have more important matters before us."

"What about the Vogt?" Oceanvine asked.

"As insane as the ones who jumped," Hervasiv replied. "We found him in the throneroom wallowing in his own filth. I ordered my men to take him alive, but I was thwarted. He had a knife on him and as we closed in on him, he stabbed himself in the eye. Drove the knife all the way in and was dead in an instant. That was when I realized there had been another enchantment on me, a far subtler one. Andriy had chosen Lavro and me as his allies. He needed the military power from me and the political authority Lavro represented. His subtle persuasion convinced us to go along with him. It wasn't until his death that I realized what a stupid, wasteful thing the coup had been. We killed a lot of good men for no purpose but to put that greedy son of a ship's chandler on the throne of this land. A throne, I'll have you know, will never be used again if I have my way, but that's part of what we'll be working on in the coming weeks."

"I should have understood I was acting against my will before," Hervasiv mused. "It's so obvious. Why shouldn't Admiral Vasytko have been part of the Triumvirate? It makes just as much sense."

"Then it wouldn't have been a triumvirate," Lavro chuckled.

"I suspect that the admiral was never close enough to Andriy for him to cast his spell over him," Silverwind concluded.

"Why was he even able to use such magic?" Hervasiv asked. "I thought only a trained mage could use more than a simple household blessing. He grew up here in Rjalkatyp and as far as I know, he never left the island nor studied with a local mage."

"He was Arithan's high priest," Silverwind explained. "The demon himself trained him. I doubt he was much of a student, though or he would have been able to do much more. Of course Arithan would not have wanted him to be very powerful. If he had the power of a wizard, he might have been a danger to Arithan later on."

"Good point. As soon as we had the Hill, I sent for Lavro by the fastest messenger at my disposal. He

arrived early this morning and we've been working here ever since."

"So what are your plans now?" Blizzard asked. She was normally quite shy, but Oceanvine noticed she was radiating quiet strength at that moment. Gone was her diffidence toward nominal superiors. Somewhere along the way she had gained self confidence and her question, while politely phrased and intoned, was a demand nevertheless.

"In the short term we mean to re-establish the Congress as the rightful ruling body of the land. We will invite, no, beg the surviving members of the Senate and House of Commons to return and help us. But the old government was flawed. It was that fact that initially drew Lavro and me into the coup. We have the opportunity to create a more perfect nation and would be foolish to waste that opportunity. So until popular elections three months from now, Lavro and I will work with a new constitutional committee to draft a new governing document. One that lays out better checks and balances on the government than before. It will be that document that the new Congress will have to ratify or come up with something better when it meets once the Commons have been elected and the Senate reelected."

"It will be a very small Senate," Lavro added. "If we choose to have a Senate at all. Most of the Senatorial families have been wiped out or driven away. Maybe it is time to do away with that vestige of our aristocratic past."

"That will be up to you and your fellow Senators, Lavro" Hervasiv replied. "If you choose to relinquish your right to sit in the Senate, so be it."

"Or perhaps we can find another use for the Senate," Lavro mused.

"Such as?"

"I don't know yet. We'll have to see what we can come up with. We'll also need to redefine the powers and privileges of the President."

"Yes," Hervasiv agreed. "That was much of the problem with the old government. Too much power for the president and no limit to how long a president might serve."

"I have always believed," Silverwind put in, "that a government should never be allowed to grow too strong. Otherwise it will cease being a servant of the people and will instead make the people its servants."

"Yes," Hervasiv agreed, making a quick note on one of the pieces of paper in front of him. "That was our problem in a nutshell. We had all become the servants of our government. We must endeavor to insure that will never happen again." Everyone at the table nodded their agreement.

"How about in the long term?" Blizzard asked.

"What?" Hervasiv asked in reply.

"You said all that would be in the short term. What, may I ask, are your long term plans?"

General Hervasiv smiled. "Lady Blizzard, you've just been drafted."

"What?"

“We need you to sit on the Constitution committee.”

“Me?”

“Yes. You appear to be asking the right questions and not letting any go unanswered. I like that.”

“And your answer to my question about your long term plans?” she prompted him, further emboldened.

“Lavro and I will both retire. That was the first thing we decided. Once a new government is established we will step aside and let others take up the burden. We will also stand trial for the overthrow of the legitimate government of the Isle of Fire.”

“Is that truly necessary?” Blizzard asked. “I mean the old government was no prize either.”

“We believe it is proper that we stand trial. Of course we hope to be acquitted, there were extenuating facts after all. But our trials will establish the legitimacy of the new government we are creating. In truth the verdicts will not matter, but the manner in which they are reached and the reasoning behind them will make all the difference in how our new judiciary will be perceived.”

“And when will these trials be?”

“After the elections and after Congress reconfirms our judges and justices.”

“So at least six months away, maybe more?” Blizzard pressed. “That’s a long time.”

“If the trial were tomorrow we’d probably be convicted,” Hervasiv replied. “In six months I think we’ll have rehabilitated our images enough to expect an acquittal.”

“Well, I suppose I can’t completely blame you for wanting to have the trials in conditions as favorable as possible,” Blizzard agreed. “It’s not like there is anyone who can force you to stand if you don’t want to.”

“I’m glad you noticed that, Blizzard,” the general replied with a big smile.

“Must you really leave tomorrow?” Lady Ielena asked over tea a week later.

“It’s time, Lili,” Oceanvine responded. “It was an honor to have some input into the new government your people are building, but this is a job for natives. It isn’t right for a foreigner to have too much say in that sort of thing.”

“You’re right, of course, but I do hope you’ll come back and visit. Our villa by the sea is really such a charming place in the summer, especially when one is not a prisoner there.”

“Thank you. Who knows? We may be back some day, but for now it’s time to return home. It’s been over a year and a half since I saw Renton. It will be nice to get back to a quiet life of research. We left so much undone, when we traveled to North Horalia and we only expected to be away a few weeks.”

“I just hope the world lets us get back to that,” Candle added.

“The world will have to answer to me if it won’t,” Oceanvine said with a hint of her characteristic irascibility. She might have mellowed over the last year or so, but not all that much.

“Hey!” continued Candle. “I’ve never even seen Renton. You still have yet to convince me the place even exists.” Oceanvine smiled, but refused to let him bait her.

“And how about you, Blizzard?” Lili asked. “How do you like being a member of the Constitutional committee? I hear you’ve been setting most of those old politicians on their ears.”

Blizzard smiled at that. “Just letting them know when I don’t like their ideas,” she replied. “I imagine they’ll all breathe a sigh of relief when I leave in a few months.”

“Leave, dear? Why where ever are you going? This is your home!”

“Yes it is, and it always will be, but it is time I stood for my Masters degree. I’m applying to both Merinne and Randona.”

“Not Querna?” Oceanvine asked.

“You might have managed to stand at Querna, Oceanvine, but those old trolls haven’t quite lost their prejudices yet. They aren’t likely to let this young troll in. Wrong gender, and the Women’s Academy doesn’t offer degrees in Magic. If I have my druthers, I think I’d like to attend Randona next, haven’t been there and maybe I can come and visit Oceanvine and Silverwind during the holidays.”

“You’ll certainly be welcome, but while we live on the same island, it’s a fairly long journey. I doubt you’ll want to do it more than once.”

“We’ll see,” Blizzard replied. “Actually I’m hoping I won’t be there long enough to visit more than once or twice anyway. The masters program isn’t supposed to take more than two years for a full time student, especially since I hope to have the rough draft of my thesis done before I arrive. I started it over a year ago. It’s on some new forensic applications of magic I’ve been working on. If I can get that accepted, I’ll be done in three semesters, maybe less if my entrance exams score high enough.

“After that I’ll be back home and in line for Ironblade’s job. He’s nearly ready to retire and has been pushing me to get my next degree, so there I am.”

“Excellent!” Lili smiled. “You’re a real asset to the Isle of Fire, dear, but I do wish you’d consider running for public office.”

“What? And ruin my life?” Blizzard shot back with a grin. “No, I’ll only resort to that if the new Congress fails to live up to its potential. And if they don’t... well if they think I’m setting them on their ears now, they’ll find themselves thinking of this period as the ‘Good Old Days.’”

“Good for you!” Silverwind commended her, raising his teacup to her. The liquid inside looked like tea, a little, but Candle suspected it was something considerably stronger, and decided he wanted to learn how Silverwind managed that. Transformations were still not an area of magic he had explored. “You know, Vine,” Silverwind continued, “It might be close to two full years before we get back to Renton.”

“Why? The voyage shouldn’t take more than three months and that only if the winds are constantly

against us.”

“Well we have at least one stop to make along the way. I may have totally misjudged you, but I imagine you want to get married with your family present. I’d take you to meet my parents, but they passed on years ago. So we need to at least stop in Medda, unless you’re planning to put this off for as many years as I have.”

“Hah! And give you a chance to change you mind? Not a chance!”

“As if I would. I don’t want to put it off any longer than necessary. I do admit I’d like a long conversation with Master Sunbear while we’re there.”

“Why?” she asked suspiciously.

“It occurs to me he had a major influence on you in your youth. Given how you turned out, he must be someone worth knowing.”

Oceanvine didn’t believe it for a moment. “And I suppose we should stop by Ketch as well,” she said after feigning consideration.

“Where did you ever hear about Ketch?” he asked surprised.

“That’s where you were born, isn’t it?” Oceanvine replied. “I figure you must still have a few relatives living there, or someone who might tell me what you were like as a child.”

“Why?”

“Silverwind, dear!” she replied far too sweetly to be taken seriously. “If you’re going to start looking for embarrassing moments from my childhood, you can bet your last coin that I’ll do the same for you.” She flashed him a predatory grin, then took the sting out of it by kissing him. “It’s only fair, isn’t it?”

“If you keep that up, I will take you to Ketch. I just hope you like fish and fishermen. That’s just about all you’ll find there.” Then he kissed her again and they both put thoughts of each other’s childhood well out of mind.

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