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Gods of the Air

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Foreword

Well, this is it. The final installment of the Maiyim Tetralogy. It took about fourteen years to get here including a very long hiatus from writing along the way. I must admit that it feels good to have brought it to its planned conclusion even I reached this point with mixed emotions. I've been living with Silverwind, Oceanvine and Candle for so long I never thought it would end and it's difficult to let them go.

However, life goes on and while this series ends here, there will be more Maiyim stories coming up. I've already plotted a series called *Ars Nova Magica* which takes place some sixty-odd years after the following story, and there are three bridging short stories that take place in between the two tetralogies that may or may not actually get written, depending on whether I feel they have something valuable to add to the overall history of Maiyim. I'm plotting them so I'll know what's been going on. They are intended as backstories for the next series. So we'll see. Well... Okay I'll admit I've already written the first one, so keep an eye out for it.

As for *Gods of the Air*, well, if you've read the first three books of the series, there's not a lot to be

said about this one. If you haven't perhaps you should, but if you've decided to read this one without the first three anyway, keep in mind that while this is a fantasy it is one set in a world with a technological level roughly analogous to that of Earth during the first decade of the Twentieth Century (for readers of the previous books; that's correct, some time has passed since the third book of the series)

Anyway, I hope you enjoy this as much as I have.

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

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Prologue

Four men slowly made their way up the slope of a mountainous island in the extreme southern hemisphere of Maiyim at the border region between the Methis and Wenni Oceans. The island's name was Pohn, the same as the demon that had been born there when Maiyim was still an infant world of water. A fiercely cold wind was blowing off the Methis Ocean on that late summer day, giving promises of snow before the oncoming night would be out.

One of the men was still in his mid-thirties, the others were much older. All were wearing long fur-lined coats over silken robes imprinted with boldly colored floral patterns. The older men were Orentan wizards and the youngest a wizard candidate from the University at Merinne.

"How much further do we have to go?" the candidate asked when they took what was their fifth break from climbing.

"You will have to tell us," the Wizard Meadow told him gruffly. "It is your test."

"On to the summit then," the candidate sighed. One of the examining wizards, an older Orent named Watroak, groaned quietly. The other two wizards sympathized but kept their feelings to themselves. The candidate, a normally sober, mature Orent called Hearthfire, was too excited to notice Watroak's groan, but the third wizard, a human who used the mage-name Turnbuckle, exchanged a meaningful glance with Meadow before they all started out once more.

An hour later they set up their tents and camped for the evening. Hearthfire, as the wizard-candidate, was required to cook for his examiners. He lived up to his name by collecting a few stray branches and

using a spell to set them on fire.

“Nice blaze,” Turnbuckle noted. “And what gourmet repast do you propose to cook on it? We only brought dried fruit and jerky with us.”

“Wait and see,” Hearthfire replied before rushing away from the fire.

“At least it is warm,” Meadow commented, moving closer, arms outstretched toward the flames.

A few minutes later they heard the bleat of one of the wild sheep that lived on the island. Then Hearthfire returned with a large joint of mutton which he spitted and placed over the fire.

“It seems to me,” Meadow commented darkly, “that it is a waste to kill a whole sheep just to gain a single piece of meat.”

“I didn’t kill the beast, Or,” Hearthfire replied humbly. “I used it to clone off this leg. The sheep was startled when this first grew out of its body and then fell off, but was not harmed otherwise.”

“Ah, that new technique your thesis centered on,” Meadow nodded approvingly. “Yes. I had forgotten. My apologies, Or.”

“Not needed, Or,” Hearthfire replied with a respectful bow, “but accepted none the less.”

“We’ve seen sheep and deer on this island,” Turnbuckle noted. “Where did the creatures come from? This is a very isolated place and the other islands in the group do not host animal life.”

Hearthfire thought it was an examination question. All the way here the three wizards had examined him at the oddest times. Some exams were formal written affairs, others were sprung on him at dinner, or while hanging, seasick, over the gunwales. He considered the question carefully.

“I don’t know, sir,” he replied finally. “Would you enlighten me?”

“No one knows,” Watroak informed him. “My old master, however, believed that they were brought here by the demon Pohn as a food source. No proof of that, though.”

“It wasn’t an exam question,” Turnbuckle told Hearthfire, having realized why the candidate had answered so. “I was just making conversation. All the tests, save one, are over.”

“Oh,” Hearthfire responded, then fell silent for a while.

Two inches of snow fell overnight and they had to pick their way carefully up the mountain that morning. However, they managed to reach the summit by noon.

“This is the place,” Hearthfire announced to his examining committee.

“Finally,” Watroak groaned. Meadow and Turnbuckle also showed signs of relief.

“What’s wrong?” Hearthfire asked.

“Are you absolutely certain this is where you are going to make your attempt?” Meadow asked him.

“Yes. Am I wrong?”

“No, not at all,” Meadow admitted. “It is just that you did not need to come this far.”

“I didn’t?” Hearthfire asked, stricken.

“No. Anywhere away from the beach on firm ground would have been sufficient.”

“I remember when I examined Silverwind,” old Watroak reminisced. “The young whippersnapper walked about a hundred paces, turned and announced his findings. I don’t think we were on that island more than ten minutes.”

“That does sound like Silverwind,” Meadow opined seriously.

“You examined Silverwind?” Hearthfire asked, impressed.

“Yes, someone had to and I drew the short straw,” Watroak replied sourly.

Meadow surprised them all by laughing heartily at that. “I am sorry,” he told the others. “Watroak, your comment sounded like the sort of thing Silverwind himself might say. He and I never got along very well, but ever since we worked together in North Horalia a few years ago, I find that I miss his sense of humor. Perhaps I shall go and visit him after this.”

“Yes,” Watroak agreed. “That should cure you.” Meadow smiled in response.

“Well?” Turnbuckle asked Hearthfire. “What are you waiting for? I’ll admit you’ve chosen a site with a magnificent view...”

“Yes,” Watroak interrupted, “I can see my house from up here.” That was a gross exaggeration, but they could see most of the island below them and the ocean was visible in every direction.

“But,” Turnbuckle continued, “we aren’t here to play tourist. Is Pohn here and captive, or is he at large in the world?”

Hearthfire sank to the ground with his legs crossed and willed himself into a self-hypnotic trance. It was an age-old technique that many mages used to aid the relaxed concentration necessary to cast spells. When he was at the necessary state he reached out with his mind to test for the presence of Pohn. At first he detected nothing, but soon he felt a hot bolt of fiery pain shoot through this head. His cry was echoed by the examination committee, who had similarly cast the spell to verify Hearthfire’s results.

“He’s here,” Hearthfire grunted.

“But he is not captive,” Meadow added.

“He is right below us and rising,” Turnbuckle told them. “We have to get off this summit.”

They ran back down several hundred feet as fast as they could but before they could get any further they heard an explosion and a deep, bestial scream behind them. Turning they saw an immense figure rising out of the mountain top. The demon had a human sort of face, but it was contorted monstrously by dozens of large dripping fangs and a death-black, sharply curved horn that sprouted from the middle of its forehead. He stood twenty feet tall, his skin was deep gray and his eyes burned a sickly yellow-green.

“That is Pohn,” Meadow announced, perhaps unnecessarily. “He was in North Horalia.”

“What do we do?” Hearthfire asked, panic in his voice.

“Fight,” Meadow replied. “Throw every nasty spell you can think of. If we cannot drive him off, we are dead.” He matched his actions to his words and caused a large boulder to fly at Pohn’s head.

The demon caught the stone in his black-nailed hand and threw it at the assembled mages. It landed short, but the impact threw them away from one another. All four managed to get up and throw as much power as they could muster at the demon, but he seemed to be able to absorb it all. Meadow remembered a trick of Silverwind’s and caused a bolt of lightning to streak down and hit the demon, but Pohn seemed to reach out almost lazily to intercept the bolt and absorb it.

As Pohn redirected the energy back at Meadow, the wizard only had time to remember the old folk tale that said you could not defeat a demon the same way twice, before he went flying backward and slammed against a large boulder. The last thing he saw before losing consciousness was Pohn swinging a tree trunk like a club at the other wizards.

Emmine

One

“For I have dreamed a dreary dream,” two young women were singing in a corner of the tap room. One was playing a guitar. “Oh, who is free of sorrow? Oh, my love was dead on a leafy bed beside the River Sarrow.”

Oceanvine listened to them from the usual table she shared with Silverwind in Old Jack’s tavern. They were trying to attract Silverwind’s attention, but Oceanvine found she didn’t mind in the least. They were young, in their late teens, and teasing the great wizard was a local sport among the girls and young women in Renton. Besides they could try all they wanted to catch his eye but Oceanvine knew they didn’t have a chance, even if he occasionally pretended to be tempted. Silverwind was all hers. She took a sip of her hard cider and glanced over at her husband of nearly eight years.

Silverwind, sometimes called “the Great,” hero of several dozen penny-dreadful novels, none of which had much in common with reality, was playing darts blindfolded with three young men in another corner. The men, also in their late teens, were trying to impress the singers by beating, or at least holding their own, against the local celebrity. They weren’t having a good night. What they failed to realize that Silverwind was using magic to throw the darts precisely where he wanted them. It did not matter that he was blindfolded, the spell he was using not only showed him the target more clearly than his eyes ever could but put the darts where he wanted whether he bothered to aim or not. They might as well have challenged him to throw the darts over his shoulder from one hundred yards away with the doors and windows shut and with his arms tied to his side. The results would have been the same.

Oceanvine smiled gently as she took in the entirety of the scene. In many ways it was just another night at the local pub. She and Silverwind usually spent two or three evenings every week there. Usually she had just one pint of cider as she chatted with the other women in the village or perhaps played a board game with Silverwind or one of the other local people. Silverwind often had two or three pints of the dark lager Old Jack brewed, but he no longer drank to excess as he once had.

Oceanvine was about to join two local women at another table when the door to the tap room opened to reveal a tall young man in a short-sleeved silk tunic emblazoned in a vivid floral pattern that might have been considered garish even in the Bellinen Archipelago. He wore a felt hat with a wide brim and had a pack slung over his back and a broad grin on his face.

“Candle!” the barmaid called. She was just a few feet away from the door. She deposited a pitcher of beer on a table before two carters and gracefully swung away and into Candle’s path where she put her arms lightly around him, kissed him on the cheek and then swung away again just as gracefully.

“Nice to see you again, Jillanda,” Candle told her with a grin. She was already halfway back to the bar, but she half turned and gave him a big smile and a little wave. “Hiya, Vine!” Candle continued, spotting her. He removed the pack from his back and plopped it down on an empty chair at the table as Oceanvine was rising to greet him. “That’s Oceanvine!” he snapped just ahead of Oceanvine herself. “Gods! It’s good to see you again!” He leaned over and hugged her fiercely.

“And it’s good to see you again, Candle,” she replied warmly, “but if you crack any of my ribs I’ll turn you into a fairytale!” Candle laughed and released her. The threat was an old family joke that they shared with Silverwind.

“Where is the wizard, anyway?” Candle asked. Oceanvine pointed toward the dartboard. “I don’t believe it. Haven’t any of those kids figured it out yet?”

“Apparently not,” Oceanvine replied. “They’re too busy watching the girls.” Candle followed her gaze and saw the two singers who had stopped the moment he walked in. He smiled and waved to them. They smiled and waved back, earning him a set of glares from the young men at the dartboard. He smiled at them too. “You’re back early this year.”

“Yeah,” Candle agreed. “I sailed across the Great Bay on one of those new clippers, landed at Lon on the dawn tide yesterday morning and only stopped to sleep on the way. My trunk should be here in a few days.”

“In a hurry to get home?” she asked archly.

“Yeah,” he replied easily. “Need to get a start on the rest of my life now that I’m through with the University.”

“Candle,” Oceanvine replied worriedly, “you still have another year to go for your Journeyman’s degree.”

“Not anymore,” he told her. “They couldn’t handle me. Threw me out.”

“What!”

“Yeah, I ran afoul of your old friend, Professor Spindle, on that trunk protection test.”

“Oh dear! What did you do?”

“Well, I’d been expecting that test ever since you told me about it, and I had years to consider what I would do when it was my turn. You know there’s a reason I was never a very good thief. It was too easy to imagine how I’d feel if someone was stealing from me, so I wasn’t about to let anyone do it to me. Not even as a test of my abilities.

“My first idea was to cast one of your alternating current wards to keep anyone from getting into the trunk,” Candle continued. “That would have kept him out, but I decided that test was something that ought to be stopped once and for all, so I took a page out of Silverwind’s book and decided to be subtle.”

“Why do I have the feeling you were dealing out subtlety with a sledge hammer?” Oceanvine asked, resignation in her voice.

“Nah! That’s your style. I’d have only had to scrub pots for a year that way. Face it, Vine, I’m much nastier than you are when I get angry.”

“Oceanvine!” she growled.

Candle considered her for a moment then smiled and repeated, “Oceanvine. Sure. But you’re interrupting my story. So instead I made it nice and easy to actually open the trunk but placed a micro-ward on the hinges.”

“A micro-ward?” Oceanvine asked.

“Very tiny, almost impossible to see, especially if you aren’t looking for it. Hey, cheer up! I gave you credit for it when I spoke to the dean.”

“Given the last conversation I had with him, I’m not sure that did much to help your case,” Oceanvine commented.

“Don’t knock yourself,” Candle told her. “Dean Moonrise told me he has a lot of respect for you. He heard about how you stood for your Masters in Querna, by the way. He sends you his best wishes, but I don’t think it made a whole heck of a lot of difference, although when he learned you had taught me about wards he stopped asking how a mere apprentice-level mage could think up such a thing. I probably didn’t need to make those micro-wards the alternating type, but I wasn’t taking chances. There were four hinges so I set four separate wards each keyed to a different spell. The first one was just an identity checker. If I opened the trunk, nothing would happen. The other spells would be held in check and reset when the trunk was closed. If anyone else opened it, however the other three went off.

“The next spell picked the would-be thief’s pockets,” Candle continued, “spinning him around and dumping any money he carried into the trunk.”

“That by itself should have been enough to get you expelled. How the heck did you figure out how to do it?”

“Simple levitation, although done along several vectors at once. You see, because you told me who the examining professor was, I knew exactly where his pockets would be. Spinning him around was really to make sure that those pockets were in the right place at least part of the time. The second spell was in

your honor, by the way.”

“My honor?”

“Yours and Airblossom’s actually. I figured he’d remember those blinking red spots and the glowing green eyes you two gave him. I did it one better though. I also put the word ‘thief’ on his forehead. That blinked too,” Candle added. “Well, that looked the same as what you had done, but instead of actually turning him those colors, I did it with another alternating current ward which wrapped itself around his body. I figured he would know how to undo the spell you put on him by now. After all, you did have to document it after it wore off for your grade, but I was certain he couldn’t break one of those cockeyed wards of yours.”

“Oh, Candle! That’s priceless,” Oceanvine laughed, “but to get expelled from University...”

“Wait! I’m not done,” Candle told her. “The fourth and final spell was the capper! I used Silverwind’s tactile illusion spell to make old Spindle think he was naked and that rattled him so much he couldn’t dispel that one for a week. I think he had a breakdown.”

“I’m sure he did,” Oceanvine sighed.

“Well, all that got me hauled up before the dean, especially since I had goaded my entire dormitory to use the identity checker on their trunks. I had to cast almost all the micro-wards, though. Only a few of my classmates were up to them. I think that impressed him, but after a long consideration he decided it would be best to get rid of me.”

“Oh, Candle,” Oceanvine sighed sadly.

“Yeah,” Candle agreed, reaching into his pocket. “Good thing he gave me one of these things as I left.” He held up a mage stone – a flat piece of crystal with the seal of the University of Randona set in it. As Candle held it, the seal glowed red.

“What? You mean you graduated a year early?” Oceanvine demanded. “Silverwind! Stop bilking those boys out of their hard earned savings and come see what your apprentice brought.”

“Candle?” Silverwind called, removing the blindfold. “You’re here early.”

“Took a shortcut,” Candle laughed, getting up to hug his old master. They sat back down just as Jillanda glided by with a tray of drinks. She placed a fresh pint of cider in front of Oceanvine, and lager for Silverwind and Candle.

“There you go, sweetie,” she told Candle, planting another kiss on his cheek. “It’s on the house.” Then she moved on as quickly as she had arrived.

“So that whole story,” Oceanvine began, looking at Candle.

“Was true,” he completed her sentence for her. “All of it. However, because I had managed to impress Dean Moonrise, he gave me the chance to take the equivalency exams for my senior year. I passed them with flying colors of course. I don’t mean to brag, but frankly I think I could have passed them when I matriculated. Anyway, when I passed those exams the faculty deliberated with the dean for a while and they finally decided it would be less trouble to just give me my diploma than to keep me there another year, especially given my record while I was there. Your name came up several times in comparison,

Vine. I told them that was because you were my sister. That was nearly true, you know.”

“It was, yes,” she agreed quietly.

“Old Spindle tried to block it, of course, but the Dean pointed out I could easily have killed him instead of merely embarrassing him and he backed down, at least that’s what Moonrise told me.”

“So now you’ve graduated,” Silverwind concluded.

“Uh, mostly,” Candle admitted sheepishly.

“Mostly?” Silverwind and Oceanvine asked together.

“Well, I have a letter from the dean in my pack for you, Silverwind. “I’ll dig it out in the morning, but basically what it says is that I’m on probation for a year and remanded to you for supervision until that time is out.”

“Maybe I ought to read it now,” Silverwind suggested.

“If you insist,” Candle shrugged and he dug into his pack. He found the envelope and handed it to Silverwind. He also pulled a small book out as well. “Here,” he said to Oceanvine, “I brought you something to read too.”

“*Silverwind and Oceanvine in the Pit of Death*,” she read the title aloud. The cover art was as lurid as that of the rest of the series.

“Yeah,” Candle added. “Evidently the publisher decided you were a popular enough character they started putting you in the titles.”

“An honor I could have lived without,” Oceanvine said sourly.

“I ran into Lady Ysema a few months ago,” Candle mentioned to them both. Silverwind looked up from the dean’s letter. “I asked her why she never mentions me in any of those books.”

“What did she say?” Oceanvine asked curiously.

“Nothing. For some reason she suddenly remembered an appointment on the other side of Randona,” Candle shrugged.

“So what’s the letter say, dear?” Oceanvine asked Silverwind.

“It seems Candle told us the straight story,” Silverwind told her. “He has been given his diploma and mage stone,”

“I could see the mage stone,” Oceanvine pointed out sharply. “It wouldn’t have glowed if it wasn’t legitimate.”

“Of course,” Silverwind agreed, “but evidently he’s been a naughty boy and is on probation for a year. So I have to supervise him as though he was still an apprentice and if during that year he steps out of line I am to confiscate the diploma and stone and send it back to University.”

“Oh right, like you would actually do that,” Oceanvine laughed. “and as punishment, Candle gets to work with you, just as he wanted to anyway only it starts a year earlier than it should have. Candle only you could have gotten Moonrise to punish you by giving you just what you wanted.”

“It had the virtue of saving a year of my life,” Candle told her smugly.

“You could have graduated with highest honors,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“And should have,” Candle countered. “I had top marks in all my classes, but that doesn’t matter. Besides the guy who graduated top of the class this year is dead from the neck up when it comes to imagination. I suppose the honors help when you’re applying for a job, but I always planned to work with you two anyway. Ya wanna see my resumé?”

“Nevermind,” Oceanvine gave up.

Silverwind just grinned. “Dear, you didn’t graduate at the top of your class either.”

“And for the same reason Candle didn’t,” she returned. “I was just hoping he’d do better.”

“He did, dear. He graduated after only three years. I told you once before I could never have worked with most of your classmates. And most of them could never have worked with me.”

“At least I wasn’t on probation when I came to work with you,” Oceanvine pointed out. Silverwind just looked at her. “Was I?” she asked at last.

“Not technically, no,” he admitted, “but why else do you think you couldn’t get a job elsewhere? You didn’t exactly garner great recommendations from most of the faculty.”

“Then why did you ever hire me?” she asked quietly.

“You impressed Moonrise just like Candle did,” Silverwind told her. “Oh, he warned me about your record and your temper, but he also admitted you were the best journeyman... no, I recall you called yourself a journeywoman... to graduate University in at least a decade. And according to this letter, Candle has earned the same distinction. Maybe you two really are brother and sister.”

“I’m sure either Mom or Dad would have mentioned him,” Oceanvine grumbled, but with a smile.

Just then the door slammed open and a man shouted inside, “Fire! There’s a house on fire east of town.” Outside the sounds of horses pulling the town’s single pump engine could be heard combined with the vehicle’s bell.

Everyone rushed outside to follow the engine eastward. Some paused to grab buckets as they passed by their homes, but those whose homes were the other way just ran to keep up with the pump. House fires were a serious business and the townsfolk of Renton all fought them together. Like any community there were internal tensions and people who did not like one another, but at times like this they pulled together as though they were all kin, working together because that was just the way a civilized person behaved.

Cold fear began to stab at Oceanvine as they left the center of the village and began passing the cottages at the outskirts and there was still no evidence of fire. Then, when they were half a mile from Old Jack’s her fears were confirmed when she saw the blaze high up on the hillside where the home she shared with Silverwind and Candle stood.

The pathway up to the house was a long and winding one, but Oceanvine was glad now that Silverwind had chosen against installing a long stairway which might have been shorter but would have prevented the progress of the town's fire engine. They reached the top to find the house completely engulfed in flames. The townsfolk started forming a line from the well and several took turns pumping to fill buckets while the horse-drawn pump started working to spew water on the blaze.

The first buckets from the well were just starting to reach the house when someone spotted a pair of figures setting another fire in the barn Silverwind and Oceanvine used as a laboratory. Several people, not in the bucket line, charged at the couple in the barn with Candle and Oceanvine among them.

They found that the arsonists were a man and a woman dressed entirely in black. The woman drew a knife from her belt and promptly stabbed herself to death, but Candle used a levitation spell to knock the blade out of the man's hand. The crowd was likely to tear him apart however, and Oceanvine used a levitation spell of her own to lift him up and over their grasping hands. Still she wasn't feeling all that kindly toward the arsonist and after hauling him outside finished up by slamming him against a tree.

Candle grabbed a rope from the now burning barn and raced out to tie the man up. He was barely out of the barn before an explosion blew out one side of the structure.

"What the hell were you keeping in there?" he shouted to Oceanvine as he started tying the black-clad man to the tree.

"A few interesting chemicals Silverwind has been investigating recently," she replied.

"Such as?" he pressed, deciding to double all the knots.

"Uh, fulminate of mercury is the most recent one."

"You 're kidding?" Candle asked, alarmed.

"No. Why?"

"We're lucky to be alive. That stuff is deadly," he told her.

"Maybe that was only the black powder," Oceanvine suggested just as a much larger explosion blew the roof off what was left of the barn, and knocking most of the people in the area off their feet.

"Maybe it was only black powder," Candle muttered, picking himself up, "That had to have been the fulminate!" Just then a fountain of fire burst up from where the roof had been and reached hundreds of feet into the sky. "And that?" he demanded.

"Not sure," Oceanvine admitted, putting the final touches on the rope that held the still unconscious arsonist. "Probably the distilled petroleum."

Candle just stared and shook his head. "We have to get the wizard a safer hobby," he told her. "Well, a lot of people got hit by the shrapnel from the roof. We'd better start helping them."

"You do that," she told him. "The fire is starting to spread to the trees. I'd better see about stopping it before it spreads anymore. Where is Silverwind, anyway?"

“Not sure,” Candle replied over his shoulder as he rushed off to see who needed assistance.

Oceanvine wasted a few seconds looking for her husband, then shrugged and set herself to the task at hand. Knowing how hot air rises, she set a series of reflective wards just beyond the fire line, but didn’t extend them down to ground level so they would not hamper the people who had come to battle the fire. That meant the heat from the already burning buildings and house was being reflected back on itself and it suddenly felt much hotter.

“Good idea, Vine,” Silverwind called from several yards away, “but why don’t you reflect the heat and light upward. We won’t bake as badly that way.” She nodded and adjusted her wards, then looked to see what Silverwind was doing.

The wizard was seated cross-legged on the ground and apparently deep in meditation. That was unusual for him; he normally did not even appear to break a mental sweat while casting a spell. For a minute nothing seemed to happen, then suddenly it began to rain. It was a light drizzle where Oceanvine was standing, but much heavier where the fires were burning. Looking upward, she saw what looked like a floating pond. Silverwind had translocated a huge mass of water directly over the fires and was letting it fall in a controlled manner to extinguish the blaze. Even so it was another hour before the fires were completely out and the ruins were cool enough to pick through.

Two

“A complete loss,” Silverwind sighed after thanking the townsfolk for all their help. Most of them had left the area and the rest were packing up the equipment from the fire engine.

Oceanvine nodded her agreement. “Not exactly the welcome home you deserved, Candle,” she told the younger mage.

“I’m just glad nobody was killed or even badly injured when those explosives went up,” Candle replied. “What the hell have you two been up to this year anyway?”

“I’ve been studying propulsion,” Silverwind told him. “A way to build a machine that flies under its own power.”

“Try talking to the Granomen next time,” Candle responded. “I hear there’s a contest across Granom to build a flying machine.”

“I know,” the wizard replied. “I was trying to work up an entry.”

“Ah,” the former apprentice said simply.

“I’m very sorry about your loss here, Silverwind,” a tall man in a grimy tunic and trousers said as he approached. It was one of Renton’s aldermen. From the look of him, he’d been fire fighting as fiercely as anyone on site that evening.

“Thank you, Morris,” Silverwind responded, a touch of sadness in his voice.

“I hope you’re planning to rebuild here,” the alderman suggested. “You’re a vital part of the community, you know.”

“Thanks. I suppose we will rebuild. Well, it wouldn’t be the first time I’ve started from scratch. Good thing we didn’t keep our money under the bed though,” he finished with a chuckle.

“I understand you captured one of the people who started this fire.”

“Did we?” Silverwind asked.

“Over there,” Candle informed him, pointing at the tree the man was still tied to. He was awake now and struggling to get free. “Want to go beat some answers out of him.”

“Violence won’t be necessary,” Silverwind told him sternly. “We do have other ways, you know.”

“I suppose, but I want to strike out at somebody for this,” Candle admitted, “and he’s the only target I have.”

“Patience, Candle,” Oceanvine admonished him. “If you’re really good, we’ll let you ask some of the questions.”

Most of their questions went unanswered, however as the man began laughing hysterically. The more they tried to get him to speak rationally the worse he got. Finally, as they gave up and started to walk away, the laughter subsided enough to let the man speak. It wasn’t rational, but it was information.

“The Great Lord is coming!” the man shouted gleefully. “The faithful will be rewarded. All others will be ground to dust beneath His heels!”

“Who is coming?” Silverwind asked

“The Great Lord!” The man shouted. “Your rightful lord and master. Down on your belly and worship him!”

“Who?” Oceanvine demanded.

“The Great Lord and His brothers will sit in dominion over Maiyim!”

“Wake up and talk sense, you loony!” Candle shouted back at him. The man merely laughed. “Have him carted away,” Candle told the alderman disgustedly. “Maybe he’ll make more sense in the morning.”

“My capture will avail you not,” the arsonist continued his rant. “There is naught you can do to prevent the glorious return of the Great Lord! He will devour your souls!” For a moment it seemed that was all he had to say, but then he spoke again. “I place my soul in your hands, Great Arithan!” A moment later he was laughing hysterically again as smoke began to issue from his clothing. The alderman and the mages watched in horror as the erstwhile fire-setter was entirely consumed by the flames, but he continued laughing all the while. The laughter lasted so long it seemed to continue to echo even after the man was nothing but a pile of ashes.

“Horrible!” the alderman choked. He looked like he was about to lose whatever was left of his dinner.

“It’s worse than you think,” Silverwind told him.

“Arithan again, huh?” Candle commented. “Didn’t he learn his lesson in Rjalkatyp?”

“I particularly didn’t like the part about him and his brothers,” Oceanvine pointed out. “One demon is bad enough, but if two or more are acting in concert...” She couldn’t finish the thought.

“What are the odds,” Candle asked, “these were just a pair of crazies who thought they were acting on Arithan’s behalf?”

“Are you kidding?” Oceanvine asked.

“He has a point,” Silverwind admitted. “It could have just been two badly deluded people.”

“And the way he burned just now?” the alderman countered. “Are you saying that isn’t magic?”

“Oh, it’s magic sure enough,” Silverwind admitted. “Flashy and alarming, but not particularly high level. Any failed apprentice could set himself on fire.”

“I seem to remember it was a full year before you taught me fire spells,” Candle pointed out.

“Just my point,” Silverwind told him. “I waited until you had sufficient control. You could have killed yourself had I taught you that first.”

“It’s a point, Candle,” Oceanvine added. “Remember the first time you managed to get that pebble to move? You left a big knick in the marble walls of Castle North.”

“Hey! It was my first successful spell,” Candle protested.

“Exactly. Now imagine what might have happened had you been trying to make a fire.”

“Um, the castle would have been a cinder?” Candle asked.

“If you were lucky. And as I recall a few months later you nearly drowned yourself when you tried a different spell,” Oceanvine remembered.

“I was sick at the time.”

“You translocated several tons of brackish water from an old well,” Oceanvine countered.

“Thank you,” the alderman said, breaking up their long-established habitual banter.

“For what?” Candle asked.

“For demonstrating just how dangerous magic can be in the hands of a novice. You might have just told me, but the way you presented it was far more convincing. So even a simple spell can be used destructively and as Silverwind said, the immolation of that man may well have been a simple spell.”

“Correct,” Silverwind agreed. “The difference between a safe spell and an injurious one is often the amount of power one puts into it.”

“The amazing thing,” the alderman continued, “is that he didn’t even scorch the bark of that tree.”

“Oh,” said Silverwind. “That was my spell. When I saw what was happening, I protected the tree with a

ward similar to the ones Oceanvine used to contain the fire damage earlier, except mine was conductive, rather than reflective. It channeled the heat away from the tree, or us for that matter, and then let it radiate into the night sky.”

“It seems that mages can be handy folks to have around,” the alderman commented. “Do you need a place to stay tonight?”

“We’ll take a couple of rooms at Old Jack’s,” Silverwind told him. “Then, in the morning, we’ll take a look at what little is left here. If nothing else, there was a small vault that was supposed to be fireproof.”

“Very well. Good night, wizard,” the alderman told him and followed the other townsfolk away and back to Renton .

“It seems to me,” Silverwind told the other two after the alderman was out of earshot, “that having mages around can be deadly dangerous too. Do either of you doubt those two were after us because of who we are?” Neither disagreed. “Well, let’s go back to the pub.”

“Good idea,” Oceanvine agreed. “I’m just getting depressed here anyway.” She was not ready to cry just yet, but Silverwind knew her well enough to see that tears were not far away.

“And I could use another drink,” Candle told them. “Maybe a whiskey nightcap.” Oceanvine started to say something, then stopped herself and just nodded.

Silverwind dreamed.

He was seated in what looked like a courtroom gallery between Oceanvine and Candle. Beyond Oceanvine he recognized the goddess Wenni and a perfect human-seeming man who had to be her divine husband Nildar. On Candle’s other side he saw the Granomish goddess Methis, who smiled and winked at him. Beyond a short fence was a long table with seven chairs placed along the far side of it.

“What’s going on?” Silverwind asked.

“Shh!” Wenni replied sharply.

Methis leaned over and whispered. “Wait and watch.” Wenni repeated her admonition and Methis sat back down again.

For a few minutes they all waited in silence. Then with a slight shimmering sound seven figures materialized in the chairs at the table. Silverwind recognized them at once; the seven Elder Gods. On the far right sat the human gods Emtos and Emmine. Beside them were Bellinen and Merinne, the gods of the Orenta. On their right were Gran and Querna, the Granomish gods. Finally there was a solitary hooded figure who, by the process of elimination had to be Aritos who was sometimes called the “Solitary God” and sometimes the “God of Evil.”

Bellinen raised his hand and announced, “We are all here to decide the final solution to the demon question. Are there any statements to be made before We begin Our deliberation?”

Emtos replied, "Brother, for the benefit of those present in the gallery, I believe We should recount the events that have lead up to this meeting."

"Do so then," Bellinen replied.

Emtos nodded and began, "Eight years ago, the last of the five children of Our brother Aritos was imprisoned on his island. That imprisonment should have been eternal, but recently the one named Arithan discovered a means by which to escape his captivity. Not only did he free himself but his brothers as well and now they are at large in the world."

"Thank you, brother," Bellinen replied. "Accurate and concise. Does anyone wish to add to that statement? No? Then it is time to consider the matter at hand."

Silverwind tried to stand up and speak, but Oceanvine pulled him back and put her hand across his mouth. He looked at her and she shook her head silently. He sighed and turned his attention back to the Elder Gods.

Gran spoke, "The demons must be destroyed. I'm sorry, brother," He added, turning to Aritos. "It is the only way."

"Not all of them," Aritos replied abjectly. "Please!"

"It seems to Me that only Arithan is capable of breaking the confinement We placed Our brother's children in," Emmine considered. "If only he can accomplish such a thing, then We only need to destroy him."

"Thank You, sister," Aritos murmured gratefully.

"Do We know that Arithan is the only one who can do this?" Querna asked.

"Of all My children," Aritos replied miserably, "only Arithan has the intelligence together with the power to break the divine enchantment that held him captive."

"Then I propose," Bellinen said, "that the others be driven back to their islands and only Arithan, himself, be destroyed. Emtos, how say You?"

"I agree," Emtos nodded.

"Emmine?" Bellinen asked.

"Yes," she replied.

"Merinne?"

The idealization of Orentan womanhood said nothing but nodded her agreement.

"Gran?"

"Aye, he must die," Gran responded.

"Querna?"

“I’m sorry, brother,” she told Aritos. “He must cease to exist.”

“Aritos?”

“Does it matter how I vote?” He asked hopelessly.

Silverwind heard a sob and turned to see Methis wiping a tear from Her cheek.

“Of course it does, brother,” Emtos replied. “We must be unanimous in this. If You have an alternative...” He trailed off.

“No,” Aritos told Them, “there is no alternative. Now that My son has discovered how to escape, he will only do so again should We recapture him. I fear that he has signed his fate. I only beg of the Council that You allow Me to do this thing. It was I who brought Aritos into this world, so it is only proper that I be the one to take him out of it.”

“No, brother,” Merinne spoke at last. Her voice was soft, almost too soft to hear, and yet her words were clearly understood by all. “You need not take this burden on Yourself.”

“Yes, sister,” He replied, “I must. The creation of My children was a mistake. We all know that. This is My job to do.”

“But it will not be Your job to hunt Your children down,” Bellinen decreed. “That task falls to three others. Silverwind, Oceanvine and Candle, the time has come for Us to give you your greatest tasks.”

“Oh no,” Silverwind muttered.

Bellinen ignored him. “You are to track down the Children of Aritos and send them to Us so We can imprison them once more, and deal with this Arithan as need be.”

“Send them to You?” Silverwind repeated.

“Yes. That is correct.”

“How? Should we just fold them up, slip them in an envelope and stick a stamp on them?”

“Silverwind!” Wenni & Methis gasped. Wenni continued to admonish him. “You must not talk to My father that way!” But at the table the reaction differed. Emtos and Bellinen smiled slightly, Gran, Querna and Emmine merely rolled Their eyes. Aritos’ reaction could not be determined under his hood, but Merinne laughed out loud.

She pointed Her finger at Silverwind and said in Her soft but carrying voice, “I like this one.”

“Mother!” Wenni gasped, but Merinne continued to chuckle and when She met Her daughter’s eyes, just shrugged.

Bellinen spoke, “If that works, by all means, send them via one of your postal services. How you do it is up to you. Just track them all down and deplete their energies enough so that they must return to their islands. Once there, We will see to their disposition.”

“Can we have help in this task?” Candle asked. He remembered his two previous encounters with demons; they always had the assistance of other mages.

“How you accomplish it is entirely up to you,” Emtos replied.

“That, too, is part of the job,” Emmine added.

“And how soon must all this be done?” Silverwind asked the assembled gods.

“As soon as you possibly can,” Querna informed them.

“So any helpers we recruit will be catch as catch can,” the wizard concluded.

“You will find help along the way,” Aritos replied from beneath his hood.

“What sort of help?” Silverwind asked suspiciously, but none of the Elder Gods saw fit to answer him. “Okay,” he sighed, “I should have known better.”

“Then there is nothing left but to prepare to begin,” Bellinen told them. “Your quest will start with a call for help from an old friend.”

“Who?” Silverwind asked, but suddenly discovered he was sitting up in bed and wide awake.

“What was that, dear?” Oceanvine asked from beside him.

“Nothing I suppose,” Silverwind shrugged.

“Oh, I thought you were actually trying to wheedle more information from Them. That would have been silly.”

“Yes,” he agreed tiredly. “It would have been. So it wasn’t just another odd dream, huh?”

“Dear,” Oceanvine replied patiently, “How many times have we been through this before?”

“Uh, twice?” he replied.

“So third time’s the charm.” There was a polite knock at their door. “That will be Candle wanting to compare notes,” Oceanvine concluded, getting up to open the door.

Three

“So now we have to wait for this mysterious call for help?” Candle asked while they ate breakfast the next morning.

“We shouldn’t have long to wait,” Silverwind told him.

“How did you come to that conclusion?” Candle and Oceanvine inquired nearly in unison.

“Simple. If we weren’t supposed to be ready now, that visitation last night would have come later.”

As if on cue the door to the tavern opened. A young man, maybe two years older than Candle, entered. He was wearing an all blue uniform that marked him as an employee of Silverwind’s former partner, Geraint. Oceanvine and Silverwind knew him on sight as he had been delivering their mail for over a year.

“Silverwind, Oceanvine,” he greeted them. “I was just at your house... I mean...”

“I know, Spanner,” Silverwind sighed. “We saw it happen. Jill!” he called to the barmaid, “could we have another helping for our friend here?”

“Sure thing, sweetie,” Jillanda replied. Her words, this morning after the fire, were delivered without her normally flirtatious manner.

“What happened?” Spanner asked.

“We had some unwanted houseguests,” Silverwind replied simply, reaching for his coffee.

Oceanvine cleared her throat and told the tale. “So what brings you to Renton this time?” she asked once she had brought Spanner up to date.

“The usual,” Spanner replied. “I’m on my way to Lon to pick up a shipment and dropping off mail for you on the way. Which reminds me. This one might be urgent.” He handed her a stiff envelope. It was addressed to Silverwind and had been sealed with ducal arms of North Horalia .

“I’m sure it is urgent,” Oceanvine replied dryly, “considering it’s marked ‘Please Rush.’ Really, Spanner, your gift for understatement...”

“Is greater than he thinks,” Silverwind finished for her. “I believe we’ve been expecting this.”

“What’s it say?” Candle asked.

“It’s from Duke Jason.”

“Duke? But Jason isn’t...” Candle started to say, then what Silverwind had said sunk in. “Oh. His father died, didn’t he.”

“Yes,” Silverwind replied simply. “Just a few days ago in fact. This doesn’t sound good. Jason believes a demon was involved and while I might normally shrug that sort of thing off, Jason is one of the few non-mages who might recognize the signs.”

“Does he say why he believes that?” Oceanvine asked.

“No, he was obviously in a hurry to get this written. However, he begs us to meet him in Tarnsa as soon as possible.”

“Tarnsa?” Oceanvine asked, “Not Castle North?”

“So he says here. I believe we have instructions to hurry to his aid, don’t we?” Silverwind pointed out.

“We do,” Oceanvine agreed, “But I think we can wait until I finish my tea.”

“You do that, dear. Meet Candle and me at what’s left of the house when you’re done.”

“The house? Why?”

“The vault, dear. There are a few items in there we might need. Like our mage stones.”

“We don’t really need those,” Oceanvine disagreed. “I doubt our identity would ever be questioned really.”

“No, but there are other properties to those artifacts that might come in handy later on.”

“Like what?”

“Tell you later,” Silverwind told her. “Get a cabriolet and a couple of horses and by the time you reach the house I should have the vault emptied.”

“Silverwind,” the one-legged innkeeper greeted him, “Welcome back. Haven’t seen you and Oceanvine in two years or more.”

“It’s good to see you again, Jim-peg,” Silverwind replied. They had made this a regular stop on their previous visits to Keesport.

The years had not treated Jim-peg well. The last time Silverwind had seen him, he may have been minus one leg, but was not crippled by the fact in any meaningful way. Now he was hobbling painfully on his crutches, but still trying to be as active as ever.

“What happened?” Silverwind asked.

“What, this?” Jim-peg said in reply, indicating the difficulty he was having. “Just getting old. It happens to all of us in the end. Good thing my daughter and her husband are here to help. This will be theirs when I pass, not that I’m in any hurry to do so, mind.” Silverwind smiled and nodded at Jim-peg’s spirit.

“And you as well, and is this young Candle?” Jim-peg continued. “Lad, it’s been even longer. I don’t think you’ve gotten much taller, but you’ve filled out. Back from University now are you?”

“Just graduated,” Candle confirmed, “And looking forward to my first glass of your *als*. It’s about time I had the right drink to go with your *kamobiscuits*.”

“That it is, lad. Though I suppose you aren’t a lad no more, are you?”

“It’s okay, Jim-peg,” Candle told him. “I don’t mind, especially from an old friend.”

“Thank you, lad. Thank you. And I don’t make the *kamos* any more, but my daughter does and I swear hers are better than mine ever were.”

“And yours were excellent,” Silverwind added.

“Thank you,” Jim-peg replied with a painful half bow. “Oh, go ahead, Oceanvine, there’s already hot water in the bath house.” Oceanvine smiled and hurried off to wash off the road dust. “Too bad my son-in-law can’t get the hang of brewing proper als yet, but I think it will come to him in time. Silverwind, Candle, if you’ll have a seat I’ll get the ale for you.”

“So how have you been otherwise,” Silverwind asked the innkeeper when he and his daughter returned with a pitcher of ale and the dark red biscuits traditionally served with the Granomish ale Jim-peg brewed.

“Passable, I suppose. Not as much traffic on the roads this spring so business is down. I really ought to paint the place but it will have to wait another season or two. I suppose there’s more goods going by sea these days.”

“Not that I’ve heard,” Candle replied. “I just sailed across the Great Bay and the captain of the ship I was on complained his business was down lately too and that other captains have been having the same trouble.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Jim-peg replied. “But that sort of thing happens from time to time. You have a bad year or two then things start to improve. Fortunately I don’t need much to live on, so I’ll make it though the lean times, if that’s what we’re in just now. So how is it up in Renton?”

Silverwind told him the news about the town, but didn’t mention the fire of the previous evening and Candle talked about what had been happening in Randona at the time he left.

“I think business must be slow all over the Archipelago,” Candle opined. “Now that you mention it, the merchants in Randona have been complaining too. I wonder why that should be.”

“Maybe you should have studied economics,” Silverwind noted.

“Magic is more fun,” Candle replied, “but if I’d thought about it, I might have taken an economics class. Never did though, although I did find archaeology and geology interesting enough. Had to force myself to stay with botany though. I don’t care how useful it is, I didn’t enjoy it a bit.”

“Enjoying classes is good, but not essential,” Silverwind reminded him.

“So you’ve said. That’s why I stuck it out, but I even found calculus more interesting.”

“Calculus?” Silverwind asked. “I didn’t know you took any math classes.”

“A couple semesters. I needed to widen the distribution of my credits and remembered a bit of what Serabawa taught me all those years ago. He never got to calculus, but what he did teach me stood me in good stead when we got to that. Good thing too, that’s really tough stuff.”

Silverwind smiled, “It was never my favorite subject either, but in the higher magics and sciences there are uses.”

“Sometimes I wonder if we’re right to keep magic and science separate in University,” Candle said speculatively. “It seems to me that both are valid approaches toward understanding the world around us.”

“You got a lot of that from me,” Silverwind pointed out. “You already know that much of the research Oceanvine and I have done has only used magic as the motive power in our investigations of the physical laws of the universe.”

“True,” Candle allowed, “but I was always surprised how none of the professors on either side of the great divide were willing to consider such a merger.”

“Probably both secretly feared their own disciplines would be minimalized by such a joining,” Silverwind explained.

“I suppose,” allowed Candle. “I did make friends with some of the students on the non-magical side of the University and that seemed promising for a while, but none of our joint Senior Project proposals were accepted, so I ended up doing a rather uninspired study of Vine’s special wards.”

“Dean Moonrise was quite impressed by that actually,” Silverwind told him.

“That’s because neither he nor the rest of the faculty had any experience with them. It was all new to them. If I didn’t have Vine’s thesis as a source they wouldn’t have approved that project either because primary research is not permitted until one is a master candidate. Too bad I couldn’t just skip ahead to that level. I think I could have handled it.”

“You probably could have at that,” Silverwind laughed. “For all of your late start at an education, I think we had you ahead of your class by the time you went to Randona. Well, don’t worry about that. You can always go back for your master’s degree when we finish this quest we’re on.”

“Quest?” Candle laughed. “Well, yes, I suppose it is. Who’d have thought it in this day and age! A quest right out of the literature of the Age of Faith! Anyway, I don’t think I should go back to Randona. I got the impression that several professors would rather they never saw me again.”

“Especially Spindle,” Silverwind laughed.

“Yeah,” Candle shrugged, “but a few of the others tended to resent the fact that I knew more on some subjects than they did. Not all subjects by any means,” Candle added quickly, realizing how conceited he had sounded, “but when we got to demonic studies so much of what was in the text was just wrong. Master Globe wasn’t particularly pleased when I tried to tell him about that. I think his father wrote the text. But what else was I supposed to do? I mean I’ve actually seen and fought demons. Two of them, anyway.”

“You did the right thing, I’m sure,” Silverwind agreed, “although it’s possible you might have tried being a bit more tactful. Did you try telling him those things in class? Yes? I thought so. You probably should have discussed it in the privacy of his office. As it was, you put him on the spot and a lot of people don’t react well to that.”

“You’re right,” Candle admitted. “At the time I just thought he’d want to know the truth. Oh well. Live and learn, like you always say. I figure I still have two other universities available. Maybe I’ll get my masters at Querna like you and Vine did.”

“That’s Oceanvine, squirt!” Oceanvine snapped from the doorway.

“Say her name three times and she appears!” Candle crowed. “Now that’s real magic!”

“Very funny,” she growled. Silverwind did his best to hide his smile, but it was still manifest in his eyes. “We’ll discuss that later,” she told him. Silverwind shrugged indifferently. Even after eight years of marriage he was still one of only two men in the world she couldn’t intimidate and they both knew it. Candle was, obviously the other, but every so often she was able to make him forget it. “Speaking of a master’s degree, however, you still haven’t told me why you insisted on retrieving our mage stones.”

“Sentimental value, perhaps?” he suggested.

“Uh uh, wizard!” she countered. “You already let slip that they have some mysterious properties you hope may be of value. Besides you’re obviously up to something especially since I know you also retrieved my old journeyman’s stone. Fess up.”

“I also got my old master’s stone as well. My journeyman’s stone was lost years ago.”

“You’re stalling,” she accused.

“Well,” he drawled, “you’re right. The property is not so mysterious, however. There’s a lot of magical power stored up in a mage stone. It takes at least two wizards working in concert to create one although they generally use three if they can.”

“So?” Oceanvine asked.

“Vine,” Candle scoffed, “didn’t you ever take elementary physics?”

“Of course I did,” she snapped, “What’s that got to do with it?”

“Consider the Law of Conservation of Energy. Magical energy is energy none the less and according to the Law of Conservation can neither be destroyed nor created. The energy of two or three wizard-class spells is encapsulated in every mage stone. Sort of like a magical wet cell battery, except it’s dry, of course.”

“I never thought that applied to magic,” Oceanvine grumbled.

“Then where does the energy we use come from?” Candle challenged her.

“From all around us, of course...” she trailed off. “Oh, I see what you mean.”

“Actually,” Candle continued sententiously, taking a sip of his ale, “from what I’ve learned this last year that’s only half the truth. Wizard Onestone lectured at University and nearly caused a riot among the faculty, but from what he said I think he explained a lot about some of the stuff Silverwind does, and perhaps even how the Gods created Maiyim.

“The mathematics were complex, but I was able to follow most of them,” Candle continued, then stopped to take another long sip of ale. “Well, let’s pass on the math for now and step back to the days when you were in Randona, Vine. Sorry, Oceanvine,” he corrected himself without being prompted. Oceanvine noted that he usually did when he was serious, it was only when he was joking with or teasing her that he shortened her name. “About the time you were in school a physicist managed to measure the speed of light.”

“I remember that,” Oceanive commented. “Doctor Mannilov from Querna University, wasn’t it?”

“That’s the man,” Candle agreed, “although he performed his experiment across the plateau of Pafsa. Now you wouldn’t think that had a lot to do with the Laws of Conservation of Energy and of Matter, but he has managed to prove that the speed of light is both a constant and the ultimate speed in the universe. Nothing can travel faster than light, according to Onestone, and after hearing him lecture and reading a couple of his papers I believe it.”

“Okay so you can’t go faster than light,” Oceanvine agreed. “To date, I haven’t even moved at an appreciable fraction of that.”

“I have,” Candle pointed out. “Remember the time I was translocated by that killer in Querna. According to Wizard Onestone, that should have happened at the speed of light.”

“The way I learned it, it should have been instantaneous,” Oceanvine countered. “Right?” she asked Silverwind.

Silverwind was smiling at the two of them. “You could both be right, sort of,” he said at last. “From what I recall something moving at the speed of light could circle the equator several times in a single minim. At speeds like that, I imagine that translocating just a few miles is going to seem like it is accomplished instantaneously.”

“I suppose,” Oceanvine conceded. “Okay, so it isn’t instantaneous. What’s that got to do with the laws concerning energy and matter?”

“I’ll get to that,” Candle promised. “One of the things he pointed out was that matter cannot really travel that fast. His equations show that as one approaches the speed of light, one’s size becomes less but one’s mass becomes greater, so that at the speed of light one would be infinitesimally small and infinitely massive.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Oceanvine opined stubbornly.

“I’ll get you a copy of his papers if you like. He proves it mathematically. And here’s the part you really won’t believe.”

“Try me,” Oceanvine challenged him. She referred obliquely to an old student game in which students tested each other’s will. To a non-mage it might look like a stare-down contest but there was much more to it, and Candle knew she wasn’t challenging him to that game.

“Light moves at the same speed no matter how fast you personally may be going.”

“Of course,” Oceanvine shrugged.

“No, you don’t follow me,” Candle told her. “I mean it moves at the same speed if emitted from a body at rest such as the sun or from a body in motion. And if you travel at the speed of light and meet a ray of light coming from the opposite direction, and you will, it will still only be moving at the speed of light.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Oceanvine commented. “Shouldn’t it be moving at twice the speed of light?”

“Not according to Wizard Onestone. Evidently the rules change at speeds like that, but I’ve intentionally taken you off on a tangent. The really new stuff I’ve heard was when he lectured at Randona last month he explained that he has come to realize that matter and energy can theoretically be converted back and

forth and he even had an equation for it. The energy you can potentially yield is equal to the amount of matter times the speed of light squared.

“Now that innocent sounding statement is just plain loaded with potential energy all its own,” Candle continued enthusiastically. “For starters it demonstrates why Silverwind here was able to create an eight base bat in Rjalkatyp, seemingly out of nothing. It wasn’t nothing. Somehow, somewhere, he constructed it out of energy. What I don’t know is how he manages that trick without frying us all with the excess energy. I got a chance to talk to Onestone about that and he thinks it may be that Silverwind is somehow converting matter to energy and back to matter again so efficiently that there is little or no stray radiation. But he would need to study Silverwind pulling that trick off in order to know for certain.”

“I’m not the only wizard who can do that,” Silverwind pointed out.

“You do it more effortlessly than anyone else,” Candle pointed out. “You’ll have to show me how you do it someday.”

“After you have your master’s degree,” Silverwind told him. “It’s that dangerous.”

“I’ll bet it is,” Candle agreed readily. “Where do you get the matter from? If you were working with ambient energy, the temperature in the area would probably drop a hundred degrees or more instantaneously.”

“I’ve never really thought about it,” Silverwind admitted. “If I had to guess, I’d say I’m getting a little bit here and there all around me.”

“We’ll have to talk about that,” Candle told him. “That sounds like a real master’s thesis to me. I’ll even promise not to try it for myself until after I have that degree.” Then he turned back to Oceanvine. “Do you realize how much energy we’re talking about here?”

“Just barely a clue,” she replied, fascinated despite herself. “From the way you’re talking I imagine it’s a lot of energy.”

“One heck of a lot of energy, Sis,” he shot back. “Have you heard about those new electric lights the Granomen are installing on the streets of Querna?”

“Ksana mentioned them in a letter about a year ago, but I haven’t seen any yet.”

“Give it another ten years or so and all the cities in the world will have them and a lot of the larger towns, I’ll bet,” Candle responded.

“It will take much longer than that,” Oceanvine disagreed.

“Don’t count on it,” Candle countered. “Eight years ago when we were in Quarna the Granomen had just managed to perfect the steam engine and were tinkering with internal combustion. Now steam-powered ships are starting to replace those that use sail and I hear there are several companies making self-propelled carriages. They’re still just toys of the rich so far, but I’ve seen a few in Randona. They smell terrible, but they do go fast.”

“How fast?”

“King Hacon’s parliament just passed a law limiting them to twenty miles per hour in the city and thirty

beyond the city limits.”

“That’s pretty fast,” Oceanvine agreed.

“Hah! Even with those limits the enthusiasts are grumbling that it’s too slow.”

“They’re crazy!” Oceanvine told him.

“Could be, but we’re on another tangent,” Candle changed gears. “Imagine the whole city of Querna lit up by those electric lights. Now look at this *kamo* biscuit. If I could totally convert the mass of this biscuit into energy, it would be enough to keep Querna lit up for two or three years.”

“You’re kidding, right?” Oceanvine asked. Candle shook his head solemnly. “Hard to believe,” she said at last. “Is that where Onestone says we get the energy for all spells?”

“No,” Candle replied. “Most magic uses the potential energy all around us. Only the most advanced magic, that which requires the greatest amounts of energy, needs to tap into matter conversion and in most cases, just a tiny bit of it. Although Silverwind’s creation spells, or maybe I should call them conversions, do a lot of that.”

“Well,” Silverwind said as he filled a second glass of ale, “if you’re going to promise not to attempt such a spell unless I choose to supervise it, I’ll tell how I do it, or at least how it seems to me that I do it. Maybe together we can figure out if Onestone is right.”

Four

They rose with the sun the next morning and traveled on to Keesport, arriving there early in the afternoon the next day. Keesport looked outwardly very much like it had the last few times they had visited, although out in the harbor they could see a dredge at work, deepening the channel.

“For the new steel-hulled ships,” Candle told them. “They have a much deeper draft than the older wooden ships.” By now Oceanvine had stopped doubting every new thing Candle told her. The suspension of her disbelief had come the day before when they spotted one of the new steel-hulled steamers headed southwest through the Quarna Strait.

“Looks strange to be moving without sails,” Oceanvine noted.

“We’ll get used to it in time,” Silverwind told her.

“Not sure I’ll get used to the trail of black smoke. What are they using for fuel?”

“Coal,” Candle told her. “Although I understand someone in Kornedd is working on a large engine that burns petroleum like a grown up version of one of those Granomish horseless carriages.”

“I don’t know if that sounds any better,” Oceanvine replied. “How much coal and petroleum is there in the world? No matter how much there is, it has to be finite. We’ll run out eventually.”

“Oh I think there will always be a place for sail,” Candle opined. “If only because it’s a renewable resource. What I’m surprised at is that the One Maiyim movement has been amazingly silent on the

subject of steam and internal combustion engines. I'd expect all sorts of polemics against pollution and in favor of living in the past."

"Well, I can tell you never joined One Maiyim," Oceanvine told him tartly.

"I would have," Candle told her, "but it's not the same group you joined anymore. No one in my class of journeymen would have anything to do with it. They're still pushing interspecies cooperation and I agree with that, but their ecological program is strictly anti-progress. In fact they want to go back to the way things were a century ago."

"Change isn't always good, Candle," Oceanvine countered.

"There's a large faction within the movement that wants to outlaw the use of magic."

"What?"

"And it's gaining popularity among non-mages. Well of course it wouldn't get much support from mages, but you know what I mean. I think that's why the movement isn't making a more vocal stand against the new engines. They're spending too much time trying to halt the use of magic."

"That isn't right," Oceanvine said tightly. "When I joined it was mostly mages working toward a better world. What happened?"

Silverwind replied, "There's no ideal so good and pure that it can't be subverted by well-meaning idiots. Why do you think I didn't get active again after my hermitage? The movement's goals had already changed even if the rhetoric hadn't yet. Well, I've already decided we've been too isolated from the rest of the world these past few years especially with all the changes taking place. And scholarly journals have only kept me so informed. It's a good thing we were forced back out into the world, because it's starting to look like we've been missing all the fun."

"But I like Renton," Oceanvine commented.

"It took you a while to adapt as I recall," Silverwind pointed out.

"So I'm stubborn," she laughed. "You knew that when you married me."

"Still when all this is over the idea of holing up in seclusion is one we'll probably want to scrap."

"Move to Randona or one of the other big cities?" Oceanvine asked.

"No, I like living in sleepy little Renton too, but it seems to me that the world has changed and so has the study of magic. So with those changes we need a new type of school."

"You want to start a university?" Oceanvine asked.

"No, three of them ought to be enough," Silverwind replied. "What I have in mind is something for young adepts of the apprentice level. Something to prepare them for University in the same way we prepared Candle. You have to admit it worked out very well."

"I wonder about that sometimes," she replied, giving Candle a sour glance, "but, yes, he's done very well. Of course he would have done well in a more normal venue."

“Would I?” Candle asked. “I’m not so certain of that. I sure wouldn’t have been accepted by most mages as an apprentice, not even your Master Sunbear, although I did like him, but he wouldn’t have apprenticed a thief and I’ve also seen the sorts of students that come out of the non-magic public and private schools. I get along with them now, but wouldn’t have when you first met me.”

“Even with a normal upbringing,” Silverwing added, “Candle would have been bored in a normal school. We need a school in which the curriculum is flexible and suited to each student.”

“That’s a lot of work,” Oceanvine pointed out. “How many students were you planning to teach?”

“Just a few at first,” Silverwind replied. “Probably no more than five for each teacher. That would be fifteen if all three of us are on the faculty.”

“I’m game,” Candle told him, “But do I know enough to teach an apprentice yet?”

“Not in everything, probably, but there are things you can teach well, I’m sure. Oceanvine and I can fill in the gaps.”

“How long have you been thinking about this?” Oceanvine asked.

“Since that night at Jim-peg’s, when I watched you and Candle talking about Onestone’s theory. It came to me that we could give apprentices a real headstart toward University if we taught them the right stuff along with the usual subjects they’re expected to know.”

Oceanvine considered that and said, “Well, let’s think about it a bit longer. I doubt we’ll be able to act on it anytime soon.” Silverwind nodded.

They rode into the commercial center of Keesport near the harbor district.

“The place has changed since the last time I was here,” Candle noted. “There’s more traffic, but a lot of the buildings could use a coat of paint; the wooden ones anyway. I see a few new brick buildings a couple of blocks ahead.”

“Change comes everywhere, Candle,” Silverwind told him.

“Change, but not everyone is prospering here,” Candle observed. “I don’t recall seeing so many people hanging out in the alleys as though they were at home last time and unless they’re planning to knock all the wooden buildings down, the owners should be taking better care of their property.”

“They’re not though, so I suspect money is short here too,” Oceanvine concluded for him.

“The last time Geraint wrote he and Elewys were doing fairly well, though,” Silverwind commented. “They and Jocey had just commissioned a new ship, one with both sails and an engine so even when becalmed they could still keep moving. It won’t be ready until next year, however.” Oceanvine nodded. She had read Geraint’s letter too.

“Good for them,” Candle said enthusiastically. “I’ll look forward to seeing that one. How big a ship will it be?”

“I’m not sure,” Silverwind admitted, “But you can ask them for yourself. We’re here.” He turned the

cabriolet to pass under a tall archway and into an open courtyard that lay on the inside of a large building that otherwise covered the entirety of a city block. A minute later they came to a halt near a small stairway that led up several steps to Geraint's and Elewys' above-the-office apartment.

"Silverwind! How wonderful to see you!" Elewys greeted him as they entered. "And Oceanvine!" They hugged warmly. "Candle? Gods! I hardly recognized you. I haven't seen you since before you went off to Randona."

"You're looking well, Elewys," Candle told her.

"Liar," she returned with a smile as she led them toward the kitchen table. "I look a fright and I know it." She exaggerated but not by much. Elewys had lost weight and was looking stressed and worried. "I need to sleep more, but that's hard to do while Geraint is away. And this past month..."

"Where is he?" Silverwind asked, sitting down at the table. The others followed suit.

"He sailed for Granom a month and a half ago," she told them. "I think he's trying to corner the hops market on Marga, although the main reason he left was there's been a blight on the crop and he wants to make sure we get only the best bundles. Knowing him, he'll come back with a dozen other deals as well. Well, that's all for the good, I haven't seen him make many bad deals over the years, but it seems like all the troubles in the world were waiting for him to leave. It's amazing all the things that have gone wrong in the past month."

"Such as?" Silverwind prompted. He could see Elewys needed to talk, but also knew her well enough that she would have let the matter drop there if he didn't ask.

"Well, it started out with some of our best customers cutting back on their regular orders. That happens from time to time and business is slow all over this year. I was able to sell the excess product, although not at a profit, but at least I was able to cut our losses. Then there were two crop failures on Barne and on Quirmlia; ergot in the rye and a blight that wiped out over a third of the barley. Good thing we don't rely on Granomish grain, but it means that the prices will be soaring on this year's crop here in Emmine. I've tried hedging by investing in wheat and barley futures, but got into the market late so while I'll do reasonably well if I manage to get out before the price drops again, it won't be the killing it could have been. Then piracy has been up on the seas.

"I blame these new steel ships," she continued. "They're faster than sail, except in a storm, I suppose, but that makes the smaller and slower ships better targets. The *Skate* 's not the slowest ship on water, but she came in all jury-rigged two weeks ago and Jocey's arm is still in a sling. She's been spending every waking moment overseeing the repairs. So how have you three been?"

Together they caught her up on their lives. At first, not wanting to add to her worries, they mentioned only the good news, like Candle's graduation, but soon Elewys noticed they were talking circuitously. They were obviously avoiding some subject and she pressed for an answer so they told her about their home being burned down and by whom.

"Another demon cult?" Elewys asked. "I should have known. Especially with the condition Geraint was in when he left."

"What condition?" Silverwind asked worriedly.

"The nightmares again. He suffered his first bout in years just the night before he left, and it wasn't even

the anniversary when they used to be the worst.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Silverwind commented, “but it is not a surprise.”

“Indeed not,” Oceanvine added. “We know Arithan is active again. It was to be expected that any curses that had been active last time we defeated him would reactivate as well.”

“I guess that means he figured out how to beat the curse I put on him,” Candle speculated. “Too bad.”

“Well it was really his own curse,” Oceanvine pointed out. “He was bound to figure out how to break it.”

“I’ll just have to come up with something more original next time,” Candle said more to himself than anyone else.

“So you’re off to North Horalia, I take it?” Elewys asked. “I heard about the old duke dying.”

“Yes,” Silverwind admitted. “Jason asked us to come because he believes it was related to demonic activity. I hope he’s wrong.”

“I hope you can wait another week to leave,” Elewys told him. “The port’s unusually inactive at the moment and the *Skate*’s the only ship in port likely to be headed to Tarnsa and she’s not ready to sail yet, but maybe she’ll be ready in another few days. You can ask Jocey when she gets back tonight. She’s been staying here while her ship’s been in the yard.”

“Elewys,” Oceanvine changed the subject. “Do you have anyone headed north toward Renton in the next two or three weeks?”

“Almost definitely, dear,” Elewys replied. “What do you need?”

“I made arrangements to buy the cabriolet and horses we rode in with, but old Jake at the livery in Renton said he’d only charge us his usual rental fee if we could return them in good shape. It seemed to me that if you had someone headed that way...” she trailed off.

“Not a problem, dear,” Elewys told her. “I’ll handle that for you.”

“Thanks,” Oceanvine replied. “The alternative would have meant selling them here in Keesport and I wasn’t really looking forward to taking the time to do that.”

“I could have always arranged that for you too,” Elewys pointed out.

“Either way,” Oceanvine told her. “Tomorrow, however, I intend to go shopping. This outfit is the only one I have at the moment and it’s starting to get a bit threadbare. You know, Silverwind, it’s a good thing I stopped at the bank and made a withdrawal before I left town. Honestly, dear, what did you expect to do for money?”

“You did know we had a fair sum in the vault at home, didn’t you?” Silverwind countered.

“Really? Why didn’t you say?”

“I thought you knew. That’s why I didn’t say anything about taking expenses out of the bank account,”

he replied.

“Look at her,” Captain Jocey told Oceanvine the next morning when she went to see how the repairs to the *Skate* were coming along. “Looks like she’s been through a war, doesn’t she? Oh well, she was nearly due to get her seams recaulked anyway.”

“Are those gun ports?” Oceanvine asked, spotting several square holes near deck level below the gunwales.

“Absolutely,” Jocey nodded. “I convinced Elewys and Geraint to install them a year ago but until this latest incident we only had two guns, one on either side. Those two were all that kept us from going to the bottom this last trip, though we had to move the port gun to starboard to get maximum effect. We’re mounting another four this trip. Still wish I could have the full compliment of ten, but money’s tight at the moment and we’re going to need to arm the rest of the fleet.”

“What sort of guns are they?” Oceanvine asked interestedly.

“The first two were just old-fashioned muzzle-loaders, four pounders. Ancient stuff but the fact we could shoot back like the big ships is what saved us this time. There are still lots of unarmed merchant ships on the sea so why risk attacking an armed one. The new guns are breech loaders with explosive shells. I’ll admit it makes me nervous to carry them, and the ammunition cuts down on cargo space, but knowing we’ll arrive safely is what will keep us in business,” Jocey told her, then added in a less confident tone, “I hope.”

“So where is Madoc while the *Skate*’s in dry dock?” Madoc had been Jocey’s first mate the last two times Oceanvine had sailed with them.

“Madoc’s got his own ship now. We set him up on the *Lady of Keesport* over four years ago when we started expanding the fleet. The *Lady*’s our biggest ship, a three-masted clipper that makes most of our runs on the outer seas. There are times I envy him, but I kept the *Skate* because that would keep me close to Keesport and the rest of the business, though I intend to captain the new ship on her shakedown cruise wherever that turns out to be. Have you seen her yet?”

“No. Is she being built here in Keesport?” Oceanvine asked.

“Of course. How else to keep an eye on her progress?” Jocey laughed. “Actually the Walling Shipyard is one of the top ten in Emmine, so why go further afield to have her built. Geraint doesn’t know it yet but Elewys and I plan to christen her the *Windchime*.” Windchime had been Geraint’s mage name years earlier when he had been Silverwind’s partner.

“I like it,” Oceanvine told her.

“I hope he does,” Jocey told her a bit less certainly. “Geraint gets strange about that name sometimes.”

“Maybe he’ll like it better when it belongs to someone or rather something other than himself. So where is the new ship?”

“Several slips north of here,” Jocey replied. “Come on, I’m really just getting in the way here. I’ll take you there.”

They left the dry-dock area where the Skate was being repaired and headed north along the waterfront. They passed several empty slips on their way.

“What a shame,” Jocey commented. “In better economic times ships would have been either under repair or manufacture in every slip. I just hope this yard can hang on until better times. It would be a shame for it to have to close up. As it is, most of the workers are on short hours. There are a lot of hungry families in Keesport this year.”

Finally they reached a slip in which a hull was about half finished. It was a tremendous hull and so far the keel, the sternpost and all the hull frames were in place, but it would be at least another few months before the workers finished the hull itself.

“She goes on forever,” Oceanvine marveled. “What were you planning? Maiyim’s largest ship?”

“You got it,” Jocey smiled. “She’ll be four hundred fifteen feet long and fifty-four feet in the beam. She’ll draw twenty-five feet too. Good thing all the modern harbors are being dredged these days, don’t you agree?”

“Absolutely” Oceanvine nodded. “She’ll have four masts, right?”

“Uh uh,” Jocey shook her head. “Five. She’ll be bark rigged with square sails on the forward four and fore and aft rigged on the aft mast. With six courses of sail, she’ll have over an acre and a half of canvas when all sails are unfurled. Conservative estimates say she’ll be capable of making at least twelve and a half knots, but I’ve bet Elewys I can get to up to fourteen. She’ll be a glorious ship!”

“How can you afford such a large ship, Jocey?” Oceanvine asked.

“A year ago we couldn’t have,” Jocey admitted. “But right now the *Windchime* is all that’s keeping the Walling Shipyard in business. She may be all that’s keeping Keesport from total economic collapse. So we are able to get bargain rates on both materials and labor and when we proposed this ship nearly every businessman in town wanted a piece of her. To tell the truth we were only able to afford about thirty-two percent of the ship, but the percentages are only for the purpose of splitting the profits, we have the managerial control of how she operates. So long as we turn a profit, we’ll stay in charge.”

“She’s beautiful,” Oceanvine sighed.

“She’ll be even more beautiful under sail. Elewys commissioned the sails in natural canvas but we’re having the company logo in bright red on each and every sail. You’ll recognize us from miles away.”

“With five masts, I’m not likely to mistake you for any other ship,” Oceanvine countered. “Didn’t Elewys say you were installing engines in her as well?”

“We are, some of the very newest oil-burners and twin screws, but to tell the truth, I doubt they’ll be all that powerful. They’ll be enough to bring us in or out of port without a pilot mage, but they won’t have enough push to move us very fast. Frankly I think we’d do better not to bother and use the extra space for more cargo, but I’m only one voice.”

“If you’re becalmed they’ll be better than nothing,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Will they?” Jocey countered. “Between the engines and the fuel oil, that’s a lot of weight we could be hauling as cargo, but then she’s a huge ship and this is just a fraction of what she’ll carry. I could say the same about her guns, but...” she trailed off.

“I hope you can keep her filled,” Oceanvine commented.

“That won’t be a big problem,” Jocey shrugged. “The reason we bought the other three ships was that Geraint needed them to ship goods all over Maiyim, but they were smaller ships, like the *Skate*, so could only get to Granom safely by way of Bellinen. The *Windchime* will be able to sail direct anywhere in the world. Elewys is already planning routes for her.”

Oceanvine nodded, then changed the subject, “Tell me about the pirates you encountered.”

“Them? What do you want to know for?”

“Curiosity, mostly,” Oceanvine admitted, “but also there’s a lot of bad stuff happening in the world at the moment and a lot of it is connected.”

“This likely isn’t,” Jocey opined. “No mage this time, just a lightly armed bark preying on unarmed ones. Most ships the size of the *Skate* aren’t armed although most these days have gun ports in an attempt to look armed. A lot of those gunports are just black squares painted on the sides, so from a distance, especially if there’s a bit of haze, like there often is, they’ll look like armed ships. Anyway, they made a mistake with us,” Jocey added proudly. “They must have thought our gun ports were false, so they attacked. I’ll bet they were shocked as hell when we started firing back.

“They got lucky though,” Jocey continued. “Their first salvo took out our main mast. Fortunately, it didn’t get in the way of our gunners, but we had to go back and fish our lookout out of the sea when it was over. When we started shooting back, they turned and fled. They weren’t looking for a fight, just an easy target.

“Anyway, we had a go cutting off the broken part of the mast and then jury rigging the ship so we could get back here, but obviously we made it.”

“When will you be ready to sail again?” Oceanvine asked.

“We got lucky there. With the shortage of work lately, we had no trouble finding a new mast and riggers to erect it. We salvaged most of the sails and repaired most of the rest, so we won’t have to wait for that either. I think the riggers will finish by the end of the day tomorrow and finish caulking the day after that, and they’ll be able to put the *Skate* back in the water. Then another two days to load her up and we’ll be ready to leave.”

Five

“It’s too much of a coincidence,” Silverwind commented. “Last time we were headed out to meet a demon, there was a problem with pirates in the Quarna Strait and this time we’re headed to meet a demon or two and piracy is on the rise again. We’d better be ready to face a serp again too.”

He and Candle were doing a bit of shopping in Keesport. Like Oceanvine, Silverwind only had one set

of clothes after the fire and most of Candle's clothes and other belongings had been shipped to Renton separately and should have arrived a few days after he did. It would not matter now. They would be waiting for him at Old Jack's on their return, but in the meantime he too could use an extra change of clothing.

"I wasn't on this leg of the trip last time," Candle pointed out. "Do you really think the pirates are in league with Arithan? It wasn't Arithan in North Horalia last time."

"It may not be this time either," Silverwind pointed out. "The only argument I can think of against the piracy being connected is that Pohn is neither intelligent nor subtle enough to work so indirectly."

"Arithan is and he may have been involved last time too," Candle commented.

"An excellent possibility," Silverwind admitted, "but it still supports my own suspicion that the piracy is not an isolated incident. Also I don't care to wait another four days before we can embark."

"Do you know of some magical way to make the workers go faster?" Candle asked sarcastically. "Because I already know what happened when you spoke to the harbormaster. He told you that he wouldn't allow the *Skate* to sail until she is seaworthy again and getting her loaded faster was out of his hands."

"I know, Candle," Silverwind sighed. "Actually I was wrong to try to get the harbormaster involved. His responsibilities have nothing to do with expediting ship repair or the stowing of cargo. I do have another idea, though. Let's talk to the mayor." He did a sudden turn and crossed the street at an oblique angle, making a beeline for City Hall.

"I thought we were shopping for clothes," Candle protested.

"How long will that take?" Silverwind countered. "An hour tops, right? We'll have plenty of time."

To Candle's surprise the mayor of Keesport made time to talk to Silverwind almost immediately, although that surprise turned to a feeling of déjà vu when the mayor asked Silverwind to autograph a fresh copy of *Silverwind and Oceanvine in the Pit of Death*.

"I really should have pressed Lady Isemay harder to put my name in those books, he muttered.

"What was that, Candle?" Silverwind asked.

"Oh, nothing."

"So to what do I owe the pleasure of your company this afternoon, Silverwind?" Mayor Markham asked.

"I was hoping you might be able to help me with a little problem, Mayor."

"If I can, I'd be delighted," the mayor replied instantly. From his reaction, Candle saw that if anything he was understating his desire to help the world-famous wizard.

"I realize this isn't really the sort of thing I might expect you to handle, but you see there's an emergency in North Horalia and I need to get to there as soon as possible."

“Ah, yes,” Markham nodded. “The old duke’s passing. I’ve heard. A sad and frightening business, but what can I do to help you?”

“Well, the only ship available to sail for Tarnsa is Captain Jocey’s *Skate* but she’s in dry dock for repairs. The repairs should be finished in a couple of days then another two days to stow the cargo on board. I was hoping, perhaps that you might be able to use your influence with whoever is in charge to expedite the work on the ship or with the cargo. Anything to speed us up would be greatly appreciated.”

Candle was amazed as Mayor Markham actually paused to consider the request. If it had been anyone else in the world, aside perhaps from the king or the local earl, making such a request, Markham would have laughed in his face. Candle tried to imagine himself walking into the mayor’s office out of the blue and asking him to help him similarly and found his imagination couldn’t be stretched that far. And yet, Markham looked like he’d help row the *Skate* if it would get Silverwind to Tarnsa faster.

“Yes,” Markham said at last. “I cannot make any promises on the repair work, but perhaps I can find a way to have the loading expedited. I’ll have a chat with the head of the Shoreman’s Union, he’s a cousin and owes me a few favors. I’m sure we can shave a day or two off the wait.”

Silverwind thanked Markham and the mayor gave some instructions to his secretary to send a note to his cousin and another to the shipyard. They chatted for a while and then the mayor took Silverwind and Candle out to lunch. By the time that was over, several notes had been brought to Markham and he was able to tell the wizard that the *Skate* would be ready to sail on the morning tide on the second day.

“How did you speed up the repairs?” Candle asked.

“I didn’t,” Markham informed him, “but the shipyard informs me that they have finished the work on the hull, so there’s no need to leave her in drydock. So starting this afternoon, the shoremen will be able to load her cargo while the repairs to the rigging continue.”

“Excellent!” Silverwind exclaimed. “Thank you, Mayor, I’m in your debt. If there’s ever anything I can do to repay you, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“It was my pleasure sir,” Markham replied.

Six

“I still don’t know how you did it,” Jocey told Silverwind in her cabin as the *Skate* cleared the Keesport harbor. The harbormaster’s pilot was just disembarking and preparing to guide his own boat back to the wharf.

“I just asked for a favor,” Silverwind replied as he helped himself to a traditional drink of rum and sourfruit juice.

“And autographed the mayor’s copy of Isemay’s latest book,” Oceanvine added. “It’s not your usual style, but I’m surprised you didn’t sign every book in City Hall.” She was drinking tonic without any

alcohol in it.

“I would have if it meant getting to Tarnsa sooner,” he replied.

“Maybe we should have flown,” Candle suggested. Candle had decided to try the rum and sourfruit too, but after one taste decided that the wizard was crazy.

“If you figure out a way to do that, I’ll give it a shot,” Silverwind told him.

“I’ve seen you levitate. I’ve done it once myself,” Candle responded.

“You haven’t seen me move very fast or very far that way, have you?” Silverwind shot back.

“No,” Candle replied, “and I couldn’t figure out how to do more than float slowly around the room when I tried it, but I figured you must have by now.”

“I don’t know everything, Candle,” Silverwind reminded him. “So, Jockey, any idea of when we can expect to make port in Tarnsa?”

“Four days normally,” the captain replied easily. “Three if the wind is favorable, five if something comes up. I’d put my money on arriving on the fourth day. The wind is astern and that’s pushing us along at over eleven knots. That’s the best the *Skate* can do short of putting a hurricane on her tail, but something always happens when you lot are aboard, so I expect to get held over at least a day.”

Life on the *Inner Seas* was a more nervous affair than it had been the last time they had sailed on the *Skate*. Where before, ships had customarily passed within hailing distance of each other and sometimes even stopped to visit each other, now it seemed that everyone was avoiding each other. Jockey had her lookout keep an eye out for the pirates who had attacked her on the last trip, but there was no sign of them. Instead they spotted three large ships with white hulls and the vivid royal arms of Emmine painted on either side near their bows.

“What are those?” Oceanvine asked the next morning as Jockey used her sextant to take a dawn sighting.

“The Royal Coast Guard,” Jockey replied tersely. She examined the sextant’s readings and wrote them down before continuing. “That’s probably why we haven’t seen those pirates, although they seem to move around a lot anyway. Besides we gave them what for, so they may still be licking their wounds and repairing their ship somewhere. One of our shots punched a hole just above the waterline.”

“Should the Coast Guard ships be patrolling in such a tight formation? It seems to me they’d do better to split up and cover more area.”

“I’m sure they will,” Jockey shrugged. “They need to get together every once in a while to compare notes and receive new orders, or they may just be arriving from somewhere else. They aren’t the ones I’m worried about. I’m keeping an eye out for that bark. Now that we’re better armed I’d love to run into them again, especially while you three are on board.”

“Would you like me to check the ship’s log?” Oceanvine asked.

“Thanks,” Jockey replied as she started to take a second sighting.

Oceanvine looked at the gauge set into the stern rail of the ship and noted they were supposedly moving

at five knots, but that seemed slow compared to their apparent speed and there was always a chance the log had been fouled by seaweed. She expertly pulled up the cable that attached the log to the *Skate* and saw she was right about the seaweed. She pulled the seaweed out of the mechanism and let the log mechanism slide back into the sea. When the cable was completely played out once more, she noted they were actually traveling at nine point seven knots.

“You do that like an old hand,” Jocey noted.

“Captain Yakaw taught me on the *Isle of Marga*,” Oceanvine explained. “We used to do this together every evening.”

“Well if you ever get tired of the wizard and want a life at sea, I’ll probably be needing a navigator on the *Windchime*,” Jocey laughed.

Jocey did not get her revenge on the pirates that trip, however. The only incident, in fact, occurred late on the third day when the lookout spied a ship with distress colors hoisted on her mast.

“Turn about,” Jocey told her first mate, a tall wiry man from Chastigon. “We should investigate.”

“Are you certain it isn’t a trap?” the mate asked.

Jocey frowned, Madoc would never have asked such a question, but this was only her second trip with this man. They still had a lot to learn about each other. “Could be,” she replied. “Have the crew at General Quarters as we approach, but I’ll be damned if I let a few pirates keep me from observing the most basic Sea Law of all. Always attempt to assist a ship in distress. That could be us someday.”

The man nodded and started bellowing orders. The commotion attracted first Oceanvine and then Silverwind. Candle, on the poopdeck, was so deep in a meditative exercise he was unaware of the activity around him. “What’s happening?” Oceanvine asked as she approached.

“Ship in distress,” Jocey told her. “We’re heading over to see if we can help.”

“You’ll want us on guard as well?” Oceanvine commented. It wasn’t really a question. Jocey nodded, never taking her eye off the ship they approached. “Anything in particular or should we play it by ear?”

“Whatever seems appropriate,” Jocey said distractedly. “Actually I think they may really be in distress. They look a little low in the water. Of course, they may simply be overloaded, but...”

“I’ll go wake Candle up then, shall I?”

“He’s not really asleep,” Silverwind told her, “but he may be in a rather deep trance. My fault actually.”

“What have you done?” Oceanvine asked. Her words might have carried blame but her tone was more curious than accusatory.

“I got him started on creation spells this morning,” Silverwind admitted.

“Good timing,” Oceanvine chuckled.

“Well, it wasn’t like I planned on general quarters today,” Silverwind replied defensively.

“Aren’t you supposed to be supervising that sort of activity?” Oceanvine asked somewhat more sharply this time.

“I just gave him a preparatory exercise. He promised not to go beyond the bounds of it.”

“That will be a first,” Oceanvine commented dryly.

“Actually the real challenge will be to get him back to the real world anytime in the next hour,” Silverwind continued. “I was with him at first, but he’s so deep in his meditation I could barely keep much of an eye on him. So I decided to let him go and trust he would keep his promise. Besides, so far he’s a long way off from being able to create much of anything.”

“I’d better have a few lessons on this sort of magic too. It wouldn’t do to let the squirt be able to do something I can’t.”

“I’ll help you sometime when he isn’t looking if you like. You’re much closer to being able to create than Candle is,” Silverwind assured her. “Some of the ward work you’ve been doing lately involves being able to harness the same basic energies. At least that’s true if Candle is right about how it is done.”

“Still, we should try to rouse him out of the trance,” Oceanvine told her husband. “We may need him.”

“You do it, Vine,” Silverwind urged her. “You always did have a knack for getting his attention.”

“Flatterer,” she grumbled.

“It’s true,” he insisted. “You’re far more ruthless about disturbing him than I ever was.”

She shot him a sharp look, but then sighed and headed over to where Candle was sitting blissfully unaware of his surroundings. She noted that he wasn’t actually sitting on the deck, but instead was actually floating about two inches above it, bobbing up and down with the waves. “Candle,” she called softly. “we need you.” There was no reaction, so she sat down on the deck beside him, crossed her legs and went into a trance of her own.

In her mind’s eye she could see Candle by the light of his aura. On close examination, she could study what he was doing and discern what sort of exercise Silverwind had set him to. The wizard had been correct; she was further along this particular path than Candle was. The knowledge shouldn’t have surprised her, but Candle had already done her one better on several counts and she wasn’t quite as sure she still knew more as she might have been. Mentally shrugging, she realized it didn’t really matter. There would come a day when Candle would be capable of many things she was not, just as there were some aspects of magic in which she would always be his superior. She had known for a long time that Candle had the aptitude to be a wizard and didn’t doubt he would one day stand for his exams on that level.

No sooner had that thought occurred to her when she realized that she was overdue to start her own wizardly dissertation. She certainly had sufficient research socked away even if her notes had been scattered to the winds in an over-carbonized format. She decided to start working on the outline of the work at her next free moment. She could recreate the notes as she went along. It’s not as if she had forgotten everything she learned when the house and barn had burned.

Realizing she had gone off on a tangent, she brought herself back to the job of bringing Candle out of his trance. Having examined the magical exercise he was practicing, it was almost child’s play for her to tap into it. The result was not unlike having a dream in which she had complete control over her own actions,

even if the dream environment was out of her hands.

There was no landscape to this particular dream-like state, just a lot of textures that changed from moment to moment. In fact, she decided, it was as if fog formed in an infinite number of polychromatic patterns that metamorphosed continuously into strange new ones.

“Candle!” she called out mentally. There was no verbal response, but she felt a slight breeze coming from her left. She turned and walked in that direction. Idly she wondered why she hadn’t chosen to fly, but kept walking instead. “Candle!” she called again and was rewarded when the polychromatic fog patterns thinned out in front of her to reveal Candle sitting in front of her. Strangely, this wasn’t the grown up Candle who favored odd-ball mixtures of clothing from all over Maiyim, but a young Candle about the same age as when Oceanvine and Silverwind had first met him. He wasn’t dressed in the rags he wore on that occasion, but instead he was clad in the fine embroidered tunic and trousers Jason’s sister, Galiena, had given him soon after his arrival at Castle North.

Candle looked up and saw Oceanvine. “Oh, it’s you again,” he muttered. “Forget it, you won’t distract me. Go away.”

“Candle, we need you back in the real world,” she told him impatiently. “There’s a ship in distress and Jocey needs us on guard.”

“Oh, Gods!” Candle muttered, “Can’t you at least come up with a new story? You tried that one on me last time. This is all in my mind anyway, I always thought I had a better imagination than this.”

“Candle, I guarantee I am not a figment of your imagination. Just wake up already.”

“Yes, yes, you said that last time too. Can’t you remember it? I know I can.”

“Candle,” Oceanvine growled. Then she sent a sharp thought at him which manifested as a blast of wind that knocked him over. “Did I do that last time, squirt?”

“You know you didn’t,” Candle told her as he sat up again.

“Oh for goodness sake!” Oceanvine sighed. She mentally reached out and doused him with a bucket of ice water.

Candle opened his eyes and abruptly fell to the deck. “Oh,” he said as he looked around. “Sorry, Vine. Uh, Oceanvine. I didn’t realize that was really you. Part of the exercise was to have my own mind try to distract me. Interesting notion really, don’t you think? Concentrating on staying in trance with one part of my mind while attempting to distract myself with the other.”

“Only Silverwind could have come up with an exercise like that,” Oceanvine pointed out. “I’m not even sure it’s particularly safe to split your mind like that. Oh, never mind, we have another situation at hand.”

“A ship in distress you said,” Candle confirmed, looking around. He looked back at her. “Did you really say it twice?”

“No, just the once,” she told him.

“Strange,” he mused. “It was an almost exact repeat of a scene that ran around in my mind much earlier. Well, it was until you started playing dirty.”

Oceanvine looked around and saw they were still several hundred yards off the port bow of the distressed ship. "Candle, did you realized you were levitating while you were in the trance?"

"I realize it now," he responded. "I think I bruised my backside when I fell. Actually Silverwind warned me that might happen and it sort of makes sense."

"Does it?" she asked.

"Well, of course. I was dealing with a lot of energy in that exercise, it was only natural that some of it manifest like that. Self-levitation takes quite a bit of power, doesn't it, and it's a lot safer way to let the excess energy out than, oh say, fireworks."

"I suppose it is," she replied. "Let's go join Silverwind. Jocey doesn't expect trouble, but it doesn't hurt to be ready."

As they drew nearer to the ship it became obvious that not only was she low in the water, but listing to her port side as well. That list, since they were approaching from the ship's port, made it seem even lower in the water than it actually was. There also appeared to be damage to that side of the hull as well, although most of it was already below the surface. When they were close enough, Oceanvine saw that the ship was the *Milla Star*, an otherwise handsome barkentine about half again the size of the *Skate*.

"Ahoy, the *Skate*!" came the call from the other ship. "Thank ye for responding!"

"Ahoy, *Milla Star*," Jocey called back. "How may we be of assistance?"

"We're taking on water and our pumps aren't quite able to keep ahead of the flood."

"We have a pump," Jocey called. The *Skate* was gliding to a halt beside the stricken barkentine although the two ships were still a good fifty feet apart.

"Perhaps we can do the job better," Silverwind offered to Jocey quickly.

Jocey nodded and continued to the captain of the *Milla Star*, "Although, we also have three mages on board who may do a better job than the pump ever could."

Jocey quickly had a boat lowered and she traveled to the *Milla Star* along with the mages and two crewmen.

"What happened here?" Candle asked, the moment he stepped onto the tilted deck.

"Our port side was stoved in by a whale," Captain Milo of the *Milla Star* explained.

"A whale?" Jocey repeated. "That's not normal."

"No, it isn't. The beast must have been sick. It attacked us several times and sprung the seams along much of our port side."

"What happened to the whale?" Oceanvine asked.

"We had to put it down," Milo told her. "We got lucky and after two salvos of canon shot we managed

to put it out of its misery. We're not whalers and that was all we had to work with."

"Shouldn't it still be floating around?" Candle asked.

"Not every type of whale floats when killed," Silverwind told him.

"I didn't know that," Candle replied, wonderingly. "So what do we do next?"

"We should take a look at the damage," Silverwind said decisively. "Let's go below and see what there is to see."

"That won't be easy," Milo told him, "what with the sea gushing in."

"Not any more. I've managed to hold the sea water from coming in," Silverwind informed him, "but I'll want to see the actual damage before we attempt a repair."

"You're showing off again, dear," Oceanvine commented as they went below.

"Should I really make a bigger show of what I'm doing?" Silverwind countered. "It would slow me down and this isn't the sort of situation where we should tarry over long. I may make it look easy, but holding back the sea, even out of a ship's hull, takes a lot of effort."

The hold was still flooded in spite of the ship's pumps. Oceanvine started using a levitation spell to augment their ability but Candle stopped her. "Allow me, Sis," he told her.

"What are you going to do?" she asked suspiciously.

"Watch and be amazed," Candle chuckled. He sat down on the top of a crate that was just barely higher than the water level and dropped himself into a self-hypnotic trance. Oceanvine watched him on both the physical and magical levels. Magically, she saw a string of energy extend out from his personal aura and into the hold. It formed a wall conforming to the inner side of the hull and then as she continued to watch small extensions of it started to wrap themselves around every solid object in the hold. A moment later, the energy extension of his spell flashed almost blindingly white and suddenly all the water in the hold disappeared. The ship suddenly bobbed up several feet in the water, throwing the mages about. Silverwind managed, with difficulty to maintain the spell that kept any more water from coming in through the breached hull.

"Good thing the cargo is all properly stowed," he commented.

"Translocation?" Oceanvine asked, somewhat amazed as she picked herself up. She had seen Candle do this only once before and that was while he was sick and disoriented.

"Uh huh," he agreed. "I started getting the knack of it this last semester. I was tempted to add it to the spells my trunk tossed at Master Spindle, but I haven't tried it on a living organism yet, so I'm not sure how safe it is. I remembered how much it knocked out of me in Querna when Snowfall pulled it on me and was worried the shock might actually kill Spindle." As he spoke water could be seen and heard seeping out of all the crates in the hold.

"Good thinking," Silverwind commented. "I've mentioned, I'm sure, that the shock of translocation is greater in older people than younger ones. And before Vine takes you to task..."

“Oceanvine!” she corrected him automatically.

“Don’t forget that’s the sort of spell you legally need supervision with until you have your master’s degree,” Silverwind concluded as though Oceanvine hadn’t interrupted.

“Supervision, sure. You were here,” Candle protested.

“Yes, but you didn’t discuss what you intended to do first.”

“Actually,” Oceanvine cut in, “technically I was supervising.” Silverwind looked at her with a bit of surprise showing in his eyes. “Well, I did ask what he intended and he asked me to watch.”

“He challenged you to watch, dear,” Silverwind pointed out.

“I took it for a request, but if you’d like I’ll be glad to bring the water all back again so he can move it under your supervision,” she suggested.

“Never mind,” Silverwind sighed. The water from all the crates was now several inches deep in the hold.

“Then I’ll just get rid of the rest,” Oceanvine told him. It wasn’t something she had ever tried, but having seen how Candle did it, she was confident she could pull it off. She didn’t bother to slip into a trance; she needed to do Candle one better. He was getting overconfident lately. However, she did close her eyes as she relaxed before casting the spell. Then, with ridiculous ease, she duplicated Candle’s feat and the hold’s deck was temporarily dry again. More water started seeping out of the crates again, but this time it wouldn’t be anywhere near as deep. “I never realized how easy that could be!” she exclaimed in spite of her plan to be nonchalant.

“Easy?” Candle asked. “It took me three years of hard practice to be able to do that.”

“That’s why you’re a journeyman and I’m a master,” Oceanvine told him smugly.

“If you two are done playing,” Silverwind interrupted, “I wouldn’t mind if we could move on to the next phase of repair.”

They examined the inside of the hull and saw where the whale had bashed in the hull planks. A large section of them were cracked and broken inward, but there didn’t appear to be any wood missing.

“That’s pretty much as I expected it would look,” Captain Milo commented. “If any of the planks had broken through the ship would have been lost before you got here.”

“Okay,” Silverwind told his two partners. “We’ve seen what we have to work with. I’m holding back the water and if I let go it will just start pouring in again, so you two will have to patch this up.”

“What do you want us to do?” Oceanvine asked.

“Candle’s job will be to push the planks more or less back into shape. Oceanvine, you’ll be doing the real work, however. You’re going to need to do the actual repairs. Captain, do you have any tar available on board?”

“We may have a little, I’ll have to ask the bosun where it is, though. Most of the loose tar on board is smeared on my crewmen’s clothing, having rubbed off of various parts of the ship.”

“Would you find out? Silverwind requested. “We can work without it, but the repairs will be better if we can find some.”

“It will take a while to heat it up,” Milo told him.

“No need. We can handle that,” Silverwind replied. Milo climbed out of the hold. “Okay, Candle, I want you to carefully push the planks and the ribs of the hull back into place.”

Candle went back into his trance and slowly, with a lot of creaking and breaking sounds the indentation in the hull began to correct itself. Candle hesitated when the noises started, but Silverwind urged him to continue until the shape of the section looked normal again.

“Good,” Silverwind told him after an eternity. “Now, Vine, I need you to work on as fine a scale as you can and do what you can to fuse the wood back together.”

“You’re kidding,” she reacted.

“No, really,” he insisted. “Sink yourself into the grain of the wood. Can you feel it?”

“Feel isn’t quite the right word,” she replied tersely, “but yes, I’m sort of in tune with the grain.”

“All right, stay relaxed and examine the breaks in the wood, when you are ‘in tune’ with them as well, do what you can to heal them. You’ll need to encourage the fibers of the wood to intermingle a bit at the edges.”

“That’s going to take a while,” she commented then sat down on one of the crates to concentrate on the task at hand. It took the better part of an hour but when she was done the cracks in the planks were mostly healed. She came out of her trance to discover she was sweating profusely from the effort. “I couldn’t patch up all the leaks between the planks,” she reported.

“That’s what the tar is for,” Silverwind told her. “Candle, it’s your turn again. Heat up the tar and caulk the seams between the planks.”

Candle nodded and concentrated on the tar. At first nothing happened and he realized that he wasn’t relaxed enough. The key to magic was to concentrate on what you were trying to do, but to stay relaxed at the same time. Candle drew a deep breath and let it out slowly before trying again. As the small bucket of tar heated up the hold filled with the smell of hot tar. Then, when he was satisfied, he used levitation to send globules of tar at the partially repaired hull and forced the hot, gooey stuff into the gaps between the planks. “There,” he announced a while later.

“Cool it off, Candle,” Silverwind instructed him.

“Oops,” Candle muttered but quickly brought the tar back down to the same temperature as the planks.

“Excellent,” Silverwind said, and carefully released his protective spell allowing the sea to press with its normal pressure against the hull. The hull creaked and groaned, but after a few moments, the creaks were more like the sounds one would normally encounter on a wooden ship. “There you go, Captain,” Silverwind told Milo. “It’s not quite as good as new and you’ll want to have it reinforced when you make port, but I doubt you’ll suffer any more leaks until then.”

"I owe you all a great debt," Milo told them. "How can I repay you?"

"No need," Silverwind told him. "Isn't this the sort of thing we're supposed to do for each other when at sea?"

"Perhaps," Milo allowed, "but these days it doesn't happen as often as it ought to."

Seven

Oceanvine supervised, but it was Candle who piloted the *Skate* into Tarnsa harbor and into a slip assigned by the harbormaster at the wharf. He did it with apparent ease, but Oceanvine could tell he was applying himself whole-heartedly. Still, piloting the *Skate* was not as great a strain as Oceanvine's first attempt at piloting aboard the much larger *Isle of Marga*, so if Candle was having an easier time of it than she had, it was understandable.

Crewmen were just throwing the hawsers on to the wharf to moor the ship when Oceanvine heard someone call her name. Looking on the wharf she saw Jason, the new Duke of North Horalia, waving at her. "Jason!" she called.

"Thank the gods you're here at last!" he replied. "Is Silverwind with you?"

"He's below at the moment," Oceanvine told him. "And Candle is with us as well."

"Candle?" Jason repeated looking at the dark haired young man, just standing up next to Oceanvine. "I wouldn't have recognized you. But I'm glad you're here just the same. I think Cerdic will be thrilled as well." With the ship securely moored to the wharf, a gangplank was extended and Jason was able to come aboard. "May I help with your bags?" he offered.

"I don't often have a duke carrying my luggage," Oceanvine laughed, "but it won't be necessary. We only have one bag each. Candle, would you be a dear and get them."

"And tell the wizard we have a greeting committee of one," Candle replied with a smile. "Yes." He strode off to their cabins.

"Traveling even lighter this time than last," Jason noted.

"We always travel light," Oceanvine replied, sadness in her voice, "but this time I'm carrying nearly all my worldly goods with me." She went on to describe the fire that burned the home she and Silverwind had shared.

"I'm sorry," Jason told her at last.

"Oh, it's nothing compared to your loss. My biggest regret was that I lost all my research notes in the fire, but I've already started recreating them. But, Jason, I'm so sorry about your father. How did it happen?" she asked.

Jason's face briefly clouded, then he pushed his grief aside and suggested, "Let's wait until Silverwind can join us. I'd rather not have to relive it too many times."

“How did you happen to be here on the wharf, then?” Oceanvine asked, changing the subject. “You can’t have been waiting here since you sent that letter.”

“Feels like it,” Jason replied, “but, no, I’ve only been in Tarnsa a couple of days now. I left Galiena in charge at the castle and rode down here to meet you. My original intention was to brief you on the way to Castle North, but it’s just as well I chose to meet you here, since something’s come up in Tarnsa too, but I’ll get to that later. To tell the truth I was just about to book passage to Keesport when I heard the *Skate* was making port. Well, I remembered that Captain Jocey was a friend of yours and a business partner of Geraint, so I came over here in the hopes you had sailed with her, and if not, perhaps she might have some word of your whereabouts. I’m just glad you were still somewhere in Emmine. For all I knew you might have been in Ellisto or someplace even more remote.”

“No. Happily we’ve been in Renton for the last few years since Silverwind and I married.”

“Married? Excellent!” Jason exclaimed. “But I never sent a present.”

“No need, it was a small, private ceremony in Medda. We didn’t see the need to send out announcements. If nothing else it kept Lady Ysemay from putting it in those penny-dreadfuls of hers.”

Jason chuckled. “But if she had, at least I would have known.”

“And how about you?” she asked. “Have you a new duchess to grace Castle North?”

“No, but I am engaged,” Jason replied. “Lady Salena’s a lovely person.”

“Well, I should hope so,” Oceanvine laughed, “or at least I should hope you would think so.”

“I think you will like her,” Jason continued. “She reminds me a bit of you. Oh. she doesn’t look anything like you, but her personality is very similar. I think that’s part of what attracted me to her. Met her at a party three years ago on a trip to Randona,” he smiled at the memory. “She was telling off Prince Michael, King Horic’s youngest brother, in such ringing tones I couldn’t help but think of you. Naturally I had to get to know her. We haven’t had nearly enough chances to be together, but she wrote, just before I left the Castle to say she would be here for the funeral.”

“It hasn’t happened yet?” Silverwind asked as he got on deck, helping Candle with their luggage.

“No, I thought you would want to examine my father’s body first,” Jason replied.

“Good idea,” Silverwind nodded. “Well let us say our goodbyes to Jocey. Then we’re at your disposal.”

“My father was a vigorous man,” Jason told them, looking for a place to start his tale. They had checked into the same inn Jason had been staying at and were now seated at a table waiting for dinner to be served. “He was hale and healthy right up to the end and was like that all his life except for that time eight years ago when he lay under the demon’s curse with that awful sign on his forehead.

“Since his recovery, though, he was as healthy and strong a man as ever,” Jason concluded.

“Yes,” Candle agreed. “I always thought he was the epitome of a nobleman. Strong, brave and caring for the people he both ruled and served.”

“Thank you, Candle,” Jason replied with a nod. “Anyway, all that ended abruptly just over two and a half weeks ago. We were having dinner. Father almost always kept dinner at the castle a small, intimate affair. Well, you saw how we did that during your last visit.” They all nodded. “Suddenly the Bond of Aritos reappeared on his forehead and he collapsed.” Jason paused for a long moment, then concluded. “As far as we can tell he died instantly.”

“I’m sorry, Jason,” Oceanvine told him. The others expressed similar sympathies.

Jason nodded. “Thanks, but that’s not why I called you. Like it or not, I’m the duke now, although my investiture won’t be until after the official period of mourning is over and since we haven’t had the funeral yet, the mourning period has not yet begun.”

“Is Horalian custom different than over the rest of Emmine?” Oceanvine asked. “Most places I know hold the funeral as soon as possible.”

“And we do that as well, but I remember how last time Silverwind and Meadow needed to examine the victims. My father’s body is under the same stasis spell that kept him alive nine years ago.”

“That may not preserve spell traces,” Silverwind pointed out, “but then keeping the body in a coroner’s mortuary may not have either.”

“I hoped it might and the local master assured me that his spell would do no harm.”

“It probably won’t,” Silverwind commented. “It didn’t last time.”

“Anyway, while so far my father’s death has been almost the only manifestation of demonic activity, I knew that I would need you all here as soon as possible if there was any hope of saving North Horalia, so...”

“So you sent us that letter,” Silverwind finished for him, “and we came running. Well, it’s a good thing you did. If the curse on your father reactivated, then the demon Pohn is either back or trying to get here again.”

“Pohn?” Jason asked.

“So I believe, yes,” Silverwind replied, doing nothing to answer Jason’s question.

“Jason, Aritos created five demons; you remember that from childhood religious training, I’m sure. Well, each of them has a name. The one who manifested here nine years ago resembles the description of the one known as Pohn.”

“Ah,” Jason murmured. “Well, knowing the name of the beast doesn’t change its nature, does it.”

“Not that I’ve ever noticed, no,” Silverwind told him. “We’ll leave for the ducal seat first thing in the morning.”

“Actually, there’s a related matter here in Tarnsa,” Jason told them. “I learned about it earlier today. It seems we have a demon cult growing here in town, maybe all over the duchy, but this is where I’ve

learned about it and the local police are at their wit's end to combat it, so I'd appreciate it if you could at least look into that before we leave town."

"All right, maybe we can wrap this up before leaving for Castle North."

They had a light breakfast the next morning before starting out for the local police station. They were only a few yards from the inn, however, before they heard a blood-curdling scream to their right and the twin thunks of a pair of crossbow bolts to their left.

Oceanvine spared a split second to see the short, feathered shafts sticking out of the wall beside her, then snapped her head around to see a group of five people running toward them, armed with clubs and rusty swords. Behind them there were two men trying to reload their arbalests. Trusting Silverwind and Candle to handle the mob running toward them, she turned her attention to the men with the crossbows. Throwing fireballs was old hat to her and her sense of subtlety hadn't grown noticeably over the intervening years. One corner of her mind noted that they were on the same block where, nine years earlier, she had incinerated a rogue mage who was attempting to cast a particularly nasty spell called the Hook on Candle. The two shooters met the same fate.

Meanwhile, Candle had erected an impermeable curtain ward between them and their attackers. The five men and women hit that ward with much the same results that would have occurred had they run head-long into a brick wall. Three of them suffered from concussions and broken bones. The other two were only bruised but none of them were in any condition to continue pressing their attack.

"Candle, you know where the police station is, I assume?" Silverwind asked.

"Sure do," the journeyman responded. "I used to do everything I could to avoid it."

"Well, could you continue on and bring back enough constables to escort our welcoming committee to wherever the locals store miscreants?"

"I'd like to help interrogate this bunch," Candle pointed out. "I think I know two of them."

"Hmm," Silverwind considered the request. "Yes, that may be a good idea. Vine?"

"Oceanvine, dear," she growled, "and I have a few choice questions for the survivors as well."

"I'll do it," Jason told them and hurried off.

"We probably shouldn't have let the local duke play lackey to us, you know," Candle pointed out.

"Probably not," Silverwind admitted, "I'll apologize to him later. Let's find out what we can. Which one do you want to talk to first?"

"This one over here," Candle replied, pointed out one of the two less injured men. "What sort of spell are you holding them with? It's not a ward, I can see that."

"Just a modified levitation spell," Silverwind said off-handedly. "I'm literally holding them still."

"Oh, neat trick," Candle allowed. "I'll have to try it sometime." Then he turned to the man on the ground below him. "Hello, Rosty. Been a few years, hasn't it. I seem to remember you were particularly fond of beating up on the low man. Well, guess who's low man today?" Candle waited but Rosty's only

response was to try to turn his eyes toward Candle. “Silverwind, I think you’re holding him a bit too tightly.”

“Sorry,” Silverwind apologized. “You take him,” he suggested and released his grip.

Candle reached out and magically held Rosty’s arms and legs tightly to his body but carefully left his mouth free to speak. “Okay, Rosty. Speak.”

“Who the hell are you, bosco?” Rosty asked defiantly.

Candle smiled. There were so many answers he could give to that. Most of them were personally amusing and a few were almost informational, but in the end he decided on the truth. “Name’s Candle. You may remember me since you ratted me out to Daddy Fox a few years ago.”

Rosty took another look at Candle as though seeing him for the first time. “Fox’ll get you back,” he said flatly. “He’s got us all.”

“How so?” Candle asked, but there was no answer. Rosty tried to answer, but sudden spasms of pain disabled him completely.

“Candle,” Oceanvine prompted him. “Take a closer look at him. The others too for that matter.”

Candle did, realizing she meant to look for spell traces. What he found was no mere trace but a set of energy strings that infused their auras and trailed off into the distance. He had seen this spell before, but it had been nearly nine years. “The Hook,” he gasped. “I wouldn’t have thought there were that many corrupted mages who also knew that spell.”

“It only takes one,” Oceanvine replied grimly. “How many are enslaved this time?”

“Two less, counting the piles of ash you left across the street, dear,” Silverwind told her. “We really do need to work on that temper of yours.”

Oceanvine took a deep breath and let it out. She knew he was right, but replied defensively, “It was a kill-or-be-killed situation. No, maybe not, but they were shooting at us and my first thought was to make sure they didn’t do it again.”

“You could have accomplished that just by burning their arbalests,” he countered, “or even just by snapping the bow strings. Still, they did take us by surprise and there could have been a lot more of them, so I can’t say you were really wrong.” She nodded but kept silent. “Now what to do about this bunch? Three are unconscious and the other two are being shut up by whoever is holding the other end of their strings.”

“Can’t we follow the strings back to the master?” Candle asked.

“Whoever it is, knows his business,” Silverwind replied. “Look carefully and you’ll see he is using the strings for two-way communication. He, or she even, is aware of what is happening here. If we try following the strings back he’ll just cut them and kill his slaves in the process. However, as it happens, after our little adventure in Querna I had time to think about the nature of the Hook and to consider alternative treatments to remove it.”

“Good,” Candle said vehemently, “’cause I’m not about to make this one,” he indicated Rosty, “my

brother.”

“No need,” Silverwind chuckled and Candle relaxed. From long experience he knew the sound of Silverwind’s laughter; it was a comforting sound to him. “I think it’s time to put theory into practice.” He closed his eyes and so did Candle. As Candle watched he saw Silverwind cast a spell that changed the nature of the horribly addictive spell these five men and women were bound by. “There,” Silverwind said a few minutes later.

“What did you do?” Oceanvine asked.

“A couple of things actually,” Silverwind replied. “First of all, I made the communicative nature of the spell one way again, only in this case, while their master can sense what they send, they will no longer take orders from him. That includes the order to die. However, that was just to keep him from interfering with the next part. The reason cutting the string kills the victim is shock, so I programmed the spell to gradually cut back control over the victim and then cut its own string from this side.”

“How gradually?” Candle asked.

“An hour,” Silverwind shrugged.

“But if the master cuts the string before then...” Oceanvine started to ask. “Oh, you said he can’t order them to die.”

“Correct,” Silverwind nodded. “That order is part of the process of cutting the string. He can still do it, but it will take much longer and already it’s been too long for the shock to kill the victims. In fact I believe he just tried cutting their strings. Notice the disturbance along them? Yes, there goes the first one, now the others. These people are going to be very sick for a while, but they’ll recover.”

“You’ll have to show me how you did that. In fact, why haven’t you told me about this before?” she asked suspiciously.

“Until now it was just something I used as a mental exercise, mostly at night when I was having trouble sleeping. If we’d had a practical use for it, I’d have mentioned it.”

“You should have mentioned it anyway. You know I have a personal interest in that sort of thing,” she reminded him. “Besides, if nothing else, you should have told Geraint.”

You’re right, of course,” he agreed. “I’ll be sure to send him a letter when we have a chance.”

“And you should write it up and publish the technique,” Oceanvine added. “There must be hundreds of mages who could benefit from that knowledge.”

Silverwind was spared from having to apologize again when Jason showed up with a squad of constables and their lieutenant. None of the erstwhile attackers were conscious and the local police had no leads as yet into the demonic cult activities, but the lieutenant promised, “I’ll call the moment they come to, your grace.”

“We didn’t learn much by all that, did we?” Silverwind commented as they headed back to the inn.

“Maybe more than you think,” Candle told him. “Rosty there let one very important thing slip, at least he did if I understood correctly. Fox is involved in it somehow. He doesn’t know who we are yet, he just

knows that Jason has brought us here.”

“How do you figure that?” Oceanvine asked.

“Rosty didn’t know who I was. Well, I wouldn’t expect him to recognize me after nine years and in clothes this fine, but if Fox had known I was here, he would have wanted me in particular.”

“You in particular? Don’t you think your head is getting a bit swelled?” Oceanvine challenged him.

“Oh, I’m a bit cocky, I admit it, but you don’t know Fox. I’m the kid who got away. Remember how he tried to get me back last time we were here. He’s thrown a few boys out, but none have ever run away. My leaving must have cost him big time in the eyes of the boys who were still with him. He wouldn’t forgive that; not ever. He won’t forgive you either, Silverwind, since you were who I left with. And Oceanvine, well I don’t think he knows how to read so he probably never heard of you.”

“That could be his sole redeeming feature,” Oceanvine commented.

“But while I don’t know where he might be, we at least have a target. Maybe we should go back and see if the police have an inkling as to where Fox’s den is these days.”

“Where did it use to be?” Jason asked.

“It doesn’t matter, but during the brief time I was with him he had a place in an abandoned warehouse down near the harbor, but before that his place was under a bridge on the west side. He used to move several times a year. Before that it was another warehouse and by the time I left, he was having us look for a new place again.”

“I’ll go ask the police about him,” Silverwind decided. “You want to come along?”

“Uh, you might not believe it, but I think I should pay a visit at the orphanage I ran away from before falling in with Fox,” Candle replied. “It took me a while to realize it, but I think I owe them an apology, or something.”

“I’ll go along with you,” Oceanvine told Candle.

“Why?” Candle asked.

“Why not?”

“And I’ll go with Silverwind,” Jason decided.

Eight

“What a depressing place,” Oceanvine opined on seeing the orphanage.

“What did you expect?” Candle asked her. “Gardens with swings and slides and other toys for children? It’s not quite like the workhouses I heard about in Granom, but we were expected to earn our keep. Good thing we didn’t have a garden. The kids would have had to take care of that too.”

The orphanage was a three-story wooden building in the east end of Tarnsa. It wasn't very large and stood sandwiched between a blacksmith's forge and an apothecary shop. All three buildings had once been painted a dull gray-green but they had been due for a fresh coat at least five years earlier and were still waiting. What was left of the paint was peeling off and there were signs of incipient rot in the gutters. However, the windows of the orphanage were kept surprisingly clean and while the building itself was not painted, the door was a glossy black with brass fittings that were kept untarnished.

However, even with that touch of obvious care there was something about the building that just seemed oppressive. Candle approached the door with Oceanvine and lifted the heavy brass ring of the door knocker. He knocked three times and they did not have too long to wait. The elderly woman who answered the door was wearing a plain gray dress. She looked for a moment at Candle and Oceanvine.

"May I help you?" the woman asked.

"Mrs. Harvester?" Candle asked, uncertain if this was the same matron who had served here while he was in her care.

"Yes," she nodded. "Are you two looking to adopt a child?"

"Uh, no," Candle replied uncertainly. "I used to live here. My name is Candle."

Mrs. Harvester looked at the young man standing before her and squinted a bit. "Candle? Yes, we had a boy called Candle here once."

"Yes," Candle agreed, "That was me. May we come in?"

"You've grown up, lad," Mrs. Harvester told him.

"Couldn't help it, ma'am," Candle laughed.

"And this is your...?" she paused, while indicating Oceanvine.

"Oh, sorry," Candle apologized quickly, "This is Oceanvine, she's sort of like a sister to me and she's married to the wizard who apprenticed me."

"A wizard!" Mrs Harvester was pleasantly surprised. "So you're a wizard now?"

"Just a journeyman so far," Candle corrected her gently, "but someday, maybe. Wanna see a trick?"

"Want to, Candle," Mrs. Harvester corrected him, "not 'wanna.'"

"Sorry. Want to?"

"All right," she smiled. "Show me something."

Candle chuckled and looked around. He remembered a fancy framed mirror in the hallway from the door. Finding it was still there, he closed his eyes to relax and concentrate. When he opened them again he could see the image of a low hill with a large complex of ornately constructed buildings along the bottom third of the mirror.

"It's beautiful, Candle," Mrs. Harvester sighed. "What is it?"

“Tenningwood, the royal palace outside Randona,” Candle replied.

“That isn’t permanent, is it?” Oceanvine asked.

“The image is, but not in color,” Candle replied. As he did so, the color faded leaving the image as a study in silver.

“Too bad,” Oceanvine commented. “That would have been something very new.”

“I like this better,” Mrs. Harvester told them. “The color image was distracting. Sometimes subtlety is better.”

“I could have made it a more realistic image had I been there when the mirror was being silvered,” Candle explained.

“Well yes,” Oceanvine agreed, “although I can think of one way to accentuate the image.” And she closed her eyes for just a moment and as Candle watched, the image became ever so slightly shaded. “Yes, I think that’s a bit better.” Mrs. Harvester agreed.

“It makes it easier to see the palace,” she said.

“How did you do that?” Candle asked Oceanvine.

“The mirror is made of glass with a coat of silver, right?” Oceanvine asked.

“Yeah, so?”

“Well, to form the image you deformed the glass. To shade it, I allowed certain sections to tarnish a bit. Like Mrs. Harvester said, ‘Sometimes subtlety is better.’”

“An unusual stance for you, Vine.”

“That’s Oceanvine,” she told him firmly.

“Yes, Candle. It isn’t polite to take liberties with another person’s name,” Mrs. Harvester lectured him. In a flash he understood anew why he had left this house. It did not bother him now, but when he was younger he had very little patience for such lessons. It was a mark of how bad life on the streets had been that he was willing to put up with it from Silverwind. “Why don’t we sit in the parlor,” Mrs. Harvester suggested.

“Where are the children?” Oceanvine asked as they moved into a nearby room. She sat down on small couch, next to Candle. Mrs. Harvester sat in a wing chair facing them.

“It’s nap time for the younger ones,” she explained, “and most of the older children went with Mr. Harvester to the zoo today. The two oldest are upstairs with the youngsters. I’m not as young as I once was and they help out, although soon they’ll be out on their own.

“How many do you take care of?”

“At the moment, we have seventeen living with us. It changes. Some of the children get adopted,

although not nearly enough. We try to give them a home here and some education.”

“And a lot of chores to do,” Candle added.

“Yes, Candle,” Mrs. Harvester nodded. “I recall you didn’t like the chores. Well none of the children enjoy them, but this is a large house and maintenance is expensive. Besides the chores are the same you might have been expected to perform as part of a natural family.”

“I suppose,” Candle allowed. “It didn’t seem so at the time, though.”

“As I recall you weren’t too keen on helping around the house in Renton either,” Oceanvine commented.

“Some things never change,” Mrs. Harvester noted.

“What about those projects we made for sale?” Candle asked. “Wallets, and pot holders and what not?”

“The profits all go to the children,” Mrs. Harvester explained. “A bit for buying the occasional piece of candy, but mostly saving up for the future.”

“I don’t recall any of that,” Candle pointed out.

“Of course you don’t,” Mrs. Harvester. “You were too young for an allowance when you ran away. Actually, I think you ran off a month or so before your tenth birthday when that would have started. There’s still a small balance that belongs to you. Do you want it?”

“Uh, no thanks. Use it for the rest of the kids. I’m okay these days. My birthday,” Candle continued wondering. “Was that my real birthday or just a day you decided on?”

“It was the anniversary of the day you came to us,” Mrs. Harvester replied. “You were approximately one year old by that time, so it’s probably not too far off.”

“So you don’t know what my birth name was either,” Candle concluded.

“I could look it up,” she told him.

“You could?”

“Of course. I have the records neatly filed. I have to. There are all sorts of reports to City Hall I have to write.”

“Then why did you call him ‘Candle?’” Oceanvine asked.

“It was a nickname,” Mrs. Harvester explained. “When he was about two years old, he burnt his hand trying to touch a candle flame. The name just stuck. If I recall correctly, your real name began with an ‘a.’ Archer or Aonghais... No, I remember now it was Ange.”

“Ange?” Candle repeated. “I like Candle better.”

“It’s your name now,” Oceanvine pointed out. “I never liked my birth name either, you know.”

“Yeah, I know,” Candle agreed. “Even I wouldn’t be foolish enough to call you Elinor. I wonder what Silverwind’s birth name was.”

“Asketil,” Oceanvine told him. “You could have just asked him, you know.”

“Somehow I never thought about it. Silverwind is Silverwind, you know?”

“Silverwind?” Mrs. Harvester asked. “Like in the books?”

Oceanvine slapped her hand to her forehead, but Candle answered, “Yes, that’s him, although the books aren’t very accurate. Sort of complete fabrications, really.”

“I’m not surprised,” Mrs. Harvester replied. “They aren’t very well written. They’re popular, I’ll admit, but they aren’t the sort of stories I like my children to read. They do, though, so I make sure they understand they have to read one work of classic literature for every one of those dreadful things they read.”

“So you haven’t read them?” Oceanvine asked.

“Only a few, to make sure there wasn’t anything dirty about them. They’re decent enough, just not very good.”

“That’s why you didn’t recognize Oceanvine’s name,” Candle figured out. “She’s replaced Windchime in the last dozen or more of the series.” Then he changed the subject, “So who were my real parents?”

“I doubt anyone knows who your father was,” Mrs. Harvester told him. “Your mother, well, she was... Well, how can I put this delicately, it really isn’t the sort of thing decent folks discuss.”

“She was a prostitute,” Candle figured out for himself, “wasn’t she?” Mrs. Harvester nodded mutely. “Well, that’s not so bad. At least she wasn’t a murderer or something like that. Besides, I know a former street-walker from Querna. She’s a nice lady, or at least she is these days. I didn’t know her then.”

“You know a former prostitute?” Mrs. Harvester asked, slightly shocked.

“Yes, I met her years ago when Oceanvine here was curing her of a magical curse. She turned out all right. She married Prince Zakhar, the Granomish ambassador to Bellinen.”

Upstairs they heard a baby crying. “Oh, they’ll all wake up now,” Mrs Harvester commented.

“Perhaps we should be on our way then,” Oceanvine suggested.

“I will be rather busy,” Mrs. Harvester admitted, “but do feel free to visit anytime.”

Nine

“He calls himself Daddy Fox or maybe just Fox these days,” Silverwind told Keesport Chief of Police James Harborside.

“Oh, yes we know him,” Chief James replied sourly. “Slippery devil, he is. Ran a child-based crime

racket here in town for years, but the kids grew up and now he's using them in gang fashion. Some of those men and women we picked up this morning, the survivors anyway, were definitely his. Probably all of them were, but not all of them had records. Hell! One of them was a teacher in the public school here."

"Targets of opportunity," Silverwind commented.

"What?" Chief James asked.

They were all victims of a particularly nasty enslavement charm known colloquially as the 'Hook.'

"Now that I've heard of. There have been reports of incidents of the Hook all over Emmine this past year."

"Have there?" Silverwind asked. "I really have been too isolated. I'm surprised Windchime didn't seem to know about it, though."

"It hasn't been in the newspapers," James told him. "Everyone's been trying to keep it quiet, not to panic people."

"I sometimes wonder about the wisdom behind that sort of policy," Silverwind responded. "Okay, you have a happier population, but it's the bliss that comes from ignorance. And the ignorance means that ordinary, law-abiding folks don't know enough to protect themselves. And this is not the first time the Hook has been used in Tarnsa."

"It isn't?"

"Not at all. It was about nine years ago when my wife incinerated a rogue mage who was attempting to Hook my apprentice," Silverwind told him bluntly. "I would have reported the incident, but I was in something of a hurry to answer a summons from the Granomish king. In retrospect, I suppose we should have taken the time to look into the situation and to let you know about it, but I had hoped that by destroying the mage who was casting the spell the problem would be solved. Evidently, Fox went and found another."

"Evidently," James echoed. "Unfortunately I don't know where Fox is. In the past he was a small-time operator and not one we had much time to track down. We'd go after him when we knew where he was supposed to be, but while we caught some of the boys, we never caught him. He just wasn't worth the trouble compared to some of the other troublemakers in town. Now that he's a bigger problem, we can't find him."

"Isn't that always the way," Jason muttered.

"There are rules, your grace," Silverwind told him lightly. "I guess our next step will be to root out Fox, wherever he may be. Damn! If I'd known he was going to be this much trouble I'd have let Oceanvine handle him."

"In hindsight we all have perfect vision," Jason quoted an old saying.

Silverwind gave him a dirty look. "I may be jumping to a conclusion, but I can't help assume the attack on us this morning was related to this demon cult in Tarnsa. It could simply have been Fox trying to get Candle back and to get revenge on me for out-smarting him last time around, but if it had been I think our

attackers would have known who we were and they especially would have known Candle.”

“By now, Fox may know who you are,” the police chief commented.

“I hope so,” Silverwind replied. “It would save me the bother of going to look for him.”

“Why not guarantee it then?” Jason suggested.

“What do you have in mind?” Silverwind asked.

“Why don’t we go to the local newspaper and give them an exclusive interview?” Jason suggested.

“That’s some interview,” Candle remarked the next morning. “I’m surprise we’re all lingering about our coffee and tea considering this ought to be enough to have Fox arrange a lynch mob.”

“That was the idea,” Silverwind replied. “We don’t have time to sit around waiting for a chance to stumble across Fox, so instead I tried to goad him in every way I could think of. Today we’ll just walk around Tarnsa waiting for something to happen.”

“Oh something will happen, all right,” Candle agreed. “You hit him in almost all of his weak spots, although how you knew, I can’t say. I sure haven’t spoken about him much over the years.”

“I know the type,” Silverwind assured him, “and Jason helped a lot as well.”

“About the only line that won’t bother him is calling him a coward. He’s proud of that. He always said that cowardice was just what the stupid called plain sense. But apart from that he should be seeing red this morning, or he will when he reads the paper.”

“So he does read?” Oceanvine asked.

“Oh yeah, he doesn’t read great literature, but he always made sure someone stole the morning paper for him. And by now he’s probably foaming at the mouth. We’d better not go near anything too breakable until we get him, because after his first attempt yesterday I doubt he’ll try to take us alive and even if he does it will only be to do something even nastier.”

“Good thing I visited Fulco yesterday,” Oceanvine commented. Fulco was one of the leading provisioners in Tarnsa. Oceanvine loved the smell of his store. Although she had only bought a few small items, she made notes of some supplies they would want for their journey to Castle North. “I’d hate for anything to happen just because we were caught inside his store.”

“That’s why we’re just going to walk casually around town,” Silverwind told her. “That’s also why we’re having an extra cup this morning. We may not get a chance to stop for lunch.”

“We can always picnic,” Candle suggested. “There are a couple of parks and the commons and it looks like it’s going to be a nice day. The open space, if that is where we find them, or where they find us rather, will be helpful too.”

They finished their tea and coffee and took to the streets. Jason had insisted on going with them in spite of Silverwind arguing against such a course. They eventually compromised and Jason was given the task of walking a block behind the mages, ready to contact the police if anything happened.

They didn't have long to wait. On their guard, there was no chance of being taken by surprise when a group of twelve armed men and women were seen coming toward them. Five of their attackers had crossbows, but Silverwind beat Oceanvine to the mark on that count and quickly snapped the cables that acted as bowstrings. Candle and Oceanvine acted in concert to scoop up the ones attacking with swords, cudgels and other hand-held weapons in a cup-shaped impermeable ward. The bowmen tried running away but only two escaped Silverwind's levitation spell that picked them up and carried them to the cup ward that held the others.

"Two got away? You must be slipping," Oceanvine commented to him.

"I let them go," Silverwind told her. "I needed to make sure Fox would know what happened."

"This lot is all Hooked too," Candle reported.

"I didn't expect otherwise," Silverwind replied. Then he worked the same spell to release them that he had used the previous day.

Jason arrived soon after with the police and they were back to their perambulation about Tarnsa. As per Candle's suggestion, they bought drinks and sausage sandwiches from a street vendor and enjoyed a simple picnic-style lunch in a park area. It wasn't until mid-afternoon that they encountered the next group of attackers.

This was more than just the simple assault of the past two attacks. They were surrounded by what looked like four times the number of people in the group of their previous assailants. Not just men and women in this crowd, Fox had chosen to use his boys as well.

Oceanvine's impermeable ward this time was used to protect Silverwind, Candle and herself. Silverwind disabled the crossbow cables once more but only the impermeable ward saved them when two shots rang out. Two of the attackers had the Granomish hunting weapons that were actually miniatures of the ship's guns Jocey had mounted on the *Skate*.

Candle wasn't too sure of what to do against the guns, but closed his eyes and willed the long barrels to bend upward. The next shot sounded different and when he opened his eyes he noted that one of the guns had exploded, killing its user. The other gunman dropped his weapon and tried to run, but Candle reached out with his mind and slammed the man into a wall.

Silverwind was handling the screaming women who were charging them from behind while Oceanvine concentrated on containing a group of men from in front before turning her attention to the two groups across the street. Candle gave a little grunt beside her, but she did not have time to see what he was doing. The men and women from the other side of the street were now halfway across and she was trying to form a third ward to deflect them and was having trouble. Silverwind tried a different ploy, however, and a terrific blast of wind roared up the street. It did not quite knock their attackers over, but it did break up the attack, giving Oceanvine time to drop the protective ward around the mages and to set one up to contain the final groups of attackers.

"Oh no you don't," she heard Candle say and out of the corner of her eye she saw him sink to the ground. There was still no time to help him until after Silverwind helped her contain all their attackers.

Then and only then were either of them able to see what was happening with Candle.

The young mage was shaking all over and sweating profusely. Oceanvine saw that he was under a magical attack and recognized the spell as the Hook. Candle was fighting it, but the contest seemed evenly matched.

“Stay out of it, Vine,” Silverwind stopped her. “He’s holding his own and doing something I don’t entirely understand. Stepping in now could hurt him more than help.”

They both watched for nearly half an hour. Candle’s battle was still going on when Jason arrived with several police wagons and continued after the wagons had carted off the men, women and children who Silverwind had just released from the Hook. Several police officers and their sergeant stayed nearby.

Oceanvine and Silverwind kept a close eye on Candle and watched as he fought off the effects of the Hook. Jason approached and Silverwind apprised him of the situation but for another few minutes nothing happened. Then, suddenly, Candle’s aura flashed brightly and they could see him take control of the spell his attacker was using. The mystic string of the spell changed color and so did the nature of the spell. Candle took hold of the string with his hand, something Oceanvine had never seen anyone do. He stretched it a bit further from the direction it came from, then let it go and it snapped back to the mage who had cast the original spell.

“That should take care of that,” Candle said tightly as he got back to his feet.

“What did you do?” Oceanvine asked.

“Turned the spell back on the caster,” Candle replied. “It’s not entirely unlike what I did to Arithan back on the Isle of Fire, but he caught me by surprise so it took me a bit longer than it might have.”

“But you let him go. Now we’ll have to hunt him down,” Oceanvine protested.

“Hunt him down? No, not at all,” Candle said calmly. “Didn’t you hear what I said? I turned the spell back on him, he isn’t going anywhere. He’s now Hooked, sort of, but doesn’t have a master so he’s just sitting there waiting for orders that aren’t going to come to him. But I know exactly where he is. Just inside this building, in fact, and up stairs. We’ll find him there.”

“Yes,” Silverwind agreed, “let’s go find out who he is.”

“Oh, didn’t I say?” Candle asked. “Sorry. It’s Daddy Fox himself.” He lead the way into the building and up the stairs.

“Fox!” Oceanvine exclaimed. “Since when is he a mage?”

“Since he made a deal with Pohn and Arithan,” Candle replied. “At least I think that’s who he dealt with. It looked like them.”

“How do you know that?” Oceanvine asked, just ahead of Silverwind.”

“Part of what I did just then was to interrogate him. When I grabbed hold of that spell string he didn’t have much choice but to tell me everything I wanted to know. He made a deal with the demons and in return, they gave him the ability to cast the Hook. Actually it was the only spell he knew, but it was enough, I guess. Anyway, the other thing I learned was that we have now captured the entire demon cult

here in Tarnsa. He used everyone he had in this latest assault and his main goal was to get me. He figured that if he had me he could force you two to do anything he wanted. What an idiot! I don't think he even figured out that Silverwind could cure his victims.

"Anyway," Candle continued, "he hasn't heard from his masters since they made their little deal, so it's possible he was just set up to try to keep us from getting to Castle North."

"Or maybe as a delaying tactic," Silverwind commented dryly.

"If so," Oceanvine added, "he was not very successful. We only lost two days. Oh, dear!" she gasped as they got a look at Fox.

He was much better dressed than the last time they had seen him, but his face was utterly expressionless. His mouth hung slightly open as he sat in his chair, but he was staring at nothing in particular.

"Silverwind, you can cure him if you want, but I'm all for leaving him this way," Candle said harshly. "He deserves it."

Ten

"It looks like Tarnsa was just the start of our problems," Oceanvine remarked as they got their first view of Castle North and the nearby town of Northerton. There was too much smoke rising from the town to come from cooking fires and the weather had been too warm for anyone to need to heat their houses.

Jason had brought a carriage and driver to Tarnsa in his hopes to pick up Silverwind and company. It took them two hours to find that driver when they decided to leave, and Jason docked the man a day's pay because he had been found gambling in one of the bars down by the harbor. On Oceanvine's suggestion Jason also forced the man to donate his winnings to Candle's former orphanage. However, to Candle's surprise, the driver shrugged, agreed with Jason, and without prompting apologized to all of them.

Jason looked at the smoke coming from Northerton and instructed their driver to pick up the pace. "I'll reinstate that day's pay if you can get us into the castle in ten minutes or less."

"Yes, your grace!" the man replied enthusiastically.

The next few minutes left the party shaken and with one or two bruises, but they did arrive in the courtyard of Castle North in time for the driver to get his pay back.. Jason bolted out of the carriage door the moment it rolled to a halt and paused only to ask the driver to see that their luggage was brought inside. The mages followed hot on his heels. They ran through the front door of the castle keep and nearly knocked over Lady Galiena who was running just as fast to meet them.

"Gali! What's been happening?" Jason asked concernedly.

"Oh, Gods! It's been horrible, Jase," Galiena replied. "Even worse than last time. But first let's get the formalities over. Do you, Duke Jason of North Horalia, accept once more the mantle of authority for the Duchy..."

"Skip that, Gali," Jason interrupted. "Master Steuen isn't in hearing range. Just tell him we had the

ceremony, let's just find a quiet corner and we can bring each other up to date."

The quiet corner turned out not to be so quiet, but a round table in the kitchen was more convenient for food and drink while they talked. "It was bad enough that Father died, especially the way he did," Galiena began, "with the reappearance of the curse. Then you went off to meet Silverwind, and a day later, all hell broke loose. Joram left the day after you did, answering a call from his brother, the Earl."

"Normally you'd have gone with him," Jason commented.

"I would never abandon North Horalia," Galiena retorted sharply.

"I know, Gali," Jason assured her. "I know. So what happened after Joram went to County Amden?"

"A bunch of little things at first; nothing I was able to get suspicious about. There was an increased incidence of petty thefts and a few not so petty. Then there was a whole long string of barroom brawls and I got a lot of complaints about thugs shaking down the local merchants. I finally had Adelulf summoned here to tell him to keep his people in line. He went into that, 'I'm just a businessman,' line he likes to use and I told him I'd make sure his business dried up permanently if he didn't wise up fast."

Jason laughed. "I've found it usually works better to be subtle with him. Your bluff must have shaken him to his bones."

"What bluff?" Galiena asked wryly. "He knew I'd make his life miserable and I would have."

"Gali, I never liked it, but there are certain lines even we cannot cross," Jason told her.

"Jase, I'm just a woman," she replied sweetly. "What do I know about running a duchy?"

Jason looked at her, then realized she was being sarcastic. "He really thought you were serious?"

"Jase, Adelulf is more conservative in his attitudes than Master Steuen. He really thought I didn't know any better and no matter what he might have gotten away with when you are in charge, he thought I really would have taken him down because I didn't know any better. And you know something? I would have too. Anyway when the shock wore off he swore blind that his people had been having just as much trouble as ours had. He didn't know who was trying to run a protection racket on his territory, which is the whole town these days."

"He doesn't know? Then he's as desperate as we are to see it stop," Jason replied.

"Maybe even more so," Candle added. "If he loses control, he loses his life. That's the way it works. As far as he knows, you're just greatly inconvenienced."

"Could be. Well, next time he gets above himself," Jason mused, "I just threaten to hand him over to my new minister of domestic affairs."

"Who?" Galiena asked.

"You. So what happened next?"

"The riots started two days ago. There are roving gangs of people out looking for fights, burning buildings and generally causing as much disruption as possible. The Fire Squad deserves anything we can

give them in thanks, by the way, but we've still lost twenty buildings in town and more are still burning."

"That explains the smoke," Jason noted.

"You needed an explanation?" Galiena asked. "Adelulf came back yesterday and offered to help in riot control. 'Riots are bad for business,'" she imitated the local crime lord. "And I'll admit that last night wasn't quite as bad. And that pretty much brings you up to date."

Jason nodded and let Galiena know what had been happening in Tarnsa. "So, Silverwind?" Jason asked at last. "Any idea of how to handle this?"

"Yes," Silverwind replied. "Two things. We'll need to have a look at your father and also have a chat with Adelulf."

Adelulf's office had grown over the last few years. The last time Silverwind and Candle had visited it, Adelulf had kept a small inner office that looked businesslike enough, but his thugs populated the outer one. Now he had expanded his operations throughout the entire building and walking in, neither Silverwind nor Candle could detect anything different from the offices of a more conventional business. The thugs were nowhere in sight, having been replaced with clerks and secretaries. The gloomy and threatening air of the offices had been banished by the installation of larger and cleaner window panes, and here and there grew potted plants, giving the entire place a comfortable and healthy look.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Silverwind asked Candle as they approached a receptionist, a young man who was busily working on a long chart of some sort.

"This is where we came last time," Candle replied uncertainly. "Looks like they must have gutted the place to remake it. I seem to remember this floor creaked like crazy."

"May I help you, sirs?" the young man asked politely.

"We're here to see Adelulf," Silverwind told him.

"Yes, sir. Do you have an appointment?"

"I'm afraid not, but we're here on the Duke's business, I'm sure he'll take the time to see us," Candle replied with a confidence he didn't quite feel. Without realizing it, he was attempting to emulate Silverwind.

"I'll ask, but, Master Adelulf is a very busy man. Who should I say is calling?"

"Silverwind and Candle," Silverwind told the receptionist. "I'm certain he'll remember our last meeting."

"Silverwind and..." he was repeating the names as he wrote them down, but then broke off abruptly and took another look at the mages. "Oh yes, of course, Wizard. Please forgive me. I'll be right back." The young man took off like a shot.

"I really have to get my name into those books," Candle muttered. Silverwind chuckled.

A few minutes later they were ushered into a large airy office where they found Adelulf sitting behind a large antique wooden desk. He got up immediately and came around the desk to greet the two mages.

“Silverwind! Candle! How wonderful to see you both again,” he gushed.

“You’ve made a few improvements,” Silverwind observed.

“The building was badly damaged during whatever happened last time you were here,” Adelulf admitted. “I figured that if I was going to be a businessman, I ought to look like one as well. Was that really a demon?” he added almost as an afterthought.

“Oh yes,” Silverwind replied. “Definitely.”

“And he’s back,” Candle added seriously, making Adelulf flinch, “maybe with friends.”

“Delightful,” Adelulf replied nervously. “Do you think you can manage to keep him away from my office this time?”

“We weren’t exactly steering him around the city last time,” Candle told him dryly.

“I suppose not. So would you like some coffee? Something stronger?” Adelulf offered.

“No, thank you,” Silverwind replied. “I must say, I’m impressed. This looks like the office of a legitimate business.”

“Actually, it is a legitimate business,” Adelulf told him stiffly, then wilted under Silverwind’s and Candle’s stare. “Well, mostly legitimate. Protection isn’t all that different from insurance, really. Once I took over the protection racket in the entire city it was in my best interest to make sure nothing happened to anyone actually paying. Strangely enough, I found I was making more with insurance policies than I did with the protection money.”

“And you also don’t have to worry about having the Duke’s police interfering with business that way,” Candle added.

“There is that,” Adelulf allowed. “We’ve started insuring clients all over Horalia and I’m considering opening an office in Randona.”

“Today Horalia, tomorrow the world,” Silverwind commented. “Let’s get down to business. We really need to talk to you about what’s been going on here in Northerton.”

“The riots, huh? Yeah, they’ve been bothering me too. My men have been looking into them, but it’s not like last time. If there’s some sick bunch intent on worshiping demons, we haven’t found a sign of them. Instead we have mobs running around, and setting fires, looting stores, killing each other and what not.”

“Cutting in on your territory?” Candle asked nastily.

“Candle, I am a businessman,” Adelulf told him sternly. “I use violence when I must as a tool to convince people I am serious, but it is very bad for business to just go out and hurt or kill folks for the hell of it. Besides, I told you,” he added quickly, “I don’t do that anymore.” Candle lifted a disbelieving eyebrow at him, but didn’t respond otherwise.

“Any signs, sigils, or interesting graffiti?” Silverwind asked, bringing the conversation back to the matter at hand.

“Graffiti?” Adelulf repeated. “Funny you should ask that. Yes, there has been a new gang mark in chalk on some of the walls of the surviving building, but we cannot find out who is making those marks. I usually try to keep gangs from bothering my clients, after all.”

“Tell me about those marks,” Silverwind requested.

“It’s a twisty-turny thing that sort of turns the stomach just to look at it, even if the rain has washed most of it off. Isn’t that odd?”

“Terrifying,” Silverwind dead-panned. He grabbed a piece of paper and a pen from Adelulf’s desk. He dipped the pen in its inkwell and quickly sketched part of the symbol he believed Adelulf was describing. “Did it look a little like this?” he asked showing what he had drawn.

“A little, Silverwind,” Adelulf replied, “but not much. It doesn’t carry any of the nauseating feeling with it that the others do.”

“I should hope not,” Silverwind told him seriously. “I was very careful. Have you looked directly at one of those intact marks on the walls?”

“Not for more than a few seconds,” Adelulf admitted, “but I have, yes. Why? What are they?”

Silverwind didn’t answer at first, but gave Adelulf a piercing look. Candle knew he was looking for signs of demonic corruption and was tempted to take a look for himself, but resisted doing so. He had just enough experience along those lines to know enough not to barge in. If Adelulf was even partially under the influence of Arithan or Pohn, his interference would only make what Silverwind had to do harder.

Finally Silverwind’s glare softened and he told Adelulf, “You’re okay.”

“What were you looking for?”

“Signs of demonic possession,” Silverwind replied. “That mark is called the Bond of Aritos, and as you might guess from the name, it is a nasty piece of work. Often enough it is used to curse anyone who looks at or touches it, but this turns out not to be one of those times, fortunately.”

“It wasn’t like that last time we were here either,” Candle pointed out.

“True enough,” Silverwind allowed. “This seems to be related to the curse we were dealing with last time, so maybe that makes sense.”

“Maybe Pohn doesn’t know that trick or is just incapable of it, as opposed to what we saw on the Isle of Fire nearly a year later. Remember those pennies Vogt Andriy tried to pay you off with?”

“You may have something there,” Silverwind told Candle. “I never thought of that. I don’t think anyone ever did. Perhaps the variants of the Bond of Aritos are related to the five different demons. Each one using it a different way. Interesting notion. Well, it looks like we’re going to have a chance to find out. You might want to take notes. It sounds like an excellent topic for a masters thesis.”

“I wasn’t planning on being a demon expert,” Candle protested. “And I’m more interested in creation theory.”

“Save it for your wizard’s dissertation,” Silverwind advised him.

“Are you trying to get out of your promise to show me how you create something seemingly from nothing?” Candle asked suspiciously.

“I’ll keep my word, Candle, but you know you’d have trouble presenting a thesis involving a technique you aren’t supposed to use without close supervision. Do the master’s on demons if it turns out we learn enough. Then when you present your theory of creation for a wizard’s degree no one will bat an eye.”

“But still, specializing in demons in this day and age,” Candle grumbled.

“No one says you need to apply your thesis subject to what you do later on,” Silverwind pointed out.

“Vine did,” Candle pointed out.

“Oceanvine,” Silverwind responded with subtle emphasis on her name, “is very unusual in that respect.”

“Gentlemen,” Adelulf got their attention with a quiet cough. “Much as I hate to interrupt this important career guidance session, would you mind telling me just what this Bond of Aritos does?”

“Nothing good,” Silverwind told him flatly. “If you were to try to draw it accurately the most likely outcome would be that it would kill you by stripping your soul forcibly from your body. An accomplished mage of journeyman level would probably create a major disaster by doing it without instruction and guidance.”

“But what can it do?” Adelulf insisted on knowing.

“It can destroy lives,” Candle told him seriously. “It starts by the destroying the foolish mage who casts it then starts working on anyone and everyone else it can reach. Don’t try using it. Don’t try finding someone to use it for you. You’ll only be obliterated in the end.”

“I think you’re overstating the case,” Adelulf told him.

“No, I’m not,” Candle replied evenly. “But even if you find a way to use it without being killed instantly you’ll still suffer in the end, because Silverwind, Oceanvine and I will have to come back and settle the matter permanently.”

Eleven

“From everything we know,” Silverwind told Oceanvine and Candle late that afternoon back at the castle, “Pohn is too stupid to reactivate the curse in the way it has been here. His principal attribute is raw power, not intelligent subtlety.”

“So he isn’t working alone,” Candle commented. “We more or less knew that anyway.”

“You don’t sound particularly worried,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“I hide it well,” Candle shrugged. “It’s not that I’m not worried, it’s just that being worried isn’t likely to do me a lot of good, so why panic?”

“This is your fault, you know,” she told Silverwind. “All those years of training and now he’s a younger version of you.”

“Oh, I think you’ll find you had just as profound affect on my personality,” Candle chuckled. “but let’s get back to business.”

“Right,” Silverwind agreed. “So we have a fairly good notion that Pohn is not planning this alone. Actually I’m not sure planning is something he ever does. All the known manifestations of Pohn were planned and accomplished by people. There was very little of the coercion the other demons have been known to use.”

“Yes,” Oceanvine agreed, “but this time we can’t find the cult that is trying to raise him”

“That’s because I don’t think he actually needs raising this time,” Silverwind replied. “Somehow the reactivation of the curse has already allowed him to return.”

“If that’s the case,” Candle countered, “where is he? A monstrously large demon isn’t exactly hard to spot, especially when he’s stepping on buildings to clear a walking path for himself. You said it yourself, he isn’t know for his subtlety.”

“That’s why I know he isn’t working alone,” Silverwind replied. “Another, more clever demon must be doing the thinking for him, keeping him hidden for now while some more complex plan is hatched.”

“What I don’t get,” Candle admitted, “is why did he come back here? I mean there’s the whole world available isn’t there?”

“There is, but there are certain mystic paths that the demons can travel easily and one happens to lead here. Remember what I did on the Isle of Fire when Arithan fled?”

“Yeah. You said you made sure that if he wanted to return there, he would have to swim. You closed off the path he had used to get there and stopped the volcano from ever erupting again. So Arithan had gotten there by way of the volcano. There’s no volcano here.”

“Making the volcano extinct was a side effect of the spell,” Silverwind replied, “not something I was actually trying to do, and I don’t think the volcano was there because the path was. Maybe it was coincidence or maybe whatever force formed the path in the first place chose to place the path in the middle of the volcano’s throat, but most such paths are unrelated to the local geography.”

“What causes these paths and why haven’t you told me this much about them before?” Candle asked, a bit annoyed this was just coming out now.

“No one knows what causes them and I’d have told you this if I’d known back on the Isle of Fire, but I didn’t learn it myself until after you were at University. You aren’t the only one to have been studying these past few years, you know. When I discovered Arithan’s escape route I started looking into similar phenomena. After that it just never came up. I don’t know how many such paths there are, although a lot of them exit in the middles of the oceans.”

“The oceans?” Oceanvine asked. “What good is that?”

“How old are these paths?” Candle asked in turn. Silverwind shrugged to both of them.

“How old?” Oceanvine repeated.

“Well if they’re really old they may have terminated on land when they were new. That’s another really new theory. Tectonic drift. It seems that the surface of Maiyim is made up of something called tectonic plates and they bump and grind against each other. That’s what causes quakes. They also move; very, very slowly of course, but they do move. If those paths are really old, maybe millions of years old, the islands they once lead to have moved on, or maybe they just don’t exist any more. Mayim is a very dynamic system, they tell me, constantly in a state of change.”

“That’s a possibility,” Silverwind nodded. “You’ll have to tell me more about this tectonic drift sometime, but for now the thing to remember is one of these paths ends here in North Horalia. We can close it off, but we need to make sure Pohn, and whatever other demon may be here – I’m fairly sure it’s Arithan - have left first. We would only precipitate a greater disaster if we trap them here.

“Why didn’t you close the path nine years ago when we were here last?” Candle asked.

“I didn’t know it existed at the time and demons aren’t really known for returning to the scenes of their previous manifestations.”

“What makes you think the other demon is Arithan?” Oceanvine asked.

“I got a good look at the chalk-sign Bonds of Aritos. I recognized both Pohn and Arithan in them. It’s possible that all five demons are around, but they don’t seem to be manifesting so I doubt they are.”

“So it’s Pohn in league with Arithan,” Oceanvine concluded. “The most powerful teamed up with the most clever. Sounds daunting to say the least.”

“Indeed,” Silverwind agreed. “But how do we find them?”

“Those chalkmarks, maybe,” Oceanvine suggested.

“What do you mean?” It was Silverwind’s turn to ask questions.

“Law of contagion,” Oceanvine replied simply. “Any two items that have been in contact remain in contact forever unless acted on by an outside agent or force.”

“Ah!” Candle breathed. “Then there must be a way to trace those marks back to Pohn and Arithan. Um... how?”

“I don’t know yet, but we’ll figure it out together,” Oceanvine replied confidently.

An hour and a half later the three mages found themselves back in Northerton, standing in front of one of the walls on which the Bond of Aritos had been marked in chalk.

“Candle, it might be better if you just watch us this time,” Oceanvine suggested. “I was a few years older than you and nearly ready for my master’s before I tried analyzing a Bond of Aritos for the first time. Even then Silverwind kept me from hurting myself.”

“I’ve handled Arithan, himself,” Candle protested. “Surely this sign isn’t as dangerous.”

“It’s worse,” Silverwind told him. “The Bond is an insidious tool that can be designed to attack you on many different levels at once. Even Oceanvine and I are at risk whenever we try this. Do you remember how we examined that button on the Isle of Fire?”

“Yes,” Candle replied instantly. “Oceanvine used a micro-ward...”

“That word again,” Oceanvine muttered, shaking her head.

“It’s an adequate description,” Candle said defensively. “Anyway she used a micro-ward to open the multi-layered aura like a flower bud so we could see what was hiding beneath the surface of the spell.”

“Right,” Silverwind agreed. “Well, the Bond of Aritos generally has so complex an aura that the spell on the button will seem simplistic in comparison. Vine, why don’t you set up a protective ward so Candle can watch what we’re doing?”

“Silverwind, dear,” Oceanvine began tightly.

“Oceanvine,” he corrected himself quickly. She relaxed and did as he had asked. “Excellent,” he complimented her. “My turn now. I’ll just use some of your micro-wards... You know, Candle is right, that is a good descriptive name for them. Anyway I’ll start opening the Bond’s layers so we can see just what this one is designed to do.”

He did so slowly and carefully, pulling back layers one at a time. The first ten layers were there just to protect the Bond from interference, but once they were opened he spotted aspects of the spell that were meant to kill. “Vine, please extend your ward to cover me as well.”

“I think we’ll need to detach some of what you’ve already opened,” she commented as her ward stretched out to shield him.

“That’s a bit more than I care to risk at the moment,” Silverwind replied.

“Gods!” Candle swore. “I see what you mean about the complexity of the Bond, and I think you’re using the wrong metaphor to study it. This isn’t so much a flower bud as it is an incredibly complex knot and so far all you’ve managed to untie is the first loop or two. The rest of it, though is too intricately bound up in itself to go much further. In fact you’re very close to making it come apart explosively.”

“I see that, Candle,” Silverwind replied, “that’s why I had Oceanvine extend her ward.”

“I’d leave it as it is, though,” Candle warned him. “There’s a summons involved along with an enslavement charm and a few other spells I can’t even guess at. Better just to banish the Bond and forget about analyzing it any further.”

“You don’t have much faith in Oceanvine’s ward?” Silverwind asked archly.

“I don’t have that much faith in my wards,” Oceanvine told him.

“Nonsense,” Silverwind scoffed. “I have this completely under control. Watch.” He went back to work but soon learned that Candle was right. After the first few layers all the rest were interlinked with various triggers that would set them all off if he made the slightest error. Several times over the next few minutes the whole construct nearly went off in his face just as Candle had predicted, but through the force of his own will, he managed to keep it together as he studied the spell. “It’s mostly enslavement on a number of levels with a lot of redundancy. There’s more of Arithan than Pohn in this, although it is a composite job.”

“And the summoning spell in it?” Candle asked. “Which demon will be called when you let go of it.”

“I haven’t looked at that yet,” Silverwind admitted, “But do you really think I can’t put it back together?”

“I really think you can’t,” Candle confirmed. “I think you’ve unwound it too much to expect it to be stable, I can see how you’re holding it together and I doubt it can be banished completely at this point. Since you don’t want to let the enslavement component released, I figure we’ll have to take our chances with the summons.”

“An excellent analysis, Candle,” Silverwind complemented him, “but you fail to account for the abilities of a wizard. Watch and be amazed.”

“I’ll watch and be prepared,” Candle replied.

Silverwind worked on putting the spell components of the Bond of Aritos back together and discovered that Candle was right after all. There was no way to stabilize it. He tried deactivating components individually, but discovered that the more he worked on it, the worse the situation got. Finally, he realized there was no preventing it, he’d have to cut his losses and keep the enslavement spells from going off, but would be unable to prevent the summons from calling whichever demon it was designed to.

“I really hate it when you’re right,” he grunted at Candle.

“This time doesn’t please me all that much either,” Candle countered. “Go ahead and do what you have to. Oceanvine and I will be as ready as possible.”

“All right,” Silverwind told him. “Watch out.” Silverwind was capable of casting many spells simultaneously, but even he had his limits. He stopped all the enslavement components of the Bond, and for a moment thought he’d be able to cancel the summons as well, but the Bond of Aritos was already coming apart into a thousand different strands and one was related to the demon-spawned disease that had killed the old duke. As he took care of that the summons activated. “Well, I got everything else,” he reported, “But I think we may want to put a bit of distance between us and this spot.” As he looked around he saw Oceanvine and Candle were already running away. *Good idea!* He thought and promptly followed suit.

They got to the end of the block and around the corner before stopping to carefully look back. So far nothing was happening but they all knew that was too good to last.

“Nice try,” Candle commented. “I think you almost did it. So, who’s coming? How long do you think we have? And any suggestions what we should try?”

“Two demons; Pohn and Arithan, as we suspected, probably a few minutes, and anything you can think

of,” Silverwind replied. “This is like last time we were here and at the Isle of Fire. Try to be imaginative, but don’t stint on the power. There is no such thing as too powerful when fighting a demon.”

“I know I’ve heard that before,” Oceanvine mused. “So we get to practice creative mayhem?”

“You’ve got it,” Silverwind replied. “Let’s split up and hit them from three different directions.”

“I’ll go around the block this way,” Candle volunteered, indicating the direction behind him, “and hit them from the other side.” He took off.

“And I’ll cross the street and go around to get a shot at them from opposite Candle,” Silverwind decided. “You work from here, Vine.”

“No,” she stopped him. “I’ll go that way. Candle and I make a pretty good team when we’re not sniping at each other and I know the way he thinks. We’ll whip-saw them and leave you to pick up the pieces.” She gave him a quick kiss and ran across the street before he could stop her.

“So much for a battle plan,” Silverwind mused. “Oh well, I wouldn’t have wanted to go into this over-planned.” He poked his head back around the corner in time to see the cobblestones glowing a dull red in front of where the chalk-marked Bond of Aritos had been. The glow became brighter and soon turned orange and then yellow. There was a tinge of green to the light when the stones suddenly exploded leaving a deep hole in the street out of which the immense figure of the demon Pohn was rising. There was no sign of Arithan yet, but Oceanvine and Candle were already going to work.

Oceanvine was hurling a sustained bolt of lightning at Pohn’s head, while Candle was doing something near the demon’s midsection. Not wanting to get in their way he examined what Candle was doing and saw he was attempting to freeze the demon by transferring the heat of his body to what was left of the pavement.

Not bad, Silverwind thought to himself. *That just might work*. He readied himself but held off for just the right moment. He watched while Pohn reeled under the dual attack and then when the moment seemed right, he sent a blast of raw telekinetic force at Pohn. The demon was thrown back a full block up the street. He fell on his back and didn’t move. For a moment nothing happened and then the hole in the street glowed yellowish green again and Arithan came shooting up and out.

Oceanvine was the quickest off the mark and hit him with the same lightning that had taken Pohn by surprise and Candle quickly followed with his freezing spell. Arithan was ready for that however, and used a ward to absorb the energy from both spells and sent some of it to Pohn. The gigantic demon stirred and started sitting up.

Arithan cast a curse at both Candle and Oceanvine, but they too used wards to protect themselves. Silverwind saw bits of bricks and mortar flying as the blast from the demon’s spell was deflected.

Silverwind gathered himself and used telekinesis to push Arithan back into the hole and then close the hole in over him. The demon screamed in pain and the stones that paved the street grew hotter and began to melt. “Silverwind!” he screamed, and suddenly the wall next to the wizard began to crack. Silverwind got away from it just in time as it collapsed over where he had been standing a moment earlier, but then he tripped over a section of cobbles as they lifted up a few inches.

Oceanvine tried fire on Arithan and Candle used telekinesis of his own to hurl loose bricks and cobbles rapidly. That managed to distract Arithan, giving Silverwind a chance to get back up. The wizard was

about to try something else when he was distracted by Pohn's roar. The great demon was back up and in action and running up the street. Taking a page out of Arithan's book, Silverwind cause Pohn to trip and fall on his partner, Arithan. Then all three mages cast spells at the pair of demons.

This time, however, Arithan reacted first and had an impenetrable ward around him and Pohn. Pohn, didn't bother standing up. Instead he got to his knees and slammed his fist on the street. The ground shook and Oceanvine and Candle were knocked off their feet.

Buildings collapsed around them and bricks went flying everywhere. One hit Oceanvine's leg and knocked her to the ground. Her head hit a stone and she was knocked out. Candle was dazed as well, but he got back up quickly, even though a sudden wave of dizziness threatened to knock him back down again. That gave him an idea.

Silverwind, however, was still attacking both Arithan and Pohn with a vast array of spells, none of which had any effect save to give Candle a minute or so of respite. Candle cast another spell at the two demons that caused them both to put their hands to their heads and howl. Silverwind used this opportunity to try something of his own.

Candle watched as Silverwind reached into his pocket and pulled out a mage stone. It glowed green and Candle knew it for the Wizard's master's stone. The journeyman returned his attention to the spell that was making the demons howl and so he missed what Silverwind did next, but suddenly a great burst of green light flooded the area and seemed to congeal around Pohn and Arithan. The screams from the demons grew ever more agonized and their arms started thrashing around.

Pohn's right arm struck Arithan and sent him flying three blocks down the street, but before he even landed, Pohn seemed to sink back into the earth and disappeared. Arithan rolled as he hit the street and still encased in the agonizing green energy he got to his feet and turned to face Silverwind. For a long moment, he looked like he was about to renew his attack, but instead he pointed his hand downward in the direction Pohn had disappeared for a few moments, then turned and ran with impossible speed.

"Where'd he go?" Candle shouted to Silverwind.

Silverwind ran up the street to where Candle and Oceanvine were. "He's headed north at the moment," Silverwind reported. "If you look, you'll see the string of his travel spell."

"Oh yeah," Candle said a moment later. "Is he really over ten miles away already?"

"Yes," Silverwind replied simply.

"I see another string on him too; a very dim one, hard to notice," Candle observed.

"A tracking spell," Silverwind told him. "I slipped it on him in the confusion. We'll be able to follow him even when he stops using magic to travel. Keep an eye on him while I work here." He closed his eyes for a moment and concentrated on sealing off the mystic path by which Pohn and Arithan had arrived. It was a very wide path and several miles wide, but a few minutes later he opened his eyes again and told Candle, "They won't be getting here that way ever again."

"Good," Candle nodded, his eyes still shut as he tracked Arithan's progress. "I think Arithan is headed for Northport. Do you think he's going to wreak havoc there as well?"

"No, I think he's going to steal a boat and sail somewhere else," Silverwind told him. "Keep watching

while I see how Oceanvine is.”

Wennil Archipelago

One

“He’s headed north,” Silverwind reported to Jason and Galiena the next morning. “We’re pretty sure he stole a boat, probably a pilot’s boat, but we don’t really know where he’s going.”

“Good thing he’s leaving a trail,” Candle added.

“I don’t really care where he’s headed,” Galiena replied, “so long as he stays away from North Horalia.”

“That’s not really a proper attitude, Gali,” Jason admonished her. “We should care. We know what it’s like to have a demon destroying our land.”

“Happily you don’t have to, however,” Silverwind cut in. “Candle, Oceanvine and I are going to have to track him down.”

“Will you be leaving immediately?” Galiena asked.

“How is Oceanvine?” Jason asked simultaneously.

“We’ll give Vine another few days to recover. She’s a bit bruised and I’d like the pain to subside. That broken leg will slow her down for a few weeks, but she would skin Candle and me alive if we left her behind. Attached as I am to my skin, I think we’ll take her along.”

“We’ll probably have to tie her to her seat in the carriage anyway,” Candle laughed. “But most of the trip will be on a ship so if Arithan is going far enough, she’ll probably be recovered by the time we get there.”

“And if not, at least she won’t be in the pain she is in at the moment,” Silverwind added.

“But if you wait, won’t the trail grow cold?” Jason asked.

“It might, but so long as Arithan is using magic to travel, we can follow him. The chance of his traveling by more conventional methods is slim. Using magic is like breathing to him. He does it practically without thinking. Don’t worry, we’ll find him.”

“That’s what I’m worried about,” Candle muttered.

It was nearly a week before the doctor attending Oceanvine would clear her for travel.

“That was really your fault, Vine,” Candle jibed as they traveled to Northport..

“Oceanvine,” she growled irritably. Secretly, however, Oceanvine was pleased. If Candle thought she was well enough to tease, then she must be as well as she thought. He had been depressingly thoughtful while they were still at Castle North. “What do you mean?” she demanded.

“Well, he was waiting for you to show signs of recovery, some form of cheerfulness. You know? Like a smile? What he didn’t know was that you are just naturally irascible.”

“Irascible,” she repeated tightly.

“You know; cranky, grumpy, and quick to anger? Irascible. The word suits you perfectly.

“Candle, you really do like living dangerously, don’t you?” Silverwind asked lightly.

“It livens up an otherwise dull journey,” he shrugged.

“Try not to make it too interesting,” the wizard suggested. “I could get hit in the crossfire.”

“Anyway, as long as you were being grumpy,” Candle turned back to Oceanvine, “the doctor figured you were still too sick to travel. How did you get him to release you? Did you threaten him?” Oceanvine twitched at that. “Oh ho! You did, didn’t you? What did you threaten to turn him into? A frog or a pumpkin?”

“If you must know,” Oceanvine voice grated, “I offered to break his leg.”

“That’s our Oceanvine,” Candle crowed. “Subtle as a sledgehammer and twice as nasty!”

“I only wanted to demonstrate that a broken leg isn’t enough to keep me or anyone else bedridden,” Oceanvine protested.

“I’m sure you could have found a less violent way to do it,” Candle laughed. “I’d have just levitated around the room a few times. Failing that, hobbling around on those crutches should have been enough to get his attention.”

“It didn’t occur to me, okay?” Oceanvine asked through gritted teeth. “I doubt it would have occurred to you either. No, you would have tried to mend your own broken leg or tried to create some new form of splint.”

“Better than bullying the doctor trying to help me,” Candle replied. “How’s your head, by the way. Still aching?”

Oceanvine looked at Candle and decided he was asking seriously. “Better, thanks. Those Granomish pain pills everyone is using these days...”

“They’re called ‘aspirin,’” Candle supplied.

“Aspirin, then. They seem to do the trick and I don’t need them as much as I did a few days ago. I just hope I don’t get seasick when we find a ship headed in the right direction.”

“Don’t know why you should,” Candle replied. “You never have before.”

“I haven’t had my head knocked around like this either,” she pointed out.

“Well it won’t do any good to worry about it,” Candle shrugged. “I’m more concerned about how we’re going to fight Arithan when we catch up to him. Is it really true that you can’t defeat a demon the same way twice?”

“Superstition,” Silverwind told him. “Demons are as fallible as anyone, but they are also one hell of a lot older too, so they have more experience than we’ll ever have and it’s very hard to hit them successfully with the same thing twice. Just like you can block nearly anything if you know it’s coming, so can they. That’s why Arithan wasn’t able to hit me with that nightmare trick once I’d finally fought myself free back on the Isle of Fire. I knew he’d try it again and that time I was prepared.

“Still, in spite of my taunting, he’s as clever as he is mean,” Silverwind continued, “and I doubt I could get close enough to him again to hit him with an eightbase bat, although if I could, that would probably work. If you can put enough power behind a strike, even the best wards wouldn’t protect him and most of his protections aren’t on the physical plane. At least they weren’t last time.”

“He was doing a good job of it this time,” Candle reported. “I was throwing enough rocks at him that something should have hit if he was open. Pohn was easy in comparison.”

“In comparison, Pohn is easy to catch by surprise,” Oceanvine remarked.

“I think he has experienced eternity in a state of perpetual puzzlement,” Silverwind commented. “But he is very powerful. It’s a good thing he doesn’t have Arithan’s intelligence or we might not have had a chance.”

“We’ll have to meet him again though, won’t we?” Candle asked. “I mean we drove him off from Horalia, but we didn’t imprison him in his island.”

“Only the gods can do that,” Silverwind told him. “All we’re required to do is send the demons to them for imprisonment.”

“And Aritos, himself, will destroy Arithan,” Candle added. “Yeah, I had that dream too, but did we send Pohn to the gods so they could imprison him or did we just drive him off the island?”

“Good question,” Silverwind admitted. “Eventually we’ll have to get an answer, but for now we know where Arithan is, more or less, but don’t know where Pohn went. So, we’ll have to continue chasing Arithan down.”

“Where is he now?” Oceanvine asked.

“Still headed north, although he’s no longer moving as quickly as he was the other night,” Silverwind replied.

“That sort of speed must use a lot of energy,” Candle opined. “He knows he’s way ahead of us now so he’s probably taking time to recuperate, or set up a new trap.”

“Running a pilot’s boat for several thousand miles is more than even a demon can do without a lot of breaks,” Silverwind added. And he’s still moving; approaching the Wennil Archipelago at the moment. I doubt he’s headed there – Castelon is the only city in that island group - probably trying to get to the Isle of Fire, though he may be planning to turn toward Granom. We’ll know more later. Anyway, there’s a good chance we can catch up to him in the Wennil area if we can catch a ride on a fast enough ship.”

“Maybe we should have gone to Kanaduin again,” Oceanvine suggested. “As I recall, we went there last time because it was our best chance to catch a ship bound for Querna.”

“True enough,” Silverwind allowed, “but Jason told me that Northport has been growing in activity lately with ships bound for Wennil, Granom, and the Isle of Fire. It’s not quite as big a port as Kanaduin, but the harbor is deeper and the facilities more modern than on Kanu. Maybe we can ride on one of those new steamships.”

“I’m not sure I would enjoy that,” Oceanvine replied. “I’m not all that fond of the smell of burning coal and those engines must be loud.”

“It’s not so bad, so I’m told,” Candle told her, “so long as your cabin isn’t too near the engines. And the steamers are faster than most sail-driven ships.”

“We do need a plan for the next time we face Arithan, though,” Oceanvine said, bring them back to the subject that was never far from their minds. “I’ve been thinking about what you said about how creation spells theoretically work, Candle. You said that Wizard Onestone speculated that it was done by reducing matter entirely to energy and then back again to matter? Is that right?”

“That’s what he thought. The transition would have to be instantaneous and almost perfect. You don’t want any stray energy being emitted,” Candle told her.

“Why not?” she asked.

“Have you studied chemistry much?” Candle asked.

“I had an introductory class in the subject. It was a prerequisite for several others I took later,” she replied.

“Remember the periodic table? Some of the elements - uranium, radium, plutonium and others - are radioactive. You’re aware of the dangers involved with radioactivity?”

“Of course,” Oceanvine replied. “Are you saying that’s the sort of energy in such a spell?”

“Could be, a side effect anyway.” Candle shrugged. “If so, the amazing thing is that Silverwind leaves little or no stray harmful radiation, because it wouldn’t take much to kill anyone within range.”

“How big a range?” Oceanvine asked.

“Depends on how much radiation there is, I think.”

“Not all radiation is harmful, Candle,” Silverwind reminded him. “Visible light is radiation, so is heat.”

“Maybe so, but I don’t see you producing massively bright flashes of light when you do that or flash frying yourself either,” Candle pointed out.

“But if a creation spell is really the conversion of matter to energy and then back again, what’s to stop us from only doing half of that. Take, say, an ounce of dirt or rock and convert it to pure energy and direct it at Arithan?”

“Um, good cautious survival instinct comes to mind,” Candle replied. “Okay, let’s assume the energy you create is entirely heat and let’s also assume you can actually direct it toward Arithan. You may well burn Arithan to white ash, but I think you’ll also do a job on any trees, bushes and buildings in that general direction as well. Not only that, keep in mind that heat is a form of radiation. Radiation can be absorbed, which is what you want, admittedly, but it can also be reflected so even if you can direct it, a lot of it may well reflect back at you. Trust me, you’ll have a deeper tan than you ever bargained for.”

“How about if I convert it to electricity and send it as a lightning bolt?” she countered.

“There are easier and less risky ways of doing that,” Candle countered.

“Actually, I think that’s how I do it,” Silverwind cut in. “It’s easy enough to call down a bolt of lightning from a passing thunderhead, but it’s amazing how seldom you have a lightning storm going on when you need one.”

“Really? Candle asked.

“I think so,” Silverwind repeated. “I’ve never actually thought about where the energy came from, but producing lightning is pretty much the same spell as producing something made of matter, although it takes a lot less skill to produce lightning, most master mages can do that if it suits them.”

“I suppose it’s easier to convert matter into a uniform sort of energy,” Candle mused. “Hey? Where does the energy come from to produce fire?”

Silverwind smiled, “The way I taught you, from within yourself.”

“Oh,” Candle replied. “Good. I think. Although using converted matter as an energy source...”

“Would produce the results you’ve already warned me about,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Oh yeah. I’ll have to think about it a bit more, I guess,” Candle admitted. “I guess I’ll get back to my creation exercises. Are you sure I’m doing them correctly?” he asked Silverwind.

Two

They arrived in Northport on the second day after making their farewells to Jason and Galiena, but were held up another three because they had to wait for a ship going their way. They eventually booked passage on the *Pride of Niah*, bound for Castelon in the Wennil Archipelago and then back to Northport.

“We’ll have to find another ship to go on from there,” Silverwind commented as they left the inn they’d been staying at.

“That’s shouldn’t be too difficult,” Oceanvine replied. “Castelon is supposed to be a fairly active port, being in a good midway location between Emmine, Granom and Rjalkatyp as I recall.”

“That’s the way I hear it. We might have stopped there on our way back from the Isle of Fire if we hadn’t found a ship bound directly for Emmine.” Candle put in. “I must say this is not a bad little city at all, is it? Not completely unlike Keesport. Very clean.”

“That’s not too surprising,” Oceanvine told him. “Duke Jason was very impressed with the way Keesport assigns clean-up duty as a punishment for drunkenness, brawling, and other minor crimes. He planned to convince his father to institute such a program throughout the duchy. From the look and smell of things, I’d say he did just that.”

The *Pride of Niah* was a bark, a three-masted ship with square rigging on the fore and main masts and fore and aft rigging on the mizzen mast. The fore and main masts were rigged for five courses of sail and the captain, a tall man, originally from Arnd, claimed she could do twelve knots on an average day. Oceanvine privately thought he was exaggerating, but not by much.

They let Candle handle the piloting duties out of Northport. Oceanvine kept an eye on him, but didn’t need to watch very closely. He had picked up the trick while guiding the *Skate* into Tarnsa and could now perform like an old hand. Even Captain Harlan told Candle he had done a better job than many professional pilots, having been especially impressed by the speed with which he was able to clear the harbor.

“That’s nothing,” Candle confided to Oceanvine while on their way to the captain’s cabin for start-of-voyage drinks, “I could have moved this tub fast enough to pass one of those new steamers.”

“I’m sure you could have, but she might have broken up in the process. Besides, how long do you think you could have kept it up? An hour or two?”

“About that, yeah,” Candle agreed. “And I would have slept for a week afterward.”

“Then what would have been the point?” Oceanvine asked.

“To see if I really could do it.”

“I don’t think Captain Harlan would have appreciated having to pick his ship out of the ocean one plank at a time.”

“I suppose not,” Candle sighed. “But it would make for interesting races with pilots’ boats. I wonder why no one at the University ever thought of that. It would be a great exercise in control and a lot of fun for everyone. I’ll have to suggest it.”

Oceanvine looked at him for a moment and Candle was unable to figure out what she was thinking until she said, “You know, that might be fun at that. How fast do you think those pilot boats could go?”

“I don’t know,” Candle replied. “Thirty, forty knots, maybe more on a long straight course.”

“A straight course? Yes,” Oceanvine considered, “that’s one way. I was also thinking of more complex courses with lots of turns, maybe in a closed circuit with multiple laps to be completed.”

“That sounds good too,” Candle told her and he opened the door to the captain’s cabin. “We’ll have to try it out a few times before making our suggestions.”

“What are you two up to now?” Silverwind asked. He was already holding his usual rum and sourfruit juice. Candle explained his idea. “Pilot boats aren’t built for speed,” Silverwind replied when Candle finished, “You’ll want to design a more streamlined hull for your races.”

“We can start with pilot boats and go on from there,” Candle shrugged and helped himself to a rum and sourfruit juice.

“I thought you didn’t like that,” Oceanvine commented.

“It’s growing on me,” Candle replied. “Captain Harlan, there have been reports of piracy on the inner seas here in Emmine. Has there been similar activity on the outer seas?”

“Aye, there has,” Harlan admitted, “but I’ve not seen any. This has been a quiet route these past years and just as well since we have no ship’s guns. I’ve tried to tell the owners we need them, but they’re still clutching the very first pennies they ever owned and have no interest in spending them. That’s why I like shipping with mages. Sure you get a free trip, but I’m far more secure with you three aboard.”

The voyage was a quiet one for the next two weeks. Candle and Oceanvine continued their studies in creation spells. They were still a long way from being able to match Silverwind’s feats in that quarter, but the wizard assured them they were making excellent progress and confided to Oceanvine one evening that in a pinch they could probably create something simple even now, but that the exercises would continue to do them some good for a while yet.

Oceanvine also started writing her wizard’s dissertation during that voyage. Like the master’s thesis it involved wards, but whereas the thesis had dealt with a new type of ward construction, Oceanvine now understood many new implications of her invention that opened a whole new field of magical technology. This was far more than being able to build walls of magical energy with embedded trigger spells. As Candle had demonstrated, her new class of wards could be miniaturized to an extent never seen before, and Oceanvine had discovered that the wards themselves, when properly harnessed, could also function as a power source. This was more than a new technique and she knew the work was worthy of a wizard’s degree at any university.

In the evenings and early mornings she also spent some time helping Captain Harlan take his navigational sightings and learned that everything she knew about that science was from a Granomish point of view. The basis by which those readings were taken and interpreted were the same, but human navigators preferred to sight different stars and the instruments differed as well. Granomish navigators used a sextant to take their sightings, but human and Orentan navigators used a similar instrument known as the quintant because it was based on a fifth of a circle instead of a sixth.

Oceanvine found herself wondering why she had never noticed that while sailing with Jocey on the *Skate*, but realized that she had never sailed on the *Skate* beyond sight of land. Checking their latitude and longitude was not as critical when you could keep track of passing landmarks.

As they crossed the equator, the ship was brought to rest in the gently rolling sea in order to hold the gentle hazing ceremony reserved for those sailors who were “crossing the line” to the northern hemisphere for the first time.

The quiet was broken, however, as they neared the southernmost islands of the Wennil Archipelago. They were north of Meledirin when the cry, “Serp ho!” suddenly rang out from the crow’s nest. Oceanvine had been sunbathing on the poop deck, but Candle and Silverwind had been below and were delayed on their way up on deck. Meanwhile the sailors were scrambling to battle stations and Oceanvine found herself wishing she knew how Silverwind had tricked the last serp they had encountered into thinking it was the mating season when all the large, ocean-going snakes met under the Arctic ice. Instead she started erecting a very large ward, hoping she could harness enough power in it to prevent the serp from penetrating it.

She spotted the approaching serp off the starboard beam when she heard, “Serp ho on the port bow!”

“Two of them?” she asked aloud, although there was no one nearby who could answer her. She saw Candle and Silverwind arrive on deck finally and watched as they headed for the bow. She wanted to join them, but was preoccupied maintaining her ward along the starboard side of the ship. She had faced a serp once before, and knew them to be tremendously large creatures, but this was a giant among giants at least twice the length of the only serp she had ever seen. She was taken by surprise when its long body suddenly erupted out of the ocean water and got over the top edge of her ward long enough to take a swipe at the main mast, snapping it off a few feet from the top. The top of the mast, the sail and the boom and spar it was attached to fell downward but were held aloft by the rest of the ship’s rigging. Oceanvine quickly adjusted her ward to be even taller than the serp was long.

Meanwhile at the bow, Silverwind and Candle were attempting to handle the other serp. “So that’s a serp,” Candle commented dryly. “I don’t imagine there are too many like him around are there?”

“Could be a her,” Silverwind replied idly, “but no, last I heard there were probably no more than a thousand or so all over Maiyim.”

“Ah. That probably explains why they’re on One Maiyim’s endangered list. And they say mages have a harmful effect on the environment. Some of those jerks ought to try leaving the cities occasionally and see the environment out here for themselves for a change. I also wasn’t too enthralled with the militant stand their agents who do work outside the city started taking. ‘Flounders and sole being over fished, let’s blow up a few fishing boats!’ I wouldn’t mind being on one or two of those fishing boats, though. That might up the stakes for One Maiyim. I notice they haven’t been complaining about the new coal and oil burning ships yet, probably because a lot of those ships can shoot back. Whoa! Lookit the size of that monster! What’s holding it back?”

“I am,” Silverwind replied dryly, “and it is not easy.” Candle glanced at the wizard; as usual he wasn’t showing any signs of stress. “I don’t suppose you’d like to help?” As Silverwind asked that, the tail of the serp whipped around and wrapped itself around the ship’s bowsprit. The ship shuddered and rocked as the bowsprit started cracking. There was another crack high above as the foremast broke somewhere high up. Suddenly, the tail unwrapped itself and the serp backed off two hundred feet or so.

“What did you do?” Silverwind asked.

“I tickled it,” Candle laughed.

“I never knew serps were ticklish,” murmured Silverwind. “Well, here’s another trick, it might even be related, but before I try it, do your best to hold it in place.” Candle did so. He wasn’t able to get it perfectly still; the tail kept whipping madly back and forth, but the serp was now far enough away from the ship that it couldn’t damage it further. “There,” Silverwind said a few moments later. “You can let her go now.” Candle did so and the serp immediately started swimming away to the north. “Let’s go help Oceanvine, it sounds like she’s having trouble with hers,” Silverwind suggested and then took off without waiting for Candle to reply.

As Oceanvine had feared her ward was insufficient to keep the first serp off the ship. It pierced her ward, albeit with difficulty and broke the mizzen mast about halfway up so what was left of the mast and sail was hanging out over the portside gunwales. The damage on the fore and mizzen masts had what was left of the main mast listing dangerously as well.

After that her strategy was to use her wards to fence with the serp. They were smaller but stronger constructs that she moved in the way of the serp whenever it made a move. It was working, but she was tiring rapidly.

"It's about time you got here," Oceanvine gasped as Silverwind arrived.

"Sorry," he replied. "Had to repel a boarder at the other end of the ship. Candle's come up with something new. Watch this." He reached out with his mind and tickled the remaining serp in the same way Candle had. The reaction was not what he expected, however. The serp roared and renewed its attacks.

"Cute!" Oceanvine told him as she beat the serp back yet again. "Can you make him do tricks or are you just trying to kill me from exhaustion?"

"Sorry," Silverwind replied, "it worked on the other one."

"The other one was female," Candle told him.

"Of course," Silverwind muttered. "Never mind." He stared at the serp while Candle helped Oceanvine hold it at bay. Then, finally it followed the other serp northward.

Seeing it swim out of sight, Captain Harlan had his sailors stand down from their battle stations and instructed his first mate to organize repair parties.

"Well, enough of that for a while," Silverwind sighed. "How are you, dear?" he asked Oceanvine. "How's your leg? It's only been a month."

"The leg is fine, but..." Oceanvine started to say just before slumping to the deck.

Three

"She's just tired," Silverwind reported to Candle later. "Vine does things the hard way sometimes. She likes using wards, but the powerful ones take a lot out of you. Well you know that, and so does she, but she goes ahead and does it anyway."

"I have wondered about that," Candle commented. "Telekenesis is easier against a single target. It's more concentrated so you don't need as much power to accomplish the same job. Against multiple targets or if you aren't sure where an attacker will strike though, a ward is better."

"Yes, but she likes wards," Silverwind replied. "Anyway you know we're catching up to Arithan."

"I'd have guessed that even without your tracking spell. I mean, two serps? Not up to his usual level of subtlety."

"I imagine he's more concerned with making sure we're dead. He'll try something else next."

As though that was a cue, a klaxon rang out from on deck. Silverwind and Candle bolted up through the hatch to find out what the commotion was now. All around them crewmen were lighting torches and running to the gunwales. One of them offered a torch to Silverwind but he conjured a small ball of fire in

his hand and waved the man off.

“Oh boy,” Candle muttered, “predatory seaweed again. Oceanvine will be sorry she missed her namesake.”

“Now this is a situation where a ward will help,” Silverwind commented.

“I remember the last time,” Candle replied. “I also remember that it didn’t work all that well.”

“It kept the oceanvine from actually touching the ship,” Silverwind returned as they made their way to the port gunwale.

“A little too late for that,” Candle pointed out. The thick green seaweed had already climbed its way up the side of the ship and was attempting to engulf the rest of it.

“Change of plan,” Silverwind decided. “Start burning, we need to get it away from the ship. You,” he called to a sailor, “how did it get this close before there was an alarm?” He conjured fire and threw it at the oceanvine.

“It was just suddenly all around us,” the man replied, panicked. “It just rose to the surface and we were in the middle.”

“That doesn’t sound right,” Candle commented, casting a spell that threw a jet of flame at the attacking seaweed. “Oceanvine floats, always. It doesn’t sink and then rise up to engulf its prey.”

“Not until now in any case,” Silverwind replied. He modified his own fire spell to mimic the one Candle was using and found it was more effective. “Good idea this,” he commended his former apprentice.

Candle was about to reply with thanks, but it became apparent that the oceanvine was getting ahead of the sailors on the other side of the ship. “Stay here,” he said instead, “I’ll get over to the starboard side.” He ran off. The entire crew was fighting off the predatory plant along the gunwales so he was able to cross over without having to bull his way through a crowd. The sailors weren’t doing well here, and he was afraid of causing damage to the ship, but saw no alternative. Better to risk the damage rather than lose the entire ship.

His fire quickly beat the oceanvine back from the gunwale and away from most of the starboard side, but he had to extinguish the flames of the burning gunwale before stopping to look around. The oceanvine was pulling the ship downward at the bow and from the shouts at the poop deck, it was threatening to get a hold on the stern as well.

“Bow first,” he muttered to himself and started trying to make his way forward. The going wasn’t as easy as it had been on crossing the beam of the ship. The way was blocked with frantic sailors waving torches at tendrils of oceanvine, and by stays and sheets that were still in the process of being repaired after the serp attack.

The bow was already on fire from the sailors’ efforts when he finally got there, so he didn’t hesitate to spray fire indiscriminately over the area. The oceanvine fell back as though in pain and Candle quickly extinguished the fire so he could continue forward to give the plant a good blasting. He was about to do so when a great wall of fire suddenly formed in front of him, incinerating the oceanvine ahead of the ship. Looking around he saw Silverwind a few feet to the right.

“Nice one!” Candle commented, but was prevented from saying any more by screams from the stern of the ship and a sudden aftward tilt that indicated the motile seaweed was now pulling the ship down by the stern. “I’ll get it!” he shouted to Silverwind and started shouldering his way to the ship’s stern. Along the way he saw the oceanvine was making headway up the side again. He paused to form wall of fire similar to Silverwind’s and the plant dropped back again.

“Whew!” he said to himself, “Not as easy as he makes it look.” Candle felt a bit dizzy, but continued onward. Climbing up to the poop deck, he found the oceanvine well over the aft rail and spreading across the deck and up the stays and into the rigging. The situation was further complicated by the fact that several sailors had been engulfed by the omnivorous plant. Four were still struggling, but two were obviously dead, crushed by the constriction of the plant’s tendrils. He could only use fire in small, but concentrated blasts.

Using caution, he cut the surviving men out of the oceanvine and let their comrades get them out of harm’s way. He tried to get to the two dead sailors, but they had already disappeared into the mass of greenery. There was a loud and dangerous creaking sound coming from midship. Turning around, Candle saw nothing out of the ordinary, but feared the ship was on the verge of being torn in two.

Turning back, he started spraying fire at the oceanvine again. Suddenly another great wall of flame formed just aft of the stern and Candle knew Silverwind had arrived. The wall cut the mass of greenery in two allowing Candle to destroy the remnants still on the ship, but in the process several cables burned through and whipped across the deck. From the shouts, Candle realized that some crewmen had been hit, but he kept his mind on the matter at hand and kept blasting the oceanvine until there was none left on the stern of the ship. Then he extinguished the fires. Another cable snapped, but from what Candle could see, no one had been hit this time.

“Not too bad,” Silverwind told him. “There are just a few patches left. Let’s work our ways down the sides and finish this up.” Candle nodded and started making his way foreward again. It took another half hour, but by the time he met Silverwind again at the bow, there was no bit of the seaweed left apart from a few harmless patches a few feet across.

“Oh gods!” Candle swore. “Look at what’s left of the ship now!” There was smoke all around them from where fires still smoldered. Many of the sails had black-rimmed holes in them and Candle could see that repairs to the rigging had been set way back. This was a ship that had barely survived a battle.

“Fire control,” Silverwind commented. Candle started to run back down the starboard side of the ship, but the wizard held him back. “No, we can do this from here.” He closed his eyes, a sure sign that he was as tired as Candle was, and a great column of seawater rose up from the ocean to the port and started spraying down on the ship. A few minutes later the fire was out and Silverwind released the spell. “I wouldn’t want to do that everyday,” he commented.

“Silverwind?” It was Oceanvine, just struggling to get herself back on deck. “What’s been going on? Emmine! What a mess!”

Just then there was a strange groaning sound from the hold. “What now?” Candle asked. The answer came a moment later when a great explosion dealt the *Pride of Niah* its final deathblow and threw them all forcefully into the water.

“Oceanvine!” Silverwind called. The world had turned into a salty, wet chaos around him. The ship was rapidly sinking and the screams of her crew were everywhere. From the sound of it, the wizard had gotten away with a few minor bruises. “Candle!”

“I’m here!” Oceanvine shouted back. “I have Candle. Help!”

Silverwind swam through the cool water, following her voice. He found her clinging to one of the booms from the ship’s sails. A ragged piece of canvas and a splintered bit of mast was still attached. She was supporting Candle as best she could. He was unconscious and partially over the length of mast, but threatening to slip back into the water.

“What happened to Candle?” he asked.

“Not sure,” Oceanvine replied tersely. “Think he hit his head.”

“And you?”

“Bruised all over. Don’t even want to know about my leg.”

“You didn’t break it again?” Silverwind asked.

“I didn’t,” she explained, “but it does hurt and the splints are heavy. I’m not going to be doing my own swimming.”

“There are islands all around us, but none are closer than a few miles away,” Silverwind informed her. “Let’s see about getting you and Candle up on the mast, or maybe we’ll find a better piece of flotsam. Then we’ll see about rounding up survivors and head for one of those islands.”

There was another explosion from the ship just then and the air was filled with an eruption of splintered wood. Silverwind used telekinesis to shield them from the falling ejecta. Luckily a large piece of the hull landed nearby and they were all able to climb onto it and stay mostly out of the water.

“I hadn’t realized Candle was bleeding. Are there sharks in these waters, do you think?” asked Oceanvine. There was a spreading bloodstain on Candle’s left arm.

“There are sharks just about everywhere,” Silverwind replied. “If you mean large enough ones to be dangerous, then yeah, probably, but I’m sure Candle’s blood isn’t the only one in the water at the moment.”

“Then there’s likely to be a bunch of them here any time now,” Oceanvine concluded.

“Could be,” Silverwind agreed. “Get his shirt off, I’ll find something to bind his wound with.” Silverwind slipped off their makeshift raft and swam to the nearby piece of sail cloth. He tried to tear the canvas, but it was stronger than he thought and he had no leverage while in the water so he used magic to pull as much of it loose as he could and returned to Oceanvine. “That doesn’t look good,” he commented when he saw the long gash in Candle’s arm. He ripped a wide strip of canvas off the rest and used it as a bandage for Candle. A closer examination revealed a small gash in his scalp as well and Silverwind bandaged that as well.

“How about you, dear?” he asked Oceanvine, holding up what was left of the sail.

“No bleeding wounds,” she replied. “It’s getting dark and we need to get out of this cool water before it kills us.”

Silverwind looked around. In the gathering fog he saw some of the crewmen had found two of the ship’s four lifeboats and were looking for survivors. He used a propulsion spell to bring their raft near one of them “Do you need help?” he asked.

Captain Harlan, his face cut and bloodied replied, “We have enough room in the boats for everyone with room to spare. Do you want to join us? That section of hull doesn’t look like it’s going to hold together much longer.”

“Candle here’s been hurt and I want to get him on dry land as soon as possible,” Silverwind replied. “If you don’t need us, I can get us there faster than those boats can.”

“Go ahead then,” Harlan replied. “We’ll meet you on the nearest island.”

“See you later then,” Silverwind called and moved the raft swiftly away from the wreckage.

“Wait!” Harlan called, seeing Silverwind was headed the wrong way. “Not that way! The close one’s to the southeast.” But Silverwind was already too far away to hear him.

Silverwind propelled the raft toward what he thought was the nearest island, while Oceanvine used a ward to keep them from getting completely swamped by the swells as they broke through them. Fifteen minutes later they were among breaking waves and still traveling at full speed, as they approached the beach, Oceanvine noticed they were no longer in the water; Silverwind was levitating them toward the beach. They continued to fly until they were above the high tide line when the wizard set them down gently.

He dragged Candle gently off the raft and then helped Oceanvine on to the sand as well. Using one last bit of magic he broke the raft up into conveniently sized pieces and set them on fire. “I’m going to sleep now,” he announced and promptly laid down next to the fire and started snoring.

Oceanvine, only slightly less tired, made sure Candle looked comfortable and was close enough to the fire for warmth. Then she cast a heat spell to dry what was left of the sail cloth they had and draped it over Candle before she, too, fell asleep.

A few hours later, she awoke to hear Candle groaning in pain. She crawled over to check on him and found he was conscious. “How are you feeling?” she asked worriedly.

“Stiff, sore, dizzy,” he muttered. “What happened?”

“You hit your head in the explosion,” she explained.

“Explosion?” Candle asked.

“Yeah, the ship, remember?”

“Not really,” Candle replied. “We were on a ship? Where are we goin?”

Suddenly Oceanvine realized Candle wasn’t joking, he really didn’t remember and that frightened her. “Silverwind!” she called softly. “Wake up!”

“What is it?” Silverwind asked.

“Candle’s up but he’s dizzy and has amnesia,” Oceanvine reported.

“And I’m sore all over,” Candle replied trying to sit up. Oceanvine pushed him gently back down. “What happened to my arm?” he asked.

“Let’s have a look,” Silverwind said, mostly to himself. He caused a gentle globe of light to form behind him and used it to look into Candle’s eyes. “Concussion, I think,” he said at last. “That’s not good, especially out here in the middle of nowhere.”

“Think I’m gonna be sick,” Candle told them. Silverwind closed his eyes a moment and caused a deep depression in the sand next to Candle’s head, then fused the sand into a dirty-looking glass.

“If you must, try to use that,” he advised. Candle nodded and immediately regretted it.

“Oh yeah,” Candle said a moment later. “I remember a bit. We were chasing Arithan down, weren’t we? And we were on a ship? Yeah. I still don’t remember the explosion.”

“It will probably come to you in time,” Silverwind assured him. “Vine we’ll need to keep him warm. That scrap of sail you put over him doesn’t look particularly toasty, does it?” He picked it up and looked at it appraisingly. It changed slowly as fibers broke strategically and rewove themselves under his direction until the cloth resembled velvet. Behind him Candle was making retching noises, but was lying back down when Silverwind turned back around with the impromptu blanket. He laid it back over Candle and cast a quick warmth spell on the blanket to make sure. Then he translocated Candle’s vomit a few hundred yards away into the ocean and went back to sleep. Oceanvine decided to stay up with Candle, but when both men started snoring softly, she fell asleep once more herself.

They were all up ahead of the sun the next morning. The night had stayed warm, although they were far enough north of the equator and it was late autumn. Silverwind considered that, but decided that the Wennill Islands must be surrounded by warm currents that moderated their climate. The Wennills, he knew, had a reputation for warm subtropical weather. “Now what shall we have for breakfast?” he wondered aloud.

“What was that, dear?” Oceanvine asked, sitting up in the light of false dawn.

“I’m wondering what to make for breakfast,” he told her.

“You’re cooking? We must be in trouble then,” she snickered.

“I’m the only one still fully mobile,” he responded. “It will be fairly simple fare in any case.”

“Well, why don’t you try to catch us some fish,” Oceanvine suggested. “It will be fairly easy to prepare and we won’t have to worry about which greens on this island are edible, although it’s something we may have to work out later. For now let’s just fill our bellies. Alternatively,” she continued, “we could try one

of your creation spells to make something to eat.”

“Let’s hold off on that,” Silverwind suggested. “I’ve never tried to create food. An eightbase bat is one thing, even if the wood is poisonous, it isn’t likely to hurt anyone unless they try to lick it or stir their soup with it or something.”

“I’ve seen you produce a live dove,” she pointed out. “I doubt it was poisonous.”

“I’ve never tried that consciously,” he replied. “I was drunk at the time. Maybe I just translocated it.”

“I doubt it,” Oceanvine replied. “It was conscious. I’ve never seen any creature translocated that wasn’t at least badly stunned.”

“It would still be safer for now to try fishing,” Silverwind told her. He got up and walked toward the water. “Anything you’d like in particular?” he asked over his shoulder.

“Whatever you can catch,” Oceanvine told him.

Silverwind fashioned a large seine-like ward and ran it through the water about one hundred yards out from shore. Then he lifted it up and brought it closer to see what he had caught. There were a lot of rather small fish, so he enlarged the holes in his ward-net to let them back into the water. There were several bluefish left in the net and, to his surprise, two lobsters. He kept the lobsters and one of the bluefish and let the rest back into the ocean.

He used the same technique he had the night before to create a large sand-glass pot, filled it with seawater and put the lobsters in it. Then he went about cleaning the fish. Looking around he saw a few palm trees not too far away and levitated several leaves to the ground and wrapped the fish in one of them. Then concentrating on a heat spell he boiled the water the lobsters were in and also cooked the fish inside the palm leaf. When they were done he brought them all to where Oceanvine and Candle were waiting and served them up on the palm leaves.

Candle was sitting up now and looking a bit better, but Oceanvine had fashioned a sling for his arm. “I think it may be broken,” he told Silverwind. “From what Oceanvine tells me, I got off easy. I still don’t remember the actual explosion, but I do remember the fight against the oceanvine and seeing Vine, here, come up on deck afterward. Maybe I got knocked out before I had time to notice the explosion?”

“Could be,” Silverwind allowed. “How are you feeling?” He started cutting the fish into manageable pieces while Oceanvine removed the lobsters’ shells. The preparation would help Candle eat one-handed.

“Stiff and sore,” Candle replied. “I’m not nauseous any more but I have a nasty headache and then there’s the arm.”

“It may not be broken,” Silverwind told him, “but it was badly cut when I looked at it last night. We’ll keep it in a sling for while though until we know for certain. We’ll take another look after breakfast.”

“This is some breakfast,” Candle commented. “Too bad there’s no butter for the lobster though.”

“I’ve always preferred my lobster without the butter anyway,” Oceanvine retorted.

“The fish could use a bit of seasoning, though,” Silverwind complained, “but it’s nourishing and at least

we won't be hungry."

Five

After breakfast, Silverwind fashioned a new pair of crutches for Oceanvine; ones with a large pad at the bottom so they could be used on the sand, and the three of them started to explore the island. "Hopefully we'll find where the other survivors landed," Silverwind speculated as they walked the circumference of the island. The sandy beach did not extend all around the island and, in fact, it turned out that pebble beaches were more common, so they had to thread their way between the palms that grew beyond the beaches themselves. It made for a longer exploration but at least Oceanvine was able to make her way through on the crutches. Candle's arm was still in its sling, but Silverwind and Oceanvine had determined it was not actually broken.

"Assuming they came to this island," Oceanvine commented. "There were several to choose from as I recall."

"Well, hopefully, they made it to shore safely in any case. If they didn't come here we'll have to build a boat of some sort for ourselves to continue our journey to Castelon. We can make it by sailing or rowing from island to island. I think the greatest distance between islands in this group is about fifteen nautical miles."

"That's a lot of rowing," Candle pointed out. "Especially if my arm doesn't heal quickly. Can't we just 'pilot' our way there?"

"That's a lot of magic use, too," Oceanvine retorted, "but I suppose it wouldn't hurt to alternate propulsion methods."

"When it's your turn, Candle," Silverwind laughed, "you may use any method you feel up to."

It was slow going around the island. As they traveled, they found numerous pieces of the *Pride of Niah* that had washed ashore. Very few of those bits of flotsam were recognizable; most were just badly charred wood, but here and there were pieces that caused them to stop and investigate. They found the top of what looked like the trunk Oceanvine had bought in Keesport for her new clothes, and the ship's compass, but they found none of their personal possessions, at least not intact and useable. A little further on they came across one of the ship's boats and Candle pointed out they could pilot it to Castelon.

"Castelon's a long way off, Candle" Oceanvine retorted, "and it's also the nearest inhabited island, so we're looking at a very long and tiring voyage."

"Besides," Silverwind added, "We'll have to repair this boat if we want to use it. See that hole near the stern?"

"Oh yeah, that is rather large," Candle agreed. "Let's keep this in mind, however. If nothing else comes up, it's an option at least."

They continued making their way around the island until they came across a small cove with a wooden wharf. Tied to the wharf was a boat unlike any of them had ever seen before.

"Amazing," Candle breathed as they drew closer. "Look at the sleek lines on that thing! And the mast; it

must be twice as tall as the boat is long, maybe more. I think it's made of metal of some sort."

"It's not any I recognize," Oceanvine commented as they walked out on the wharf to get a closer look. It isn't steel, the color is wrong. I'd almost believe it's silver, but who would make such a thing of silver?"

"The metal would be too soft in any case," Candle added. "What the heck is it? Titanium maybe?"

Silverwind replied, "No, I doubt it, but that wouldn't make any more sense than what I think it actually is, but I've never seen so much of it in this form before."

"What do you think it is?" Oceanvine asked.

"Aluminum," Silverwind replied. "I have, no... I had a small piece of it in the lab, remember?"

"Aluminum? Isn't that a precious metal?" Oceanvine asked.

"Ten years ago, maybe," Candle informed her. "But it's considerably cheaper these days since Lord Mairsten started licensing his new refining process, but I hadn't heard it was being used on ships or boats yet. Or on anything else yet in such quantity."

"It's a good material for it though," Silverwind said approvingly, "It is light and strong and easy to shape."

"The rigging is deceptively simple," Oceanvine noted, "just a mainsail and a jib, but it supports a lot of sail for the boat. I'd be more worried about being driven under than anything else."

"That's what reef points are for," Candle pointed out, "although the mainsail is furled, so I'm only assuming there are reef points, but in one that large, there almost have to be. I'd love to see this boat under sail though. She must really fly through the water. What is the hull made of? I thought it was painted, but now that I can see it up close I think that white color is in the material itself, the blue below the waterline might be painted, however."

"I like the woodwork on the rails and cabin," Oceanvine commented. "I think it's teak from Bellinen."

"And metal cable stays to hold the rest of the rigging in place," Silverwind added. "Very nice! Let's see if we can find the owner, maybe he'll give us a ride to Castelon."

"She's a big boat too," Candle commented. "Must be fifty feet long, but she looks fairly easy to sail."

As they left the wharf they noticed a well-made path heading inland. The palms along the water quickly gave way to oaks and grasses. The path was edged with stone cobbles and paved with gravel. They walked a few hundred yards along the gently winding path until they came to a small cottage built in a clearing. The structure had only one story, although it was wide and, they learned later that it was U-shaped and open in the center in the same manner most Orentan houses were built.

There were garden beds around the outside of the cottage filled with cheerfully colorful flowers. The walls were painted a brownish gray, but the front door was a vividly bright pink. Silverwind walked up to the door and knocked.

A moment later the door was opened by a tall and handsome human man with long dark brown hair and a neatly trimmed beard. His eyes were hazel and his face unnaturally handsome. Oceanvine thought he

looked familiar, but couldn't quite place where she might have seen him before. "Yes," he said to Silverwind, "We've been expecting you, although not quite so soon. Please come in."

"Who is it, Nildar?" a female voice asked from the next room, then the Orentan goddess Wenni entered the room, spotted Silverwind and her face fell from polite interest to tired disdain. "Oh, it's you. You're early."

"We can come back later if You like, Divine Wenni," Silverwind offered.

"What good would that do?" she asked. "You would still come back."

"At least I didn't ignore Your summons this time," Silverwind pointed out.

"Oh yes. Do you really think I would ever summon you again," Wenni sniffed. "Hello, Oceanvine. It's nice to see you again, anyway. I really don't know what you see in this man."

"He's an acquired taste, Goddess," Oceanvine replied politely. "I don't believe You have met Journeyman Candle."

"Not formally, no, but I did see him at the hearing. Why are you using crutches?" Wenni asked suddenly. "Are you injured?"

"I broke my leg when we faced Arithan and Pohn. It's getting better. We're more worried about Candle. He hit his head when the ship we were on exploded."

"Exploded?" Nildar asked. "Tell Us about it."

"No," Wenni disagreed, "Let me see to their injuries first." Wenni placed her hands on Candle's head and for several minutes they were both enveloped in a light blue nimbus. When the light faded, Candle smiled and removed his arm from the sling then took off his bandages.

"Thank You, Wenni," he said with a courteous nod of his head. "I didn't realize how bad I was. Everything was so fuzzy. The world is nice and sharp now."

"Good, and you are welcome, Candle," Wenni told him formally, then she turned and performed the same act on Oceanvine, healing her broken leg. Then after Oceanvine thanked her for her ministrations, Wenni asked, "Now, please tell Us what has happened."

Nildar conducted them into a small room with just enough comfortable chairs and together Silverwind, Oceanvine and Candle told the divine lovers everything that had happened since the house in Renton had burned to the ground. It took quite a while, because They kept interrupting with questions about the other people involved. Finally, they related their arrival on the island and the journey from the place they had slept the night before.

"That's quite a story," Nildar admitted. "I cannot say I've had such an adventure in many millennia. Still, there is much We have to tell you three. First of all, you may stop worrying about Pohn. When you drove him back to his island, the Elders were waiting."

"What's to stop Arithan from breaking him back out again?" Candle asked.

"My parents are guarding the island of Pohn," Nildar informed him. "Arithan may have a lot of power at

his disposal, but even he may not contend against a God.”

“Then the Elder Gods have physically returned to Maiyim?” Oceanvine asked.

“They never truly left,” Wenni told her. “Not for very long anyway. They do occasionally travel to other worlds, but that is mostly for recreational purposes.”

“They take vacations?” Silverwind asked.

“Don’t you?”

“Not really,” Silverwind shrugged. “We travel around enough when we’re working that I don’t usually feel the need to visit still other places I’ve never been.”

“Not that there are many left for you,” Oceanvine pointed out. “The last time we did that was a few years ago when we went to Keesport to visit Geraint and Elewys. Before that, the closest thing to a vacation I ever experienced was the trip to Medda for our wedding.”

“But surely your honeymoon...” Wenni began.

“What honeymoon?” Oceanvine countered. “We went right back to Renton. Of course, that was fine by me. We had already been traveling on business for over a year. It was more than time to go home.”

“Well,” Nildar continued, “yes, the Elders do go on vacation from Maiyim from time to time. We younger Gods, however, have never done so. Maiyim has been Our responsibility since We were born. However the time is coming when We must remove Ourselves from the physical plane.”

“Why?” Oceanvine asked, in spite of herself.

“All things change in time,” Nildar explained, “and Maiyim changes most of all. Our job has been to guide Our mortal brethren, to help each of you mature as a civilization. Your civilizations have matured now.”

“More or less,” Wenni added lightly.

“More or less,” Nildar repeated, with a slight smile. “But you don’t need Us here any longer. Humans, Orenta and Granomen are ready to go on and take care of themselves. It is time for Us to let you go on your way, but before We do, there is still one last service We must do for you and that is to make sure We leave this world safe from the children of Aritos.”

“We have a few other tasks ahead of Us as well,” Wenni told them, “but that need not concern you.”

“Such as?” Candle asked. Then he realized he was being nosy. “Uh, sorry, didn’t mean to pry.”

“It’s all right, Candle,” Nildar told him. “We know people are curious. It’s not a sin. Of course, We don’t have to answer either.”

“So, are You leaving this plane as soon as the demons are imprisoned once more?” Candle asked.

“That’s depends on how much more there is still to do,” Wenni replied.

“We don’t really know,” Nildar admitted. “You see, some things are still hidden from Us as well.”

“So You only think you’ll be leaving soon?” Candle pressed.

“No, We know that for a certainty,” Nildar told him.

“Yes, but will it be soon to me or just to You?”

“Good question,” Nildar said, “but I imagine that if you survive your own task, you’ll live to see the time when We are no longer physically on Maiyim.”

“We’ll still be around in spirit,” Wenni added. “We are inextricably part of Maiyim. We just won’t be directly involved in mortal affairs most of the time.”

“Most of the time?” Silverwind asked archly.

“We aren’t being forced away,” Nildar told him, “We may return if there’s a need, but if We do, it will likely be because We failed to prepare you properly.”

“Just how active a role have You played the last few centuries or so?” Candle asked. “Methis, I suppose, has been inspiring inventors in Granom and maybe across the rest of the world, but haven’t You two been living here in isolation?”

“We do live here, yes,” Nildar replied. “And it’s one of Our favorite places on Maiyim, but We don’t keep Ourselves in isolation by any means. We frequently visit many places on Maiyim. For example we were in Old Jack’s tavern nine years ago the evening Lord Jason found you, Silverwind.”

“You were? I’m sure I’d have noticed divine Wenni at least. The closest person to an Orent I saw was Vine here and that was because of her clothes.”

“We generally travel incognito,” Nildar explained.

“You came very close to impressing Me that night,” Wenni admitted. “That dove. Then I realized you were blind, stinking drunk. First impressions are the most lasting, you know.”

“In all fairness, he hasn’t been that drunk since,” Oceanvine told her.

“If you say so, dear,” Wenni replied, although from Her tone of voice it was obvious Wenni didn’t believe a word of it.

“Are any of you hungry?” Nildar asked suddenly.

“I certainly am!” Candle exclaimed. “We may have had lobster for breakfast, but it was hours ago. Though I must admit it was the best undisguised cooking I’ve ever seen Silverwind serve up.”

“I hadn’t thought of that!” Oceanvine admitted, her eyes wide. She laughed and turned to the two gods, “I don’t usually let him cook because I’m never sure just what I would be eating. His illusion spells are too good!”

“I would have thought you had forgiven me for that by now,” Silverwind commented.

“Oh I have,” she told him. “But when I thought about what I’d been eating I was surprised I hadn’t been poisoned. That’s why I do all the cooking at home. At least that way when the food is burnt or underdone, I know it.”

“Why don’t we eat?” Nildar suggested. He gestured to a long table in the next room that Candle could have sworn hadn’t been there before. There were five place settings at the table and there were platters of food representative of several regional cuisines from all over the world.

Candle looked at Nildar and realized He had performed a creation spell as matter-of-factly as Candle might have juggled pebbles by telekinesis. “Do You know how You do that?” he asked interestedly. “I don’t mean what You’re thinking of to create, but the actual mechanics of the process.”

“You mean where does all the food come from?” Nildar countered.

“And this table for that matter,” Candle agreed. “Matter doesn’t just come from nowhere, after all. If You didn’t just convert other matter to create this, You had to have made it by converting energy into matter.”

“You know of that?” Wenni asked, amazed. Candle explained about Wizard Onestone’s theories as he helped himself to a few slices of a roast seasoned with the mild but flavorful spices of Elisto.

“Sounds likes it is time for Us to attend the universities again, dear,” Nildar said to Wenni. “We do that every so often to keep up with what Our mortal brothers and sisters know.

“Yes, Candle,” Nildar continued, “We do know about that and while you’ll no doubt find the situation far more complex than Onestone’s beginning implies, he is on the right track. I wasn’t aware any mortals had been thinking along those lines. Of course, until I saw Silverwind create a living dove, I wasn’t aware any mortal could do that either; drunk or sober.”

“He’s teaching me how to do it,” Candle volunteered.

“Well, when you can, be very careful what you do create. The act of creation is one thing, but what you create and why is far more important and more dangerous,” Nildar told him seriously. “Never forget that the demons were products of creation that were not fully thought out.”

“Right,” Candle nodded. “May I ask You about the boat?”

“You should ask,” Nildar replied. “It’s going to be yours.”

“Mine?”

“It is for all three of you.”

“You cannot keep hoping to catch a convenient ship going your way as you chase Arithan,” Wenni added. “Such a course will slow you down. You won’t catch up to him that way. Besides, it wouldn’t be fair to the ships and their crews.”

“My wife is correct,” Nildar agreed. “Arithan will not hesitate to attack any ship you are on, just as he did the *Pride of Niah* .”

“What’s to stop him from attacking Your boat?” Silverwind asked.

“I have used some rather revolutionary materials to build it. You might say some of them are ahead of their time. Additionally, I have incorporated certain powerful spells – what you might call divine blessings – into it as well. He won’t be able to destroy that boat.”

“What is the hull made of?” Candle asked.

“A cloth made of very fine glass fibers that have been impregnated with a waterproof synthetic resin,” Nildar explained.

“It’s made of glass?” Candle asked. “Doesn’t sound like a practical building material.”

“Oh, but it is,” Nildar insisted. “I got the idea last time We toured Maiyim. We visited an academic exhibition in Randona where one man exhibited a dress made entirely of glass fibers. They are quite flexible when you make them fine enough, you see. Anyway, I thought about it for a while, searching for a practical use for glass fibers and found that when reinforced by plastic resin it is light, but very strong.”

“Glass,” repeated Candle.

“Reinforced glass,” Nildar insisted.

“What is plastic resin?” Oceanvine interrupted by asking.

“That I had to come up with on My own,” Nildar told her. “Plastic is a family of various synthetic materials. I could explain it in detail, but you don’t really have the time; it would take weeks just to teach you what you’d need to know in order to understand the explanation.”

“If You say so,” Oceanvine told him suspiciously.

“You may as well believe Him,” Wenni advised her. “I have to admit I don’t really understand it Myself.”

“You don’t?” Candle asked.

“No, My studies have been mostly in the arts. I leave technology to Nildar and Methis. It’s what They enjoy.”

“So what else do we need to know about the boat?” Silverwind asked Nildar.

“It should be fairly easy to manage,” Nildar replied.

“Should be? Haven’t You sailed in her yet?”

“Should I have?” Nildar asked, puzzled.

“It’s a good way to make sure a boat is as good as she looks,” Silverwind replied.

“My plan was to take it out with you after lunch. You can sail around the island this afternoon, getting the feel of the boat and then, I imagine, you’ll want to leave in the morning.”

After the meal they walked back down to the dock. Before boarding the boat, Candle commented,

“She’s a beauty. Where did You find this design?”

“Methis isn’t the only inventor in the world,” Nildar told him with a smile.

“What’s her name?”

“Name?” both Nildar and Wenni repeated, looking at each other in confusion.

“A boat like this ought to have a name. It would be unlucky not to,” Candle pointed out.

“What sort of name do you think it should have?” Nildar asked.

“She,” Oceanvine corrected him gently. “What sort of name do we think *she* should have? Ships and boats are always female, even if named after a man. You built her. I think you should name her.”

“I haven’t the foggiest notion of what to name her,” Nildar confessed. “I’ve never named a boat.”

“Call her the *Maiyim Bourne*,” Wenni suggested. As She said that the words appeared on the stern of the boat. “Now why don’t we all board her and see if she sails as beautifully as she sits at dock.”

“I’m still not convinced a boat this size will be safe on the outer seas,” Silverwind countered.

“You think We haven’t thought of that?” Wenni countered. “Just get on the boat. We’ve put a lot of work into her. She will survive anything.”

Six

The shakedown cruise of the *Maiyim Bourne* went as smoothly as Nildar had promised. It took very little time to figure out which line hauled up the mainsail, but Nildar had a surprise for them when it came to the jib.

“I borrowed from a number of designs for her,” He told them, “and I couldn’t make up My mind on which to use for the jib, so I actually made three different sails that can be hoisted on the fore side of the mast, depending on conditions. Now this is a standard Emmine style of jib. You’ll note it doesn’t extend aft of the mast at all. It’s a good sail in a heavy wind, but if you want to make better head-way in light to moderate winds, you’ll want the Granomish jib. As you can see it’s almost twice the size of the Emmine jib. And in case you want to run with the wind, I added a spinnaker like the ones they use in Bellinen races.

“Now, with sails like these you’re going to need a fairly deep centerboard to keep from side slipping, but you’ll find it draws too much water when you’re in the shallows, or if you need to land on a beach. This winch here will allow you to raise it right up into the hull if you need to. This small gauge indicates whether the centerboard is up or down and if so, how much.

“I wasn’t sure how many compasses you might need, so I probably over did it. Obviously, you want one right here at the helm, but I also put one below in the chart room, one in the galley and one in the captain’s cabin.”

“That may be a couple too many,” Silverwind agreed, “but they won’t hurt.”

“Chart room?” Candle asked.

“Yes,” Nildar nodded. “She’s stocked with navigational charts for anywhere on Maiyim. Hmm, I may need to show you how to read them; they’re a bit more detailed than most maps mortal navigators use.”

“Show them to Oceanvine,” Candle suggested. “She’s our navigator.”

“Is there a sextant?” Oceanvine asked eagerly.

“Every modern navigational tool, in fact,” Nildar told her proudly.

“Wonderful!” she breathed. “We won’t need them this afternoon, but you can show me everything later.”

“What’s this tiny sail on the stern?” Candle asked. It wasn’t really a sail, but Candle couldn’t figure out what else to call it. It was a triangular frame across which a piece of sail cloth had been stretched. The frame was perched on a short, swiveling, metal pole, which went into a hole near the stern.

“Part of the automatic navigator,” Nildar replied. “I wouldn’t recommend using it on the inner seas, but when set it will maintain your course, at least in light to moderate conditions without anyone having to keep their hands on the wheel.”

They cleared the bounds of the small cove and reached the open water surrounding the island. Silverwind and Candle traded off duties at the helm, getting to know the boat that would soon be their own. They started off fairly conservatively, but when a stiff breeze cropped up, Candle wanted to see just how much speed she could put on. They were running with the wind and the colorful spinnaker had been deployed when suddenly the boat rose up a few feet in the water and started moving incredibly fast.

“What’s happening?” Candle asked Nildar.

“You have probably noticed how narrow the stern is,” Nildar said. “This reduces drag on the hull while she is still in the water.”

“What do you mean ‘still in the water’?”

“Hydrofoils,” Nildar explained.

“Bless You,” Candle replied automatically. “Uh... Was that a sneeze?” Wenni started laughing.

“No,” Nildar replied. “Hydrofoils, water-wings. This boat is so light for its size it has a tendency to want to lift up out of the water anyway, although that would normally mean it would capsize. That’s why I gave it such a deep centerboard, but then I realized that if the boat wanted to lift up, that would also mean less drag and more speed if I could keep it from capsizing. That’s when I installed the wings beneath the hull. As the boat increases in speed they provide lift and when you go fast enough the hull lifts entirely out of the water.”

“You mean we’re flying?” Oceanvine asked just a bit nervously.

Nildar considered that. “Yes, I believe we are,” He replied at last.

“Wow!” Candle enthused. “Look how fast we’re moving! We’ll catch up to Arithan in no time.”

“You will need a fairly stiff breeze to get the lift you need, however,” Nildar warned them. “I imagine there will be many occasions when you’ll only get enough speed when you’re riding directly with the wind; that why I included it, although the Granomish jib should provide enough sail to get you aloft in some conditions. I also think you’ll want to keep the hull in the water during heavier conditions. The hydrofoils can be retracted if you want to stay down, of course.”

The *Maiyim Bourne* sliced through the water as they headed toward Castelon the next morning.

“I get the impression They were anxious to see us go,” Oceanvine commented when they had cleared the island’s small harbor.

“What makes you think that?” Silverwind asked from the helm of the boat.

“The fact that They stopped giving us advice about an hour after dinner last night. They had pretty much told us everything They were going to. If we had suggested leaving right then I doubt They would have tried to stop us.”

“Then why didn’t They hurry us off this morning?”

“They were exquisite hosts. They were being polite and courteous.” Oceanvine pointed out.

“So do you have a bearing for me, navigator?” Silverwind asked.

“Sail around this island until we’re due north of that small point we rounded yesterday afternoon. You remember the bell buoy we nearly hit?” Oceanvine asked.

“Vividly. Candle was at the helm as I recall,” Silverwind replied uncomfortably.

“Since when does Candle have long gray hair?” Oceanvine retorted. “It doesn’t matter. We weren’t used to the speeds of this boat and we were still up on the wings. Anyway, when we reach the buoy you should come about and set a course twenty-three degrees east of magnetic north. That should fetch us up against the southwest coast of Castelon. From there we can follow the coast of the island around to Castelon port. There will be a number of buoys, some gongs and bells mostly, along the way that I’ll use to verify our position with. There are also several lighthouses around Castelon. They’ll help in a fog or at night, but I think until we get out of Wennil, we ought not to try sailing at night.”

“Good idea,” Silverwind agreed. “At the velocity *Maiyim Bourne* is capable of we’d run aground before we even knew it was there. I think I’ll keep us in the water until we set course for Castelon, after that, we’ll see what we can do.”

“If the wind direction keeps up we won’t quite be running with it, but with the Granomish jib up, that may be enough to hydroplane,” Oceanvine opined. “Where’s Candle, anyway? I would have thought you’d have to fight him for the first watch at the helm.”

“He’s below settling into his cabin. He chose the bow cabin, by the way.”

"I could have predicted that," Oceanvine laughed. "I'll bet he likes it because of the hatch that will allow him to climb directly up on deck. But what's he doing? It's not like any of us have any luggage."

"I think he's just arranging the cabin to his taste," Silverwind shrugged. "Oh here he is now. Where did you get the fresh clothes?"

Candle was wearing a blue flannel shirt over heavy tan trousers. "In my cabin," he replied. "Nildar and Wenni provided us with a few spare sets of clothes. We'll still want to go shopping as soon as we can though; it looks like everything is suitable for sailing in cool weather like this."

"We're headed north and winter is coming," Oceanvine pointed out. "That should do for now. Besides all our money went down with the *Pride of Niah*. We don't have anything to go shopping with anyway, and I doubt there's anyone in Castelon willing to float us a loan."

"You never know," Silverwind commented, "but you're probably right. Castelon is not a big city. There won't be a branch of the Bank of Randona there."

"It won't be an issue anyway," Candle told them. "They left a small bag of gold coins in my cabin. I wouldn't be surprised if your cabin is similarly equipped."

"Kind of them," Silverwind acknowledged, "and practical. We're going to have to pay port fees nearly everywhere we land."

"And wait until you see the cooler in the galley," Candle added. "We'll be eating well tonight!"

"And several nights to come, I'm sure," Silverwind nodded. "I took a look there before we cast off. Ready about!" he added in a somewhat louder tone. "Hard alee!" He swung the rudder and the *Maiyim Bourne* swung around to head north with the bell buoy to port. Silverwind set the course as Oceanvine had specified then turned to Candle. "Want to stand a watch?" he asked.

"Sure," Candle accepted enthusiastically.

"Just hold this course until we can see Castelon Island," Silverwind instructed, allowing him to take the helm, "or until it starts to get dark, whichever comes first."

Candle took the wheel and noted their heading. He noted where the wind was coming from and adjusted the mainsail and jib, then sat back to see if he got the results he desired.

Oceanvine and Silverwind went below to settle into their cabin. The *Maiyim Bourne* boasted three cabins. Candle had taken the triangular one at the bow of the boat, so Silverwind and Oceanvine chose the larger of the two remaining cabins, which was meant to be the captain's cabin. The third cabin was half the size of the captain's to make room for the dining/chart table attached to the galley. Nildar and Wenni had told Oceanvine the boat had a chart room, but in actuality the dining area did double duty, but there was a wall of pigeonholes filled with charts and a set of drawers in which Oceanvine found her sextant and other navigational instruments.

"Candle was right," Silverwind said, opening the closet in the cabin. "The clothes are quite appropriate to sailing in the fall and winter."

"They left me an Orentan bathing suit, however," Oceanvine commented.

“Your personal preferences are legendary if even the Gods know them,” Silverwind chuckled.

“It’s warm today, but not that warm,” Oceanvine considered. “This silk blouse, however, would be about right.”

“And just your color.” The blouse was printed in the sort of garish floral pattern favored by Orenta.

“Funny,” she replied flatly, stepping behind her closet door for a touch of privacy while changing. “You probably ought to put on a clean shirt at least,” she suggested.

“I can clean this tunic well enough,” Silverwind retorted.

“It’s badly worn and has a few holes in it,” she pointed out.

“And mend it.”

“Dear, put on a new shirt,” she told him firmly as she stepped back out from behind the door. “And those trousers have pretty much had it as well. Hmm, Candle was right on another count; they did leave us some money, a small but tidy sum, it looks like. More than enough to get us back to somewhere with a bank that will allow us to withdraw funds from our Renton account.”

“Or collect on old debts,” Silverwind added, choosing a Granomish tunic in gray and a pair of black trousers. “There are more than a few jobs we’ve done or that I did with Geraint that were never completely paid for.”

“Why didn’t you collect?” Oceanvine asked.

“I didn’t really need the money. Like the Isle of Fire eight years ago. I sent them a bill, but at the time they couldn’t really afford it, so I told them to put it in an account in the Bank of Rjalkatyp, so that if we ever needed it we could always make a withdrawal. From what I’ve heard the island has been prospering ever since, although I pity poor Blizzard. She was elected to the House of Commons as soon as she returned to Rjalkatyp with her master’s degree and I understand she’s being pressed to run for president.”

“Good for her!” Oceanvine exclaimed.

“Perhaps,” Silverwind nodded, “but I’ll bet she’d rather be back doing forensic magic for the Department of Security and Justice.”

“She can always fall back on that if she loses the election,” Oceanvine shrugged.

“Oh, there’s no doubt that she’ll be elected,” Silverwind disagreed. “Ironblade gave her nearly all the credit for the rescue of Rjalkatyp. By the time he got done you would have thought we were her backup.”

“I doubt Blizzard would have let it lie at that,” Oceanvine opined.

“No, but folks wanted a local hero so her disclaimers were seen as seemly modesty.”

“Does that bother you?”

“Not in the least,” Silverwind told her. “I just wish Ysemay’s book on the incident had given her all the credit as well.”

“Ready about!” Candle’s voice called from on deck. “Prepare for flight.”

“Prepare for flight?” Oceanvine echoed. “He’s making it up as he goes along, you know.” She found something to hold on to, however.

“Maybe he’ll come up with a better way to say it,” Silverwind speculated as the boat began to rise up. There was a brief period of instability as the craft shuddered and then it smoothed out as the hull lifted entirely out of the water. Once it was all the way up, it matched the rhythm of the ocean once again, although the rhythm now was different. It was faster, less formal; as if now *Maiyim Bourne* was in a hurry to experience the sea all at once. “Want me to make lunch?”

“I’ll do it, dear,” Oceanvine replied. “I’ll put a cold lunch together.” She left as Silverwind started changing into the clothes he had chosen.

The galley was in fine order and looking through the cooler, a box that appeared to work with a permanent cooling spell inside of it, she found a collection of sliced meats, cheeses and several loaves of bread. It looked good, but it pretty much filled the cooler and she couldn’t figure out why Candle said they would be eating well unless he like cold cuts a lot more than she ever had reason to believe.

She found a serving platter in the cupboard and put out an assortment of meats and cheeses, along with slices of bread from one of the loaves along with a few condiments, and brought them up on deck for Candle.

“Thanks,” he told her, layering several slices of a spiced beef on a slice of bread and slathering it with mustard. He thought about it for a moment then added some cheese and another slice of bread. “Is there anything to drink?”

“I should have thought about that,” Oceanvine apologized. “I’ll be right back.” She scooted back down to the galley just as Silverwind was climbing back on deck. They did a little dance as they each tried to move out of the other’s way, then Silverwind reached out and put his hands on her shoulders and gently rotated with her until she had a clear path to the galley.

“What happened?” he asked Candle, “She forgot something to drink?” Candle nodded. “I hope she finds some beer down there. There’s something about salt air that goes well with a good lager.”

Candle agreed, then asked, “Any idea of where we’ll be bound after Castelon?”

Silverwind closed his eyes and cast the spell that would activate the tracer he had planted on Arithan. “I think he’s headed for the Isle of Fire, or at least he is so far, though he may decide to change course. We’ll have to keep an eye on him.”

Oceanvine arrived back on deck with two mugs of lager for Candle and Silverwind and a glass of sweet cider for herself. “There is something very strange about the cooler,” she announced.

“You mean how the spell on it is permanent, unlike the best we’ve been able to devise?” Silverwind asked. “This spell was cast by a god, after all.”

“No,” Oceanvine shook her head. “Not that. The first time I looked into the cooler it was filled with

lunchmeats, bread and all the appropriate condiments. This time there were about a dozen different drinks.”

“When I looked,” Candle added, “I saw roasts of beef and lamb, some whole birds, including one I couldn’t recognize. What an amazing thing. Do you think it offers anything you happen to want at the moment?”

“You wanted a whole roast beef?” Oceanvine asked pointedly.

“Not exactly,” Candle replied, “but I did open it wondering what sort of foods Gods might provide. I was expecting to be impressed and I was. I suppose I should have wondered why there were no vegetables, but it didn’t occur to me at the time.”

“You always did like meat better anyway,” Silverwind laughed.

“I like vegetables too,” Candle replied defensively. “I’ll admit, however, it took me a long time to develop anything even related to a gourmet sensibility.”

“Considering you were scavenging for food when we met you,” Silverwind told him, “that’s hardly surprising. Merely having a full belly was a novelty to you back then.”

“True enough,” Candle nodded. “But about the cooler, will it always offer us whatever we want or will that wear off after a while?”

“We’ll just have to wait and see,” Silverwind shrugged. “In the meantime we have a genuine cornucopia to enjoy.”

“The closets full of clothes,” Oceanvine said suddenly. “I’ll bet they’re the same. Everything in them was appropriate to the weather and what we are doing at the moment. Hold on a minim. I’ll be right back.” She rushed back to her cabin, her mind on having to survive a blizzard, then looked back into her closet.

“I found it full of heavy woolens and furs,” she reported.

“Remarkable,” Silverwind commented with only a touch of wonder in his voice. “It appears that Nildar and Wenni are even more generous than I would have given them credit for. My apologies to the Gods, Their wonders to behold, and all that.”

“This does cast a whole new light on creation spells,” Candle mused. “I never thought they could be cast perpetually on a closet or a cooler, and how does the spell know what we want?”

Silverwind laughed. “Nildar and Wenni are gods. Not only are They capable of harnessing more power to their desires than we ever could, but They have been studying magic for longer than we can imagine. I’m sure They have learned things that we mere mortals won’t understand for centuries or millennia yet, if at all.”

“Then why can’t They chase down Arithan?” Candle countered. “Arithan’s been studying magic as long as They have.”

The echoing voice of Wenni filled their minds to answer his question, “Because this task requires the labor of a mortal. We told you your civilization was mature and that you no longer needed your Gods on the physical plane. We freely admit, however, We could be wrong. Consider this a test if you like,” she

concluded, her voice fading out again.

“I wasn’t expecting a divine answer,” Candle commented as he felt Wenni’s presence withdraw. “I would have liked to ask about the perpetual creation spells, however.”

“I doubt She would have answered those questions,” Oceanvine chuckled. “It isn’t something we need to know on this quest. I also wouldn’t depend on getting instant answers like that.”

“A quest,” Candle mused. “I still think it sounds so medieval. I mean who goes out on quest these days?”

“We do, evidently,” Silverwind replied. “But if Nildar and Wenni were right, this could be the last great divinely commanded quest in the history of Maiyim. I, for one, appreciate the honor to have been chosen.”

“According to the stories,” Oceanvine commented acidly, “you may be the only one who ever has.”

“I can’t think of anyone more worthy of the honor,” Candle cut in. “I don’t mean me, necessarily, but if there’s anyone on Maiyim more qualified than you two, I certainly haven’t met them.”

Oceanvine remembered the visitation from Wenni she and Silverwind had shared in a dream back in Merinne. The goddess had told them that Candle would be needed in Rjalkatyp both for the part he would play there and in preparation for a task he would have to undertake later. Then a previous dream visitation from Wenni came to mind. This one had happened in Querna while they were investigating the case of the “Cardiokiller.” That time Wenni had coyly mentioned that Oceanvine and Silverwind would undertake a quest with the aid of two others. It was obvious now that Candle was one of those others. *Who, she wondered, was the fourth member of the team?*

Seven

The sun was still high in the sky five hours later when the island of Castelon came into view. Silverwind had just started his watch at the helm and adjusted their course to aim the *Maiyim Bourne* to round the eastern side of the island.

“I’m not sure if we’ll be able to keep the speed up enough for the foils to work if we turn completely east,” he explained when Oceanvine asked, “but it seems to me that it is easier to stay up than it is to build up the speed to get aloft again. It also seemed like a good idea not to try too sharp a turn while we’re still hydroplaning.”

“Sounds reasonable,” Oceanvine agreed. “*Maiyim Bourne* may be indestructible, but we aren’t. We could be killed if we capsize at full speed.”

“I’m hoping I can bring us right up to the entrance to Castelon harbor before dropping the hull back into the water,” Silverwind commented.

“That will save us a lot of time and get us in before dark as well,” Candle opined.

“We have already saved a lot of time,” Oceanvine retorted. “This trip should have taken two or three days.”

“You know,” Silverwind told them, “when our shipwrights can build boats like this, it’s going to totally change the nature of water transportation.”

“Could be,” Candle agreed, “but not as much as true flight. Once we can build a flying machine, the need for a hydroplaning boat might not be all that great.”

“Maybe,” Silverwind conceded, “but Maiyim is in many ways her oceans. Any means by which we can improve transportation by sea will be important.”

Silverwind managed to guide the *Maiyim Bourne* around the east side of Castelon island and a quarter of an hour later they were within sight of the marker buoys that indicated the mouth of the entrance channel to the harbor of Castelon the city.

“Strike the sails!” he called and Oceanvine and Candle jumped to pull the mainsail and jib down. The boat shuddered and rocked a bit as the hull fell back into the water. The boat slowed so suddenly at that point that Candle, who had struck the jib, lost his footing and was thrown into the sea.

“Man overboard!” Oceanvine called, just barely managing to catch the mast as she lurched forward.

“I’m okay!” Candle shouted, but he had to swim a dozen yards or so to catch up to the boat as it continued to slide through the water.

Silverwind helped him back on board. “And who gave you permission to go swimming?” he asked in mock severity.

“It was a sudden inspiration,” Candle retorted, “and not one that is likely to come again in our time. The water is much too cold for my taste. Next time, I’ll have to remember to hang on to something sturdy before the hull hits the water.”

“I’m lucky,” Silverwind admitted. “I had the wheel to hold on to.”

“Next time I intend to grab on to the mast as soon as the mainsail is struck. Whoever strikes the jib probably ought to have a life line around his waist,” Oceanvine suggested. “At least he was wearing a cork life preserver vest.”

“Candle, you’re shivering,” Silverwind noted. “You’d better get below and into something dry.”

“What about raising the sails again?” Candle asked.

“Oceanvine and I will manage. Get below before you get sick. We’ll need you when we make the dock.” Candle nodded and went down to his cabin. “Vine, if you take the helm, I’ll raise the mainsail.”

“That’s Oceanvine,” she corrected him automatically.

“I know, dear,” he replied just as automatically. “I know. Take the helm and I’ll hoist the sails.” They exchanged places and Silverwind hauled on the line that raised the mainsail.

“Dear,” Oceanvine called, keeping the bow of *Maiyim Bourne* into the wind, “why don’t you put the jib away for now. We won’t need it in the harbor.”

“Right,” Silverwind called back. “Start bringing her in.” Oceanvine let the mainsail swing out to catch the wind and brought the boat about, then started heading into Castelon harbor. Silverwind stowed the jib before joining his wife once more in the stern. They were already deep into Castelon harbor before he was able to sit.

“Where should we try to dock?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “Try to find an empty slip and if the harbormaster wants us to move once we’ve spoken to him, we will.”

Candle returned wearing a woolen Granomish tunic and trousers. “Wow,” he enthused. “This boat makes great time even when she’s still in the water. I thought we’d still be out at the mouth of the harbor.”

“She’s a fast boat,” Silverwind agreed.

“What sort of town is Castelon, anyway?” Oceanvine asked.

“Can’t say I know,” Silverwind admitted. “I’ve never been here. I don’t even know if the majority of the population is Human, Orentan or Granomish.”

“It’s about half Granomish,” Candle informed him. “The other half is evenly split between humans and Orenta.” They both looked at him wonderingly. “What?” he asked. “Freshman year; Geography 101. Anyway, they get along mostly, not so well as on the Isle of Fire, but the people think of themselves as citizens of Wennil first and then by their species, so the interspecies tensions aren’t too common.”

“What sort of government do they have?” Oceanvine asked.

“Believe it or not, it’s a democratic theocracy, sort of.”

“How does that work?”

“Well, I’m not sure I have the details right, but basically the people elect the governing body called the Ordained Council. This council is entirely made up of priests, but since almost anyone can be a priest in Wennil, in fact most heads of household technically are ordained, so it’s not as exclusive as it sounds at first. They take their religion fairly seriously here and the most popular cults are those of the Younger Gods.”

“Similar to the Isle of Fire again,” Silverwind commented.

“In some ways,” Candle replied. “The other gods are also represented, however, even Aritos.”

“That’s unusual,” Oceanvine commented.

“Well the cult of Aritos is not particularly popular,” Candle admitted. “According to my professor, the high priest of Aritos is chosen by lottery from among all eligible candidates, male and female. Then he or she is required to serve for ten years, before someone else is chosen. On the other hand the priest of Aritos is guaranteed a seat on the Ordained Council during his tenure, so it isn’t all bad news. The other council members only sit for three year terms so whoever is the priest of Aritos is likely to have more political power in the long run. I know it sounds a little silly, but it seems to work for them.”

They continued in toward the dock area when Oceanvine spotted a familiar ship already tied to a wharf.

“Look!” she exclaimed. “It’s the *Isle of Marga* . I wonder if Yakaw is still captain.”

“We’ll have to find out,” Candle told her. “There’s an open slip at that wharf. Let’s land there.”

Oceanvine steered toward the dock. Then once they were pointed the right way told Silverwind and Candle to strike the mainsail, while she piloted them into the vacant slip.

There was no one on the dock as they approached, so Candle jumped from the boat’s deck to secure the *Maiyim Bourne* to the cleats. After that he boarded the boat once more to help Silverwind and Oceanvine furl the mainsail.

“Now where might we find the harbormaster?” Silverwind wondered aloud.

“Let’s see if there’s anyone on the *Isle of Marga* to ask,” Oceanvine suggested. She led the way to the ship’s gangplank. “Ahoy the *Marga* !” she called out. “Permission to board?”

“What?” she heard a deep voice reply vaguely. Then Capatin Yakaw of Kif stepped into view. “Who is... Oceanvine! By Querna, it’s good to see you, lass!”

“And it’s wonderful to see you too, Yakaw,” she replied warmly. Yakaw was moving much more slowly than they remembered. When they had last seen him he was a large robust Granom who looked like he could have managed the ship all by himself. Now he leaned heavily on a cane as he made his way toward them.

“And Silverwind too. How are you? Yakaw called.

“Reasonably fine,” Silverwind replied cheerfully. “And you?”

“Hanging in there,” Yakaw replied with a smile. “And this is... Gran’s beard! Is this Candle? You’ve grown, boy!”

“Hiya, Captain!” Candle returned the greeting. “I’m fine too, but what happened to your leg?”

“What, this?” Yakaw countered. “It’s a long story, but we got caught in a bad storm two years ago. There was a big wave, a really big one, must have been ninety feet high if it was an inch. It swept right over the *Marga* like she wasn’t even there. Felt like we were under water forever, though I suppose it must have only been a few seconds. Fortunately all the hatches were battened down properly and the ship held together. After an eternity under the surface we shot back up like a cork. Lost most of our rigging. We all got knocked about pretty badly. I smashed my knee against a bulkhead in the wheel room. Good thing I wasn’t trying to steer from my usual spot outside, right?” he laughed. “We were left with the stump of the foremast and two sails, but managed to limp into Kodenet where we had to sit for over three months waiting for the repairs to be finished. That wasn’t so bad as it sounds, I got to spend a bit of time with my family on Kif. I was just glad to still be alive. Most ships that get hit by a wave like that would have been splinters. I don’t know why the *Marga* didn’t break up that day. Gran and Querna must have had other plans for this old troll, I guess. So what brings you lot to Castelon of all places?”

“Just passing through,” Silverwind replied.

“If you’re looking for passage, we’ll be casting off for Querna within the week,” Yakaw volunteered.

“Thanks, but this time we have our own transportation,” Oceanvine smiled and indicated the *Maiyim Bourne*.

“Interesting design,” Yakaw allowed. “Looks a little like some of those new yachts the rich kids have been racing in lately. You sure you feel comfortable sailing the outer seas in a boat like that? I’d hate you to meet a freak wave like the *Marga* did in that.”

“The cabin section can be sealed,” Candle explained, “And the sea anchor should keep us bow to the wind if we have to ride a storm out, although she’s fast enough that I’ll bet we can outrun a lot of weather.”

“We won’t be taking that sort of chance if we have a choice, however,” Silverwind added. “Actually, aside from paying our respects, we also came to ask where we might find the harbormaster.”

“You need not go too far for that,” Yakaw told him, pointing at the dock. “Here he comes now. Ahoy, Rogert!”

Rogert of Castelon was a short, sturdy Granom with dark gray hair and beard, carrying a clipboard with several sheets of paper on it. He turned when Yakaw hailed him and waved back. “Captain Yakaw,” he called back, “do you know where the owners of this boat are?”

“Right here, Rogert,” Yakaw replied easily. “Come on aboard and meet some friends of mine.” Rogert climbed up the gangplank and shook hands with Yakaw, who started introducing him to Silverwind.

“Silverwind?” Rogert repeated, shaking the wizard’s hand. “Like in the books?”

“Guilty, I’m afraid,” Silverwind replied, chuckling. “And this is my wife, Master Oceanvine.”

“Charmed,” Rogert told her with a nod of his head. “Your name is familiar to me as well.”

“And our junior partner, Journeyman Candle,” Silverwind concluded.

“Pleased to meet you,” Rogert told Candle.

“Likewise,” Candle replied. “You haven’t heard of me, have you?”

“Can’t say that I have,” Rogert shrugged. “Should I have?”

“Not really,” Candle laughed. “Somehow I always get left out of the books.”

“Well, now,” Rogert coughed to clear his throat, “this is a new situation by me. I know that mages are allowed to sail free on ships, the implication being is that even if their services are not needed, they are at the captain’s service, but there’s no custom for waiving port fees should they be sailing their own vessels.”

“I never thought there would be, Harbormaster,” Silverwind replied easily. “if you’d like to come aboard the *Maiyim Bourne* I’ll be glad to pay whatever the going rate might be. For that matter we were just asking Captain Yakaw where you might be because we weren’t sure where we should dock for the night.” They started walking back down the gangplank. Oceanvine invited Yakaw to join them.

“*Maiyim Bourne*, eh?” Rogert paused to note the name of the boat on a form on his clipboard. “Normally, I dock the smaller vessels two wharfs up the harbor from here,” Rogert replied, “but since you’re only here for the night and since you’re friends of Captain Yakaw, I see no harm in letting you stay tied up right here. If you were planning an extended visit it might have been different, but there are no big ships due in until next week. Even if one does enter the harbor today, we have another slip available. Now as for the port fees...”

The fees, as Silverwind suspected, were reasonable given the assumption that if you could afford to buy a boat or ship, you could afford the port fees. To Candle the price sounded high, but he shrugged it off, knowing that Nildar and Wenni had already arranged to pay the fee, in their own way. Rogert had a number of forms to fill out and have Silverwind as nominal captain to sign. While they took care of business, Oceanvine produced a pot of coffee, and, after checking the cooler, a plate full of pastries. With business concluded Rogert wished them a pleasant stay and started to get up to leave, but Silverwind stopped him.

“We originally set out for Castelon on the *Pride of Niah*,” he informed the harbormaster, “but the ship was destroyed somewhere this side of Meledirin three days ago.”

“You acquired a new boat and arrived from Meledirin in only three days, Silverwind?” Rogert asked.

“We got very lucky,” Silverwind allowed.

“You must be specially blessed by all the gods,” Rogert countered. Silverwind was forcefully reminded about what Candle had said about most heads of household being priests here and decided not to make a joke. “Just getting here in that time and in such a boat... Well, I hope you gave thanks to whatever gods were responsible for such a miracle.”

“We have, I assure you,” Silverwind replied. “But there were other survivors. We haven’t seen them since shortly after the shipwreck, but the captain and crew were filling a pair of the ship’s lifeboats and planning to take refuge on a nearby island.”

“Ah, yes,” Rogert breathed. “Thank you for reporting that. We have a rescue ship here in port. It’s one of two ships of the Wennil Coast Guard. I’ll let them know what you have told me and I’m sure they’ll leave on search and rescue with the evening tide.”

“Thank you, Harbormaster,” Silverwind replied. Rogert nodded and left.

“Well,” Candle concluded, “that pretty much wraps up whatever business we might have had in Castelon. We could leave now if we had to.”

“Candle,” Oceanvine admonished him. “We came here to pick up supplies for the trip north.”

“Such as?” Candle countered. “What do we need that we don’t have plenty of already?”

“Good point,” Oceanvine admitted. “Well it will be nice to eat in town, I suppose and this was a nice little shake down cruise. Yakaw, would you like a tour of our boat?”

“Yes, lass,” the Granomish captain replied. “I’d like that a lot. And then I think I’d like to take the three of you to a small inn not too far from the harbor. If you’re going to try some of the special foods they have in Wennil, you might as well try them at the best place in town.”

They left the next morning after bidding farewell to Captain Yakaw. “Maybe we’ll see you in Querna,” Oceanvine suggested.

“I’d like that, lass,” Yakaw replied.

“Next time it’s my turn to pay,” Oceanvine insisted.

Yakaw laughed, “We’ll see.”

Then they cast off as Silverwind piloted the boat out of the slip and into the harbor.

“I still don’t know why you felt the need to go out and buy food for the voyage,” Oceanvine complained.

Silverwind had been stubborn and insisted on buying a few staples like beans, meal and a few other dry goods. “I just don’t like leaving my fate in the hands of the gods,” was all he said about it. “Candle, hoist the jib.”

Granom

One

“Arithan’s on Marga,” Silverwind told them three days after they left Castelon.

“When last we heard, so was Geraint,” Oceanvine pointed out. “Do you think he may still be there?”

“It’s possible,” Silverwind allowed, “but it’s been a while. I doubt he’s there.”

“That all depends on how long he’d been there when we spoke to Elewys, if he had even arrived yet. We’re moving along at unprecedented speeds, so it’s quite possible we’ll get to see him there.”

“Much as I’d like to see Windchime again,” Silverwind replied, using Geraint’s former magename, “for his sake I hope he’s not still there.”

“Why ever not?” Oceanvine asked.

“Arithan’s curse in him is in remission, but it was never cured because he was unable to confront his fears. Arithan won’t have any trouble inflicting the nightmares on him once again, should he become aware of Windchime’s presence.”

“Well, Arithan knows we’re chasing him, but he may not know Geraint is on Marga, if he is. We’ll be there in three or at most four days if we can keep our current pace up.”

“Part of that was running with the wind from a small storm the day before yesterday,” Silverwind pointed out.

“I’m not counting that. I’m basing our normal cruising speed on the day we left Castelon and the speeds we’ve been maintaining today. In fact today has been a couple of knots slower than the first day, but

we're still hydroplaning. You were right. Once we're aloft, staying there is fairly easy."

"We might still get becalmed," Silverwind commented, "although the chances of that in these waters at this time of year are slim."

"Serp ho!" Candle shouted from the bow. "From the port bow, starboard bow and the port beam!"

"Three serps?" Oceanvine asked. "That can't be a coincidence."

"I'm sure it isn't," Silverwind replied, "not after our encounter with two of them last week. Besides there aren't that many serps left in the world. The chance of seeing so many of them in one voyage is ridiculous! I'm not too worried about the one on our left, it can't catch up to us, but the two in front, maybe you and Candle better be ready with wall wards. I'll try to sail the boat straight between them."

"Right," Oceanvine agreed and ran to the bow to tell Candle the plan.

They watched the approaching giant sea snakes, then just as they were about to cast their wards, both serps changed course and started swimming away from the *Maiyim Bourne*.

"Well," Candle shrugged, "That was exciting. Did you change your mind and just send them off to the happy mating grounds?"

"Not I," Oceanvine protested.

"Must have been your husband then," Candle concluded. "We may not have had much to do but the bit of excitement has left me hungry. Is it lunch time yet?"

"If you're hungry," Oceanvine told him tartly, "you know where the galley is. While you're in there, you may as well fix something for the rest of us." She went back to the helm and asked Silverwind, "Why did you change your mind?"

"About what?" he asked.

"The serps," Oceanvine told him. "If you were planning to fake their mating season again you certainly didn't need Candle and me casting protective wards."

"I didn't," Silverwind explained. "I thought one of you had."

"You mean they just changed their minds and swam away on their own?" Oceanvine asked. "Have you ever heard of that happening before?"

"Can't say that I have, no. Serps always attack boats and ships, it's a natural instinct for them to do so. That's why so few boats the size of *Maiyim Bourne* venture out on the outer seas."

"Even so," Oceanvine pointed out, "the incidence of serp attack world-wide is less than once per month. We've seen five now in the last week."

"Hey," Candle cut in, arriving with a platter of meat and bread similar to what Oceanvine had served their first day aboard, "we already know Arithan is aware of us and is trying to stop us. It's probably safe to assume he knows a way to control serps. So do we, really. We're just more concerned with making them go away instead of using them as tools."

“Candle’s got a good point,” Silverwind told Oceanvine, “We’ll need to expect similar attacks, although Arithan isn’t stupid when he finds this doesn’t work, he’s more likely to try something else.”

They sailed on until late afternoon when the wind dropped off to a mere breeze for an hour, causing the boat to slow down too much to remain aloft. The wind picked up again just after sunset, but by mutual agreement they had decided not to hydroplane after dark. Instead they would hoist the Emmine jib, which was not full enough to gather the wind necessary to hydroplane except in a very high wind, and then set the automatic navigator. Silverwind still thought they would be well advised to keep a watch all night, but that soon turned out to be impractical with only three crew members, so instead Oceanvine fashioned a ward around the boat that would wake them up if they were attacked or if conditions changed sufficiently for them to be alarmed.

The first night out, Candle thought they should use the automatic navigator while hydroplaning, but it soon became apparent that the simple steering equipment could not adjust quickly enough to the conditions while aloft and would not hold their course for very long. After that, they kept their hull in the water at night, although Silverwind agreed with Candle that if the moon, Midbar, had been full they might have continued aloft until they were ready to get some sleep.

The next day the winds were just short of what they needed to get aloft.

“Well, we knew there would be days like this,” Oceanvine sighed that afternoon. “Maybe more than we would like.”

“We’re not really sailing all that slowly,” Candle commented. “The gauge says we’re doing about eleven knots. There are ships that can’t do that.”

“This is a fast little boat,” Oceanvine agreed.

“What if we run with the wind for a while and use the spinnaker to get the speed we need for hydroplaning?” Candle suggested. “If we can hoist the Granomish jib fast enough, we might be able to stay aloft.”

“It’s worth a try,” Silverwind told them.

They tried, but no matter how fast they worked, the boat always sank back in the water whenever they struck the spinnaker.

“Too bad,” Candle said after their third attempt. “For a while I thought we had a solution. Maybe it’s just as well, though. It looks like we’re headed into a fog bank. Are you certain there are no navigational hazards in our way tonight?”

“As certain as I can be,” Oceanvine replied. “According to the charts there’s nothing between here and Granom, and we won’t reach the Granom Archipelgo until tomorrow sometime even if we can get aloft.”

“Good,” Candle replied. “Let’s stow the spinnaker and get some rest. We’re obviously stuck with our bottom in the water for the rest of the day.”

The gauge that measured speed on the *Maiyim Bourne* informed them that they were still moving along at a respectable six to eight knots whenever they happened to check it, but the fog bank they had sailed into had cut their visibility down to less than half a mile. Silverwind and Oceanvine combined skill and power to establish a low energy ward that encircled the boat at a radius of three miles. It was nothing more than a remote sensor that would activate their fog horn should another vessel intercept it. Candle stayed up late that night, worried about what the fog might be concealing, but eventually he grew tired and went to his cabin. All three mages were on deck when the first signs of false dawn made their way down through the fog.

"It's even thicker this morning," Oceanvine observed, bringing out mugs of coffee for them.

"It is," Silverwind agreed. "Still, we've come a long way and the wind is shifting from southeast to northeast, so I expect it to burn off soon."

"Northeast?" Candle asked, "That's not the prevailing wind direction at this latitude."

"No, it isn't," Silverwind replied. "We may be in for a storm."

"Or not," Oceanvine pointed out. "We could be on the north side of a low pressure center, but might as easily be to the south of a ridge of high pressure. We'll just have to see what comes our way," she concluded with unusual serenity and took a sip of her coffee.

Candle looked at her and asked, "Since when do you drink coffee?"

"With enough cream and sugar in it, it's not bad," Oceanvine replied. "although normally I only drink it to stay alert. Come to think about it, this coffee is much better than the stuff we get in Renton."

"Face it, Vine," Candle replied with a laugh. "It's a gift from the gods, or two of them anyway. Why shouldn't the food and drink be fit for them as well?"

The fog began to thin out half an hour later just after the sun had slipped over the eastern horizon. The wind picked up a bit and the air grew cooler. Then, the wind shifted again to the northwest quadrant and with amazing rapidity the fog was swept away, leaving behind it crystalline clear conditions.

"Cold front," Silverwind remarked.

However, Candle got suspicious and started scanning the water around them. "We're nearly surrounded," he informed them a minute later. "Biggest patch of oceanvine I've ever seen. Of course, I've only ever seen two others, but you know what I mean. The only exit is in the direction we came from, and it looks like it's trying to encircle us."

"Oceanvine doesn't work like that," Oceanvine told him. "It has sensor cells that can pick up the vibration of something moving in the water, but it moves directly toward its prey. I've never heard of a patch encircling something first."

"We'll have to resort to wards and fire, I fear," Silverwind, "and our course is directly into the wind, we'll have to tack for a while. It will lengthen the trip, but we'll be able to hydroplane again. But first let's get out of the carnivorous seaweed."

Oceanvine cast a bubble ward around the boat and maintained it as Silverwind steered the boat

northeast, trying to build up enough speed to get aloft. They were picking up speed but were still firmly in the water when the oceanvine came within one hundred yards of the *Maiyim Bourne*. Candle was prepared to start hurling fire spells when the large patch of Oceanvine opened up in front of them to create a wide, safe path. The hull of the boat lifted out of the water and they sailed on as the seaweed parted before them.

“What the heck did that?” Oceanvine asked.

“Another gift from the gods, I think,” Candle opined. “It would certainly be in keeping with some of what Wenni may have been hinting at. You remember what she said about putting a lot of work into the boat?”

“Could be,” Silverwind admitted. “Could be. If so it will make this trip a lot easier. I just wish we could ask them about that.” He looked around expectantly then muttered, “No, I didn’t think they’d bother to answer that one.”

An hour later the winds became more favorable and they were able stop tacking their way toward Granom. Because of all the delays they didn’t actually reach the archipelago until just after dawn the next morning, but by then they were in a position to use the spinnaker and were soon sailing at the highest velocities they had so far.

Silverwind checked and rechecked the charts as they sailed and just after noontime announced, “See that small island to the northwest? That’s mine.”

“Yours?” Candle asked.

“You’ve heard my titles,” Silverwind reminded him. “You know I’m the Marquess of Sentendir? Well, that’s Sentendir. To tell the truth, I’ve never knowingly seen it before either.”

“Who lives there?” Candle asked interestedly.

“No one lives there,” Silverwind laughed. “That’s why King Ksaveras gave it to me. It was a cheap means to reward me for a job he considered to be of priceless value. And being that I was human and not a normal member of his court he knew I wouldn’t exploit the honor.”

“Then where is that smoke coming from?” Candle countered. Sure enough there was a thick column of smoke rising from somewhere on the island.

“Can’t rightly say,” Silverwind admitted. “Maybe I have squatters. Let’s go find out, shall we?”

“Surely you don’t care whether there’s actually anyone living on that island, do you?” Oceanvine asked.

“Of course I care,” Silverwind told her. “It’s my island, I’m entitled to a share of any revenues generated here.”

“I never thought you were one to buy in to the privileges of nobility,” Candle commented.

“I’m not, really,” Silverwind shrugged, “but I am curious as to just who is on that island.”

“Candle,” Oceanvine put in, “I recall it wasn’t all that long ago that you took the existence of the nobility for granted and thought any form of democracy ridiculous.”

“Hey, even the king is in favor of a more democratic system.”

“For men,” Oceanvine pointed out. “I notice that women still don’t have the vote. You would think we were Granomen!”

“Candle, prepare to drop the spinnaker,” Silverwind ordered.

“Aye, aye, sir!” Candle laughed and made his way to the bow.

“I agree with you,” Silverwind assured his wife. “King Hacon should have given everyone the right to vote for their Members of Parliament. You would have thought the bad example in Granom and the good one in Bellinen would have taught him better. But he was still a young man and on the throne less than two years, I suppose he was entitled to one or two really stupid mistakes. Ready about! Drop the spinnaker!” he shouted so Candle could hear him.

The spinnaker dropped immediately and *Maiyim Bourne* started slowing down and slowly dropping back into the water, then the hull kissed the sea and the deceleration became more rapid. Water sprayed in every direction and the hull shuddered in what was now a very familiar manner.

When the boat was running stably once more, Oceanvine said, “I’ll run forward and help stow the spinnaker. Which jib do you want?”

“The Granomish one,” Silverwind replied. “I like that jib. It’s large but a good serviceable sail nonetheless. Hold off hoisting it until after we come about, though.” Oceanvine went forward and together she and Candle got the spinnaker safely put away. Then Silverwind shouted, “Ready about! Hard alee!”

Two

Sentendir was mostly surrounded by pebble beaches and jagged rocks, but after sailing back and forth along the shore for an hour, they found a small, thin stretch of sand. Silverwind brought *Maiyim Bourne* up and on that sandy beach and Candle jumped off the bow and set the anchor in the firm soil beyond the sand while Silverwind and Oceanvine struck and furled the mainsail. Then Oceanvine cast a protective ward around the boat and they started looking for whoever had started the fire.

They trudged back over three miles until Candle announced, “We were just off this spit of land when we spotted the smoke. Should have used a tracer spell to mark the spot.”

“That would have been a good idea,” Silverwind commented. “I think the smoke was coming from somewhere off the beach. Let’s look inland.”

They wandered around that part of the island for the rest of the afternoon, but found no signs of intelligent life - not even so much as a cold firepit.

“So what did we see?” Oceanvine asked as they walked back to the *Maiyim Bourne*.

“We saw a plume of smoke,” Candle replied. “Maybe we were looking in the wrong place.”

"I doubt it," Silverwind commented. "We covered a lot of ground here and we were all certain this is where the smoke was coming from."

"Then how do you explain smoke without a fire?" Candle demanded.

"I don't," Silverwind replied with a shrug. "Just another mystery of life, I guess."

"I don't like this," Oceanvine told them. "Someone wanted us to stop here. Why?"

"Getting paranoid?" Candle asked archly.

"Maybe," Oceanvine admitted, "but it just seems too suspicious that we would see smoke on Silverwind's island just as we're passing by, but when we get to the area the smoke was coming from there was nothing to see. Sorry, but I just don't believe it."

"You might be right," Candle allowed, "but why? No, cancel that, I just thought of a good reason why. Maybe whoever it was wanted us to get off the *Maiyim Bourne*."

"I hadn't thought of that," Silverwind replied. "We'd better hurry back and hope the boat is still where we left it."

Even in a hurry, it took half an hour to return to the sandy beach where they had left the *Maiyim Bourne* beached and anchored. The boat was still there, but when Candle went to retrieve the anchor the rope attached to it had been cut and there were more footprints around the edge of Oceanvine's ward than could be accounted for by the three mages.

"Where did you say Arithan is?" Candle asked Silverwind.

"On Marga," Silverwind replied worriedly. He checked the status of his tracer spell and reported, "He's still on Marga."

"Is there anyway he might have transferred your tracer to something or someone else?" Candle pressed.

"The spell was on Arithan himself," Silverwind replied, "not some object I attached to his clothing. He might discover it and counter it, but he can't move it to someone else. There are other possibilities, however."

"We already know Arithan has built up his cult again," Silverwind continued. "This may have been done by a cult member or maybe a group of them. A small group of people might easily have eluded us today. My guess is that they were trying to either steal or destroy the *Maiyim Bourne*."

"Fat chance on either attempt," Candle scoffed. "What other possibility did you think of?"

"Arithan isn't the only demon on the loose at the moment," Silverwind replied.

"I don't think my ward would have been proof against the power of a demon," Oceanvine commented. "It must have been people, and I doubt anyone, even you, dear, could have gotten past this ward."

"I won't take that challenge," Silverwind laughed.

It was nearly dark before they were back underway, but rather than stay on Sentendir for the night, where they might come under attack, they sailed on under the full light of Midbar until they came to a small fishing port on Mahdir, the next island north of Sentendir.

Sometime after they had gone to sleep the temperatures dropped and the skies clouded over and it started snowing so that when they awoke at dawn, the dock was slippery with a three inch-thick blanket of white, fluffy flakes.

“Hey!” Candle complained. “It’s cold out here.”

“It is early winter, Candle,” Oceanvine told him.

“But it was warm in the cabin,” Candle protested. “Really warm.”

“A perpetual heating spell?” Silverwind mused.

“More like it maintains a constant temperature,” Oceanvine disagreed. “We’ve had a few warm days since we left Wennil and the cabin was comfortably cool then.”

They had a warm breakfast and spent another hour trying to find someone to pay their port fees too, but eventually learned that the small village did not normally charge transient boaters, so Silverwind insisted on making what turned out to be a well-received donation to the local fisherman’s fund before they cast off and resumed their journey.

The *Maiyim Bourne* was covered with snow too, but Silverwind caused it all to rise off the deck and drop into the harbor without any visible effort, although the decks were slick with patches of ice for the remainder of their voyage to Marga.

However, the winds were perfect for the last leg of their voyage, as though Maiyim, herself, was endeavoring to get them there with all due haste. The *Maiyim Bourne* arrived in Kodanetport with her colorful spinnaker flared out before her. Candle was at the helm and as Silverwind and Oceanvine dropped the spinnaker and splashed down spectacularly, they saw that their boat had drawn a crowd about the waterfront, so that the wharf they approached was crowded with sailors and other on-lookers.

Silverwind and Oceanvine furled the mainsail and Candle piloted them up to the wharf. After the boat was secured they spent a while answering questions about the boat from the crowd.

“Silverwind!” they heard a shout. Coming through the massed on-lookers was Silverwind’s erstwhile partner, Geraint. “You always did know how to make an entrance!” Geraint was smiling broadly, but his face was heavily lined and he had large dark bags under his eyes.

“Geraint!” Silverwind greeted his friend with a warm hug, “I didn’t expect you would still be on Marga.”

“Something’s come up,” Geraint replied seriously. “Something we could use your help with if you have the time.”

“We’re in the middle of something,” Silverwind hedged, “but our problems may be related. Let’s discuss this privately on the *Maiyim Bourne* .”

“*Maiyim Bourne*?” Geraint echoed. “Interesting name for a flying boat. Where did you find her?”

“In the Wennil Archipelago,” Silverwind replied, “Tell you all about it later. We probably ought to pay our port fees first though.”

“No problem,” Geraint laughed. “I was in the harbormaster’s office when you were spotted entering the harbor. Either he or one of his deputies ought to be here any minute.”

Geraint was only partially right. The Harbormaster and two deputies all arrived soon after, eager to get a close look at the boat that seemed to fly over the water. Candle gave them a guided tour of the vessel while Oceanvine prepared pots of tea and coffee and set out platters of Emmine-style pastries from the cooler she hoped would go over well here in Granom. Silverwind and Geraint sat out on the deck, waiting until the harbormaster and his men were ready to talk business.

“It’s nice in here,” the harbormaster commented as he entered the galley area. “How do you do it?”

“Heating spell,” Silverwind told him. It was half true.

“I must remember to sail with a wizard if I ever go to sea again,” the harbormaster laughed, “I’ll obviously be far more comfortable than I was last time. We were sailing on a milk-run to the Isle of Fire and back in the middle of the winter. Didn’t run into any bad storms, but that might have been better. Instead we had freezing salt spray both ways. By the time we returned to Marga, the rigging was covered in salt ice several inches thick. Every so often large chunks would break off and come crashing down on the deck, and the deck was slick with ice of its own so trying to jump out of the way in a hurry was likely to land you flat on your face. And the entire time it was cold. Never thought I’d be warm again. I started volunteering to work extra watches in the galley just to be near the ovens.”

They talked for a while longer and when the pastry was gone, the harbormaster collected the boat’s entry fees and a deposit toward their exit permit as well. When he and his men had left, Silverwind and company started telling Geraint the full truth behind their boat.

“A genuine gift from the gods, eh?” Geraint asked with a chuckle. “I’m not surprised in the least. And while I’m curious about that amazing cooler of yours, I think I’d like to take you all pub crawling around Kodanet tonight. But first let me tell you about what’s been happening here.

“It all began late last summer,” Geraint told them, “when I heard rumors of a crop failure of the hops here. I had several other errands to run and deals to make on the way, but my main reason for getting up here was to corner the market on whatever quality material was left of the crop. Precious little of it was left too. Anyway the problem was a rare form of leaf wilt and a really nasty one too. It’s the sort of thing that leaves its spores in the ground and can last for years. That sort of thing will destroy the economy here so naturally I tried investigating the matter. I was merely hoping to find a way to destroy the spores, but there was a magical component to the disease and I was already suffering from the nightmares again when I left Keesport.”

“So we heard,” Silverwind replied. “We saw Elewys on our way through town.” He went on to describe their mission in North Horalia and after.

“Arithan?” Geraint asked hoarsely. “I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised, especially since I have the nightmares every night now. During the day I can feel them all around me, always just out of reach. But how can that be if he was down on Horalia?”

“He was, but some of his cult may have been up here,” Silverwind replied. “He used his pawns to burn our house in Renton.”

“You didn’t mention that,” Geraint accused him.

“Sorry,” Silverwind replied, “so much has happened since then that it’s not exactly a recent event to me any longer.”

“Demon cultists,” Geraint growled. “What a bunch of morons. You would have thought a few thousand years of cautionary tales would have taught folks that demons always lie, especially to their followers. Yes. That might explain the magical component to this disease.”

“You’re both overlooking another possibility,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Yeah,” Candle agreed. “Arithan isn’t the only demon on the loose. In fact of the five only Pohn is currently imprisoned on his island.”

“Exactly,” Oceanvine chimed in. “Arithan was working in concert with Pohn in North Horalia. I think he came here to team up with another of his brothers.”

“An interesting point,” Silverwind mused, “but which one? It’s been eight years since the last time I studied the known attributes of the demons and at the time I was mostly interested in Pohn and Arithan since they were the only ones at large at the time. I’m not sure I really remember the others well enough to know neither who we’re likely to encounter nor what weaknesses if any we can exploit.”

“If I had to guess,” Candle offered, “I’d say it was Gredac. His biggest strength is related to the plant kingdom. Any of the others could generate a plant disease, I suppose, but this is really more his style than the others.”

“You remember that from when we were in Merinne?” Oceanvine asked, impressed in spite of herself.

“Sure,” Candle shrugged. “You guys were busy working on that counter curse, but I read the rest of those demon books from the library. Serabawa and I discussed them a couple times.”

“Good!” Silverwind commended him. “We may need to rely on your memory of the properties of the five demons. Well, we can look at your leaf wilt tomorrow morning, Geraint. Why don’t we check out some of the pubs?”

Three

“Well,” Oceanvine asked Candle, “is it Gredac this time?”

“I don’t know,” Candle admitted. “I remember that Gredac was at his strongest when dealing with plant-related curses, but I don’t recall what spell signatures to look for. It’s not Arithan, at least not completely.”

“Yes, I can see that,” Oceanvine nodded. They were standing in the middle of a large hops yard. Normally by this time of year the vines would have been cut back and the final crop of hop cones

removed for processing, but at Geraint's insistence a section of this one had been left intact. They started walking back between the lines of poles and twine. "I wonder if Silverwind will remember more. To tell the truth I don't think those books we read in Merinne described the spell signatures very well. We recognized those of Arithan and Pohn because we'd encountered Pohn and Silverwind had also met Arithan before, but Gredac and the others are complete strangers."

"Some of them have been out of action longer than anyone alive," Candle agreed. "Well, since we don't really know how reliable the books on their attributes are, we'll just have to muddle through as usual. Maybe we should stop by Querna when we finish here and do a bit of research at the University."

"They may not let you in," Oceanvine pointed out. "You aren't a student there."

"True enough," Candle agreed easily, "but you and Silverwind are alumni and Silverwind is former faculty. I doubt we'll have any trouble getting in. Now this is interesting."

"What?"

"Maybe it's just that I don't have any previous experience with this demon, but look at the variations in the Bond of Aritos on this withered leaf."

"What Bond of Aritos?" Oceanvine asked, just before her jaw dropped open. The leaf Candle was holding did, indeed have a dark brown pattern of marks on it that appeared to be the sign they knew of as the Bond of Aritos. She closed her eyes to get a better look at the mystic aspects of the Bond. "That is interesting. See how its aura seems almost plant-like; as if it has roots and branches. We need to show this to Silverwind."

"Just what I was thinking, but it's still active. We need to keep this out of sight or it may affect some poor innocent who doesn't know how to protect him or herself," Candle pointed out.

"I have a small notebook in my purse," she replied, pulling the book out. She held it open and Candle dropped the leaf in. She noticed he was tense, but visibly relaxed once the book had been closed around the leaf. "You were containing the effect of the curse?" she asked.

"It's pretty nasty," he admitted as they started walking back. "It nearly snagged me, it was that close. I didn't want to take a chance of it possibly taking you unaware. I mean you're good, one of the best..."

"It's like Silverwind's told you dozens of times. Anyone can be caught by surprise. The first time he and Geraint ran into Arithan is an example. Arithan was more than they expected and they got cursed. The second time, however, Silverwind was ready for Arithan's favorite trick and was able to beat him senseless."

"And while he wasn't paying attention I gave him a taste of his own medicine," Candle finished. "Yeah, surprise can make all the difference."

"True," Oceanvine agreed. "You may not have been able to do that to him if he had been paying attention. Then again maybe you might have anyway. He seriously underestimated you. He knew you were an apprentice and just assumed you wouldn't know anything that could hurt him. He didn't know you were already doing master-level magic, well, along some lines anyway."

"It's amazing some of the basic stuff I didn't know until I got to University, though. There are times I think you and Silverwind cut a few corners on my education."

“Maybe we did, but it wasn’t intentional, you know. The problem was that any time we tried to teach you a basic spell, you learned it fairly rapidly and before we could show you the next step, you had already gone on to the one after that. It was a bit disconcerting, let me tell you. With the rate you were learning at, it was hard to remember that you didn’t know some of the easy stuff.”

“I suppose,” Candle admitted.

“It doesn’t seem to have hurt you,” Oceanvine pointed out. “You graduated a year early.”

“I got lucky. None of the professors tested me on the easy stuff and when I could do some more advanced techniques better than some of them, they naturally assumed I was all set on the basics. My dorm mates helped out on the stuff I didn’t know and I helped them with the harder lessons. I’m not sure who got the better of the deal,” he laughed.

They went back to the *Maiyim Bourne* but Silverwind and Geraint weren’t there, so they decided to look for them at the inn Geraint was staying in. “I’ll bet you anything they’re drinking *als* and comparing the relative merits of the various local kamo biscuits,” Oceanvine told Candle.

“Wouldn’t surprise me in the least,” Candle laughed. Sure enough Silverwind and Geraint were nursing pints of the dark Granomish ale at the bar with a plate of dark red kamo biscuits between them.

“I don’t care who you said made better kamos here twenty years ago,” Geraint was saying. “These are the best in Kodanet today. Besides how can you remember a kamo that far back. Maybe your memory is off. Maybe... What are you two laughing about?” Candle and Oceanvine dissolved in laughter and the other two just looked at each other, puzzled.

“I told you so,” Oceanvine said to Candle when she finally caught her breath.

“Hey! I agreed with you,” he countered. “Silverwind, we have something to show you, but we probably ought to do it back at the boat. It involves a new variant of the Bond of Aritos.”

“It probably isn’t necessary to go all the way back there,” Silverwind scoffed. “I’m sure we would have sufficient privacy in a booth.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” Candle shrugged, “but I’ll keep the dirty thing in check while you take a peak.”

“Is it that virulent?” Silverwind asked.

“Take a look for yourself,” Candle invited him, gesturing toward one of the booths.

Silverwind and Geraint picked up their glasses and the plate of biscuits and headed for the booth with Candle. Oceanvine arrived a moment later with a pint of ale for Candle and one of sweet cider for herself. “Thanks,” Candle told her.

“You’re welcome,” she replied taking a sip of her drink before reaching into her purse. Finally she brought out the notebook and asked Candle, “Ready?”

“Ready,” he confirmed.

She opened the notebook and showed the leaf to Silverwind and Geraint. They were silent for a full minute, before Geraint suddenly turned away from it, shaking violently.

“Put it away,” Silverwind told her quickly. She closed the notebook back up and they all examined Geraint. The former mage was still shaking and twitching, but staring at something only he could see. “Geraint? Can you hear me?” Silverwind asked.

“I doubt it,” Candle opined. Silverwind turned to chide Candle for the remark, but noticed that Candle had his eyes closed, trying to concentrate on what was happening to Geraint. “The sight of the Bond sent him into this,” Candle reported calmly, “but it only activated what was already there. Take a look at the spell signature of his curse, both of you. I doubt it looked like this before he got to Marga, but I think the original curse by Arithan has been further influenced here. It looks more like the signature of the Bond on the leaf than the sort Arithan inspires and creates. He must have been in contact or seen a copy of the Bond here.”

“Good diagnosis, Candle,” Silverwind commended him.

“I can do better than that,” Candle told him, “but it’s going to take a long while.” Before Silverwind or Oceanvine could stop him he started working on unraveling Geraint’s curse.

Silverwind and Oceanvine watched as he studied the curse’s aura, so deep in his trance he wouldn’t have paid attention to their warnings, if he had consciously heard them. Candle spent most of the next fifteen minutes just studying the nature of the curse he had decided, perhaps rashly, to dispel.

He was interested to see the same plant-like structures in the aura of Geraint’s curse that he had observed in the Bond of Aritos on the leaf. The “roots” of the curse had grown into the original one as had been set by Arithan, both feeding off and masking it at the same time, while the branches grew like vines, trying to encircle and choke Geraint. Candle was having second thoughts about what he was about to attempt, when he remembered that the demon Gredac was vulnerable to spells that could heal and nurture plants. Just how vulnerable varied both by the spell and its intensity, of course. He found himself wishing he had the assistance of Master Waterfall, Airblossom’s husband. Waterfall was an expert on plant diseases and would probably be able to handle this as easily as he had trouble not stumbling over his own feet when not engaged in his magical specialty.

Candle had only been taught fairly basic healing spells at University; it wasn’t a subject he had chosen to specialize in. But his talent for turning basic skills to more advanced techniques served him well here. Then with care he cast a gentle healing spell.

Most mages developed metaphors through which to work their spells, especially the higher ones. Candle had never understood why so many, however, would hamper their effectiveness by using the same sort of metaphor for every spell they cast. Oceanvine saw spells as various patterns; that was better than most of his classmates who would see spell auras as living things or forms of machinery. But the more specific a metaphor was the more narrow its effectiveness was, although a specific metaphor would be more efficacious within its range. So he preferred to think of each spell in different ways. He used patterns, mechanistic and animistic metaphors and others, depending on the situation. This time the obvious way to think of the curse was to see it as a plant that was sick. He had to decide how the metaphoric plant was ill, however and eventually he chose to see it as infested with parasitic insects. Therefore he thought of his spell as an insecticide.

That was beneficial, but the plant was still sorely injured. So Candle tried a blessing. It did no harm, but the curse didn’t lift at all. Finally he tried a straight healing charm, but instead of trying to heal Geraint

directly; he tried to heal the curse. At first he thought he might have made the matter worse, for the metaphoric plant grew larger and lusher, but then as it reached full health, it faded away. Geraint's original, Arithan-cast, curse was still there, but the new one had been countered.

Geraint blinked and then fell over across the table for a few seconds, but as he sat back up again, he was smiling. "I didn't realize," he said enigmatically.

"Realize what?" Oceanvine asked.

"The nightmares I've had since I arrived. They weren't exactly the same as the ones I had before. I should have known something had changed."

"I wasn't able to affect the spell Arithan put on you, though," Candle told him.

"No, I can tell, Candle," Geraint replied, "but I've lived with that one so long it's almost like an old buddy I share war stories with."

"That one goes too deep for anyone but you to cure," Silverwind told his old friend.

"You've said that before," Geraint replied, "and I guess you ought to know, but not everyone has your strength. What I don't have is the willingness to try to face Arithan down and if I cannot do that, I'll just have to live as I am. I'm used to it by now."

"You underestimate yourself," Oceanvine told him. "You've held up under that curse longer than Silverwind ever did and you're still sane and much more. There's a lot of strength in you; the strength to get on and do what you must. And don't you forget it!"

Geraint smiled. "You sounded a lot like Elewys when you said that. Silverwind, do you think they might be related?" he asked whimsically.

"Depends," Silverwind shrugged. "Does Elewys have any relatives on Kern?"

"Not that I know of. Does Oceanvine have any relatives in Keesport?"

"None I'm aware of," Silverwind replied off-handedly.

"I would be proud to call Elewys my sister," Oceanvine threw back at them. She was about to say more but the ground suddenly shook and glasses and bottles rattled on the tables and at the bar. One of the barmaids screamed, but the rest were trying to keep the bottles from falling over.

"Tremor," Silverwind commented without much emotion. "Not too violent. I don't recall, though. Does Marga have a history of tremors?"

"There was a major quake here about two hundred fifty years ago, but nothing worth noting since," Geraint replied. Another tremor started, lasting a bit longer and a bit stronger.

"Maybe we should head back to the boat," Candle suggested.

"I'm not sure that would be wise," Oceanvine told him. "If the quake is happening at sea, it could cause a great wave to sweep the waterfront and, who knows how far inland."

“That was sort of what I had in mind,” Candle replied. “If there’s a wave coming, the water should pull back from the shore like the tide going out first. You know that as well as I. If we’re at the boat, we’ll have fair warning.” The ground shook again, not any more violently, but the deep rumbling lasted much longer. Then, just as the tremors ended, an ear-splitting sound, halfway between a roar and a scream pieced the air. “Uh, forget the boat, I think this was definitely land-bound.”

Silverwind slapped a few coins on the table to cover their bill and all four charged out the door. There was an explosion at the north end of the town and they headed in that direction. They knew they were getting closer to the site of the disturbance, when the panicked crowds heading in the opposite direction made any headway nearly impossible.

“Now I know how herring feel during their mating season,” Candle declared as they pushed their way “upstream”. However the crowds thinned out all too soon and they found themselves running through the area that had been deserted.

“Listen,” Silverwind commanded suddenly, bringing them to a halt.

“I don’t hear anything,” Oceanvine replied softly. “Where’s Arithan?”

“That way,” Silverwind pointed in a direction no street led directly. “A few streets away, I think. Get your best spells ready.”

“Uh, maybe I should just sit this one out?” Geraint asked. They turned to look at him. “I mean I’m likely to be a liability.”

“I’ll bet you can get in one or two really good shots,” Silverwind told him. “You were the one who dropped a building on him in Rjalkatyp as I recall.”

“A long time ago, Silverwind,” Geraint hedged. “I haven’t done stuff like that in a long time.”

“Subtlety works on Arithan better,” Candle told him. “Tell you what, why don’t you work with me. I pulled a stunt a few years ago that we may be able to work a variant of on him.” Geraint looked at Candle and slowly nodded. “Silverwind, let’s split up again,” Candle suggested. “You and Oceanvine keep going that way. Geraint and I will do the same, but from the next street to the right.”

“It’s a plan,” Silverwind nodded, “and it worked before. Good hunting.”

Candle nodded and led Geraint up to the next street. Silverwind and Oceanvine watched them go. “Do you think he’s going to try the same thing he did in Rjalkatyp?” she asked. “He got lucky that time, you know. Arithan was distracted.”

“I suspect he’s hoping we’re going to provide the distraction,” Silverwind shrugged. “Okay, they’re at the corner, let’s go.”

They trotted up three blocks, keeping pace with Candle and Geraint but it was on the third corner that those two, not quite parallel streets converged. There was a loud, roaring crash and a column of dust and smoke rose high into the sky from two blocks away. “Let’s try that again,” Silverwind told the others. “Vine and I’ll go around the block this time.” Oceanvine bit back her automatic correction and instead made Silverwind try to keep up with her.

As she rounded the second block with Silverwind several steps behind her, she discovered they had

reached the edge of town and were now facing a large hop garden. There they were met by the sight of a collapsed and burning building, but the culprit was not immediately in sight. But as they turned to look across the hop garden, they saw a path of destruction weaving across the garden. At the end of the path they saw two figures. One was roughly seven feet tall, with long horns protruding from his temples and eyes that glowed a bright yellowish-green. That was Arithan in what they believed was his natural form. Beside him was a somewhat shorter, less human-like figure. The other demon stood a mere five and a half feet tall and was skeletally thin and had green skin and dark green hair. He also had orange eyes and the blocky teeth of a mad herbivore.

"It's definitely Gredac," Oceanvine commented. "No other demon looks like that."

"Unless they wanted to," Silverwind told her, "but from what I've heard they wouldn't want to. And there's our old friend Arithan."

Before they could make their first move, Geraint and Candle, at the other side of the garden and about thirty feet apart, started their attack against Arithan. Geraint had hoped to drop another building on the demon, but failing that he used levitation to throw a large boulder at him. Arithan was ready however and used a spell of his own to deflect the boulder, but the first boulder was there to distract Arithan from the second, which was flying at him from behind. It almost worked, but at the last moment Arithan jumped high and the huge stone sailed under him, forcing Geraint to jump to the side. He landed on his face.

Gredac grunted something in a language long forgotten by mortals.

"My friends?" Arithan replied sarcastically. "I thought they were your friends." Gredac grunted an interrogative, but Arithan turned his attention to Geraint. "Windchime? Is that you? If I had known you were here, I'd have paid a call, I assure you, but still I have something for you." Gredac roared something, but Arithan ignored him and waved his hands. Geraint began to scream. But the scream didn't last long and was replaced by Arithan's. The demon fell to the ground and growled, "Candle! I'd know that touch anywhere." He got to his feet, but instead of his normal gray skin, he was bright green with pink spots.

"Ha!" laughed Candle. "Haven't you figured out how to get rid of Silverwind's curse yet? It's really simple. Here let me." Suddenly Arithan's coloration reversed so that now he was predominantly pink but with bright green spots.

Behind him Gredac was battling Silverwind and Oceanvine. The married pair were mixing plant healing charms with defensive wards leaving Gredac slightly drained and increasingly frustrated.

"This isn't going fast enough," Silverwind complained. "Candle and Geraint will need our help with Arithan."

"So you say," Oceanvine retorted. "I don't know what Candle had in mind, but I'm willing to bet he's the one mage Arithan really fears, besides you maybe."

"Flattery," Silverwind laughed. "We're still only fighting Gredac to a standstill; our healing spells are only having a slight effect on him. Whoa!"

Gredac had just tried a physical counter-attack by causing his arm to grow like a parody of a tree limb off of which all the leaves had been blasted. It scraped viciously at Silverwind and Oceanvine and Oceanvine just barely managed to deflect it with a simple but powerful curtain ward.

“Maybe we need something other than general healing spells,” Oceanvine suggested. “Something more specific.”

“You mean we need to cure Gredac?” Silverwind asked, sending another powerful healing charm at the demon. “I’m game, but what are we trying to cure him of?”

Meanwhile Candle and Geraint were still attacking Arithan. Geraint had felt shaking and worried when he first started attacking Arithan, but aside from the brief period in which Arithan was trying to reactivate Geraint’s nightmares, he was feeling increasingly better. They both tried a variety of spells limited only by their imaginations and ability to harness power, but Arithan had thousands of years of experience over them and did not so much repulse their spells as deflect them.

Suddenly Arithan erected a quick ward between him and Candle and Geraint. Then he turned toward Gredac and cast a spell. A moment later Arithan was speeding out of sight in the same manner he had vacated the scene of destruction in Northerton. Gredac was now on his own against the four mages.

“Healing spells,” Candle told Geraint. “Gredac is unique among the demons in that he is basically a disease. At least that seems to be the best tack to take when fighting him.”

“What sort of healing spells?” Geraint asked.

“Ones that heal plants work best. Ones that specifically heal the damage he does are best of all.”

“Ah,” Geraint nodded, Then he sank to the ground with his eyes closed. “Cover me,” he told the journeyman as he attempted to sink into a self-hypnotic trance. Twenty-five years earlier he wouldn’t have needed this crutch to perform any but the most advanced magic, but he was long out of practice and what he wanted to do now would need him utterly focused on the task at hand and this was the only way to do that while still staying relaxed enough to let the magic flow. Candle warded Geraint while Gredac tried a physical attack on them.

Meanwhile Silverwind and Oceanvine were experimenting with various healing spells, but none were doing much more than to get Gredac annoyed. Suddenly, however, Gredac screamed in genuine pain and Oceanvine knew someone had hit paydirt. She examined what was happening and saw what Geraint’s spell was doing to the demon and reached into her purse and drew out a mage stone. From its red light she knew she had drawn out her journeywoman’s stone. The stone had great sentimental value to her and she didn’t want to destroy it, but swallowing hard, she used the stone to magnify the same healing spell that had caused Gredac such pain. The stone cracked and Gredac was engulfed in blindingly bright red light. His arms shrunk back to their normal size and he gradually became less emaciated. All the while he screamed like a tormented soul and then without warning he dived into the soil of the hop garden and burrowed straight down.

Silverwind examined the area mystically and found that Gredac was traveling along a mystic pathway similar to the ones that had been in North Horalia and on the Isle of Fire. He closed his eyes and methodically closed up that pathway in the same way he had the ones in Rjalkatyp and North Horalia , only this time he had help and Oceanvine added her expertise quietly and efficiently. She didn’t try to beat him to the job, but instead kept pace with him and eased the process as the path was permanently closed.

“Did you do that?” Candle asked Geraint, referring to Gredac’s defeat.

“I think so, yes,” Geraint replied, “but I got the idea from you. I’ve been here trying to cure the leaf wilt that’s infected the hops. I’ve been fairly effective, but the cures were only temporary. It seemed to me that the reason for that must have been Gredac himself so I tried the same spell on him. You saw the results.”

“Uh, how are you feeling?” Candle asked hesitantly.

“Not bad,” Geraint replied with a smile, “and you?”

”No, I mean...”

“I know what you mean,” Geraint laughed. “The nightmares. Yes they seem to be gone, possibly even permanently. It seems Silverwind was right, I should have confronted Arithan again long ago. Think of all the time I wasted.”

“Maybe not,” Silverwind disagreed as he approached. “It had to be when you were ready and you also had to face Arithan himself to make it permanent. I thought I had beaten the curse the first time we met Pohn in North Horalia, but it came back a year later on the anniversary.” He meant the anniversary of their first encounter with Arithan many years earlier. “I wasn’t completely cured until I faced Arithan in Rjalkatyp eight years ago, so even if I had persuaded you to join us in North Horalia it wouldn’t have been a permanent cure. At the time neither of us knew there could even be a cure.”

“We both should have known better,” Geraint pointed out. “Anything magic can do, it can undo, short of death, of course. You’ve said it often enough.”

“I have,” agreed Silverwind, “but just because something is possible, it doesn’t mean we might necessarily know how. Still, it all worked out. Too bad Arithan got away again. It looked like you two had the upper hand over him.”

“He hasn’t completely recovered from the Isle of Fire,” Candle reported. “He still had the green skin and pink spots. He’s been hiding it with an illusion spell.”

“But Candle here, reversed the color scheme,” Geraint laughed.

“Not really,” Candle admitted. “I used another illusion spell. He could have dispelled it easily enough if he had realized what it was, but he honestly thought I’d changed his skin color like Silverwind did. I could have, I suppose, but not without careful preparation. I’m pretty good, I think, but I’m not quite that good. Not yet anyway. Maybe when I’m a wizard I’ll be able to handle spells like that on the fly, but not today.”

“Arithan is currently headed southwest,” Oceanvine announced. “Not really headed anywhere directly, but I think he’s off of Marga. He must have run to wherever he hid his boat.”

“We’ll have to follow him, of course,” Silverwind replied. He turned toward Geraint. “How much help do you need cleaning up Gredac’s damage here, Windchime?”

“Windchime,” Geraint repeated. “It’s been decades since I used that name.”

“It’s been years since you really were Master Windchime,” Silverwind pointed out.

“You’re right,” Geraint replied, “It seems to fit better now than it has for years. Yes, I can be Windchime again, sometimes anyway.”

“Welcome back,” Silverwind told him. Oceanvine leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. Candle winked at him. “However, you didn’t answer the question; are you going to need help cleaning up here?”

“The local mages ought to be able to handle it now that Gredac is gone and unable to renew his curse on the hop plants. There’s a master who comes here as part of his regular circuit. I’ll leave him some instructions so he can double check the local journeymen’s work. After that we’re free to leave.”

“We?” Silverwind asked.

“My business here was done weeks ago,” Windchime replied easily. “I stayed to help out because I never could just walk away from people in trouble, but that’s over now too. Ships don’t dock here all that frequently in the winter, if I don’t leave with you I could be stuck sitting around here for weeks. Besides it’s been years since we traveled together, and you do have a spare cabin.”

“I don’t know where we’re headed next,” Silverwind pointed out.

“It doesn’t matter,” Windchime told him. “Kodanet’s great for a pub crawl during the tourist season, but it’s deadly quiet in the winter. Besides we’re well overdue for a heavy snowfall. Best to get south while the getting is good. You can drop me off at the first major shipping port we happen on.”

“Depending on where we are bound after that, you may want to stay with us longer,” Candle pointed out.

“Could be,” Windchime agreed. “We’ll see where you’re headed. So where to next?”

“Let’s see,” Silverwind replied, checking the tracer on Arithan, “He’s slowed down again, no surprise there; he’s probably exhausted. And he is moving in a more southerly direction now, he’s at least a hundred miles away, Looks like he’s getting ready to sail the Strait of Khordel . We may catch up to him, but if not, we can drop you off in Querna.”

“Excellent,” Windchime agreed. “It may even be like old times.”

They set sail the next morning on a strong quartering wind that was just barely enough to get them up on the hydrofoils, but after two hours of a rather shaky ride, Candle convinced Silverwind that the seas were too rough to hydroplane safely and they retracted the foils. They still rocked back and forth with the waves, but on the whole it was a more stable ride. The seas quieted enough to hydroplane again once they entered the Strait of Khordel , but the wind was no longer strong enough to get them aloft as long as it still came from the northwest quadrant. However, their speed even in the water continued to be at a respectable pace. With four crew members they decided they could safely continue to sail all night with Candle and Windchime on the first night watch and Silverwind and Oceanvine taking the watch from midnight until just before dawn.

Three days later Silverwind announced they were within thirty miles of Arithan and the wind turned around until it was coming from the northeast. Candle had Windchime deploy the foils once more and

with the spinnaker hoisted, they flew down the strait at their best speed to date.

“I think Arithan beached his boat on Khordell Island,” Silverwind told them after an hour of hydroplaning. “Candle, we want to turn to starboard very soon.”

“Okay,” Candle agreed. “Prepare to strike the spinnaker and hoist the Granomish jib.” Oceanvine and Windchime scrambled to the bow. “Ready?” he asked when they were in place. Oceanvine signaled their readiness and Candle gave the order.

They pulled down the spinnaker as fast as they could, but instead of waiting for the *Maiyim Bourne* to slow and drop back into the water, they hoisted the large jib as soon as the spinnaker was down and lying all over the bow deck. The hull was just starting to drop back into the sea when the strong wind filled the jib and lifted her right back up again.

Candle waited until they had the spinnaker stowed then shouted, “Jibe ho!” and swung the boat to starboard. A moment later the boom swung rapidly from starboard to port and Oceanvine quickly walked the jib across.

“Very well done,” Silverwind told them all.

“I have to admit I was a bit worried about jibing,” Candle replied. “We haven’t had to jibe in the *Maiyim Bourne* yet and I didn’t know how she would react.”

“It looks like Nildar built her with jibing in mind,” Silverwind remarked. “The maneuver was nearly as smooth as coming about. You aren’t planning to beach us with the foils still extended are you?”

“No,” Candle replied. “In fact I’d like to try another little trick that ought to work.”

“You aren’t planning on surprising us with it are you?” Oceanvine asked acidly as she returned from the bow.

“No, in fact,” Candle answered, “I wanted your opinions as to whether it’s a good idea. Up until now we’ve been dropping the jib or spinnaker in order to stop hydroplaning. What if we were to just retract the foils? It seems to me that would be a smoother and safer way to do it. If nothing else, none of us would be in a precarious position when the hull splashed down.”

“Well, Nildar did claim she was indestructible,” Silverwind allowed. “I suppose it is worth a try.”

“Good, I figure we’ll want to retract the foils in about five minutes. Too long after that we’ll be stuck in the approaching beach.”

A few minutes later they tried slowing down Candle’s way and found the deceleration to be smoother.

“We’re going to have to raise the centerboard,” Candle pointed out, “but with the wind coming nearly abeam we’ll sideslip. Best to furl all sails and pilot our way in.”

“You’re at the helm,” Silverwind told him. “Just give the orders.” Candle did and shortly they landed on a seemingly deserted beach on Khordell Island. Arithan’s boat was nearby. It was a medium-sized dory skiff; a flat-bottomed boat with a pointed prow and a flat board at the stern. At ten feet in length it was nothing more than a row boat, normally used as a dinghy or a tender, although there were no oars in evidence.

“He must have been piloting all the way,” Geraint remarked. “No wonder we were able to catch up. I’m surprised you didn’t catch him before.”

“He’s half a mile inland,” Silverwind reported. Oceanvine warded the *Maiyim Bourne* and they hurried to track the demon down.

They found an overgrown, slightly winding path that Oceanvine decided must be an animal track of some sort. The path was over-grown, but the evidence of many broken branches proved that someone, most likely the Demon Arithan, had been along this track recently. They pushed on until they reached a wide clearing and saw the demon a hundred feet ahead of them.

“Sorry I can’t stay and chat,” Arithan shouted gleefully at them, “but I suspect you’ll be a bit too busy anyway.”

They heard a deep growling just to their right and saw a massive bear charging them from only twenty feet away. Candle cast a quick spell to push the bear away and Oceanvine erected a hasty ward, but it was Windchime who used a tranquilizing spell to put the beast to sleep. Silverwind attempted to stop Arithan, but before he could react, the demon disappeared into the ground.

“Another mystic pathway, I’m afraid,” he said grimly. “Vine, you want to do the honors, this time? You did a pretty good job of it on Marga.”

“That’s Oceanvi... Oh what the heck, that game’s getting tiresome after all these years.” She shook her head. “Don’t you get any bright ideas, squirt,” she told Candle. He laughed in response. “Yes, dear, and thank you. I’d like to try my hand at closing a demon’s path.”

“Hey, when do I get a turn?” Candle protested.

“I won’t tell you it’s too advanced for a journeyman,” Silverwind responded. “It is, but I know you better than that. It isn’t easy, however, and you could do it wrong and make a real mess of the job if you just jump in and try it without guidance. Watch how Oceanvine does it and maybe next time I’ll give you a chance to help out. After that, if you do well assisting, I’ll let you try it on your own.”

“Okay,” Candle responded easily. He turned to Oceanvine and said, “Show me something.”

Oceanvine raised an eyebrow at him, but otherwise said nothing. She sat down on the ground and closed her eyes. Then, in the same manner Silverwind had done so in similar situations she closed down the mystic path through which Arithan had escaped. She was able to detect it going deep into the surface of the world and closed it up as far down as she could reach. Then, feeling a bit dizzy, she stopped and opened her eyes once more.

“You didn’t need to seal it off that far down, Vine,” Silverwind told her. “Any complete seal would have done the job.”

“You did it on the Isle of Fire,” she pointed out.

“I did but that was a special case,” he replied. “The volcanic pipe of Mount Rjal was hampering my attempt to close off the path, making it necessary to shut down the volcano itself.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she replied tiredly.

“Are you all right?” he asked, concern in his voice.

“Just a bit tired,” she replied. “That took a lot out of me, but I can make it back to the boat. I may sleep for the rest of the day though.”

“That’s fair,” Candle commented. “You’ve been up since before midnight. So where is Arithan headed now?” he asked Silverwind.

Silverwind closed his eyes for a bit to concentrate. “Oh hell,” he said emotionlessly a moment later. “Closing the path must have shut down my connection to the tracer, or more likely, his entrance into the path probably did it.”

“Are you sure?” Candle asked immediately. “Oh, sorry. Silly of me to ask.” He took a look for himself. “Oh yeah, I see. The string was cut, wasn’t it? Will it re-establish itself when he emerges?”

“I doubt it,” Silverwing replied. “It wasn’t much of a spell. I didn’t have time to add permanence to it and if I had Arithan might have realized he’d been tagged. Oh well, it served its purpose. If we’re lucky he’s headed back to his island where the gods will be waiting to imprison him.”

“It won’t be that easy,” Windchime predicted. “Unlike Gredac and Pohn, Arithan wasn’t injured. He doesn’t need to return there yet. It would be nice if he did, but I suspect he has another plan.”

“He may,” Silverwind agreed, “but in the meantime, we have no idea of where he is going. For now, at least, we’re not in a hurry to get anywhere in particular.”

“Sure we are,” Candle told him. “We want to get somewhere we can get the latest news from all over the world in the hopes of hearing where he might show up next. Fortunately, we’re already headed in the right direction.”

“Candle’s right,” Windchime agreed. “We want to keep moving on to Querna and as quickly as possible for two reasons. First and foremost, you’ll want to know where Arithan shows up next. Secondly, there’s a storm headed this way, at least that’s what it usually means around here when you have a northeast wind. If we don’t stay ahead of it we’re going to have to hole up somewhere a lot less comfortable than Ksaveras’ palace.”

Five

“I should have realized this would happen,” Silverwind remarked the next day. The northeast wind persisted, but it had been snowing lightly since dawn. “It’s a nor’easter and we’re headed directly into it.”

“It may not be as bad as all that,” Oceanvine told him from the helm. “I haven’t been able to sight a star in days, but if I’m reading landmarks correctly we should be entering Querna Bay any time now. We may already be at the mouth of the bay, in fact, but visibility is so bad I can’t see the shore and we may have missed the whistle buoy that marks the entrance. If that’s the case, there will be a series of bells further on. As soon as we hear one, we can sail close enough to read the number on it then I can give you a more accurate heading.”

“I think I hear the whistle up ahead of us,” Candle told her.

“I don’t hear it,” Windchime disagreed.

“I do,” Oceanvine informed him. She listened again, then adjusted their course a few degrees southward. Then she handed the helm over to Silverwind and told him to keep to that course until they could see the whistle buoy. She went below and made sure the chart for Querna Bay was laid out on the table. While waiting to pass the buoy, she put away the chart for the section of the Strait of Khordel they had just left. She took a quick reading of the chart and came back up on deck just as they were passing the whistle. “Set the heading for 220 degrees and deploy the foils,” she instructed Silverwind. “We should be in port in an hour or two.”

Querna port was not directly on the Bay of Querna, but instead was in the more sheltered estuary of the River Gran. Unlike their arrival in Marga, they were not able to enter the harbor with the foils still deployed nor was there anyone out to see their arrival. The snow had become much heavier once they were in the bay. Visibility was down to less than a quarter of a mile and the heavy, wet snow started sticking to the sails and rigging. So Silverwind ordered the foils retracted and the sails furled. Oceanvine navigated their way from buoy to buoy using only a compass and the chart, while Windchime and Candle piloted the boat forward.

“Not entirely unlike our last arrival in Querna,” Oceanvine remarked.

“Maybe it’s my fault,” Silverwind replied whimsically. “It always snows when I arrive in Querna. Some day I’ll have to come here during the summer just to see if it still snows to greet me.”

“At least we’re not the ones piloting in this time,” Oceanvine pointed out. “Although piloting the *Maiyim Bourne* is a world of difference from doing the same thing with the *Isle of Marga*. ”

“True, but on the *Marga* we didn’t start piloting until we were at the mouth of the harbor. Candle and Windchime have been piloting the boat now for the last four hours. Only a few hundred yards to go now, though. Why don’t you tell them to take a rest? I’ll bring us in the rest of the way,” Silverwind offered.

This time Silverwind knew which dock to bring them into. It was one normally used by Granomish noblemen for their yachts although at the moment only one other craft was still at the dock.

“The rest are out of the water for the winter,” Silverwind remarked.

“A fairly smart move,” Windchime agreed. “I wonder who left his boat in the water though.”

“Oh there’s always one or two. The owner is probably planning a vacation in Bellinen this winter. This time I know where to go to pay our port fees. Let’s take care of that then pay a social call on His Majesty.”

“Maybe we should find a room at an inn,” Oceanvine suggested. “I mean last time we were here it was at Ksaveras’ invitation. Now we’re just visiting.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll let us stay at the palace,” Silverwind told her confidently.

“You thought Vogt Andriy would put us up in Rjalkatyp too,” she retorted. However, she stopped arguing the point and packed a small bag full of clothes before trekking off with the rest to visit

the WurraPalace .

They got lucky and found a taxi cabriolet still out in the storm. They almost missed it, however, because without a horse in front it appeared to be out of service even though the driver was still seated.

“Did you go out with the horse this morning?” Silverwind asked curiously.

“Not at all, gov’ner,” the driver replied with a smile. “It’s a horseless cabriolet,”

“I’ve heard of these,” Windchime remarked, “but this is the first one I’ve actually seen. What sort of engine does it have? Steam?”

“No, gov, it’s what they call an inland combustion engine. Runs on distilled petroleum. Need a ride?”

“We do, indeed,” Silverwind replied. “Is there room for four in there?”

“Sure thing! Three in the back and one up front with me. Where to, gov?”

“The WurraPalace .”

“Whatever you want, but I don’t think they’re open to tourists today.”

“Just as well,” Silverwind remarked. “I never did like taking guided tours.”

Candle chose to sit up front so he could see how the vehicle was driven. The driver fiddled with a switch beneath his chair, and pulled out a small knob that appeared to be attached to a brass rod until it stuck out by a few inches. Then he jumped down into the snow and walked in front of the vehicle. He turned a crank and the cabriolet shuddered. Finally on the third crank the engine coughed to life. He got back into his seat and revved up the motor.

“Sorry about the delay folks,” he said to his passengers. “I normally leave the motor running, but there hasn’t been much business today.” After a minute the motor started faltering and he pushed the knob on the rod back in and the sound from the motor smoothed out.” He released the handbrake lever, pushed a long metal stick to his left forward and stepped on a pedal at his feet and the cabriolet started moving forward. “Actually I was just thinking of going home. I can get through six inches of snow like we have here, but another inch or two and I might not be able to get back to the taxi station.”

“Then we all got lucky,” Candle commented. “Are all the cabriolets motorized these days?”

“Only about half of them so far, gov’ner,” the driver responded, “but give it another year or two and they’ll all be motor driven. And not just the taxis, but a lot of personal carriages as well. It’s all the rage with the nobility lately and I hear tell there’s a manufacturer working on a way to cut the costs so that nearly everyone who wants one will be able to afford it.”

Candle asked questions all the way to the palace, learning about brakes and clutches, chokes and accelerators. The difficult part of driving the vehicle, Candle thought, was the steering mechanism, a vertical crank set just to the driver’s right. A wheel, he thought, similar to that on a ship or a large boat like the *Maiyim Bourne* would be better.

It only took a few minutes to get to the main gate of the WurraPalace , where Silverwind paid the driver while the others unloaded their bags. Then they walked toward the gate where they had some trouble

getting past the guards.

“Do you have an appointment, sir?” one guard asked emotionlessly. He was tall for a Granom, nearly as tall as Candle, and twice as wide, seemingly built of solid muscle.

“No,” Silverwind replied. “We just got into port and thought we’d pay respects to our friend the king.”

“The king is a very busy man, sir,” came the retort. The politeness was obviously forced. “If you would like to make an appointment, he may be able to make time for you in a week or two.”

“I have a better idea,” Windchime cut in impatiently. “Why don’t you trot on up to the throne room, or the tower or wherever Ksaveras is at the moment and let him know that Wizard Silverwind, Marquess of Sentendir, Master Windchime, Knight of the Silver Stay, Master Oceanvine... am I going too fast for you? Tough. Master Oceanvine, also Knight of the Silver Stay and Journeyman Candle are here at the gate and see what he says?”

The guard swallowed hard and replied, “I am not allowed to leave my post here.”

“Then I must assume there is some way for you to handle unforeseen guests. Maybe you can send your sidekick here,” Windchime tilted his head toward the other guard, “is he the one who runs messages?”

“I could lose my job if I just let you in,” the guard told Windchime.

“You could spend the rest of your life as a radish if we don’t at least let the king decide whether he wishes to see us,” Windchime threatened him, but did so in a cheerful tone of voice.

Candle felt certain the guard would have blanched had his natural skin tone not already been chalk white. He was also worried that in spite of his manner, Windchime might lose his patience suddenly, so he spoke up, “Go ahead and run a message inside to whoever is greeting people today. If the word comes back that His majesty isn’t receiving today, we’ll go away quietly.” The guard nodded at his partner and the quiet one disappeared, not through the gate, but into the gate house.

They only waited a minute before the guard who had gone inside the gatehouse returned and reported, “They have clearance. Welcome to Querna.”

“That was fast,” Oceanvine commented as they walked through the snow in the courtyard between the gate and the main building of the palace compound. “How did that guard get an answer so fast from the gatehouse? Signal flags?”

“Let’s ask when we get inside,” Silverwind suggested.

The answer turned out to be a series of tubes that connected various key locations in the WurraPalace . Powered by vacuum pumps, small canisters carrying messages could be shot around the network for speedy answers.

Inside the keep, they were met by Earl Vilimas Pafsa, King Ksaveras’ seneschal. “Welcome back to Querna, my lords and lady,” he greeted them warmly. “His Majesty sent word to have you escorted directly to the chamber at the top of the tower. It is hard, sometimes to tell with only a written message to go by, but I got the impression he was quite excited to hear you were here. And, Master Windchime,” he continued as they walked toward the tower, “you may be interested to know the lift has been entirely rebuilt since your last visit.”

“A problem with the old mechanism?” Silverwind asked.

“An improvement. The new one is motor driven. It is actually faster than we dared run the old one, but also much smoother. We don’t have quite so many over-excited passengers as we used to.”

The top room in the tower was still the king’s office; at least the small desk in the corner was still there, but one side of it was also cluttered with brightly colored toys. King Ksaveras was waiting for them as they stepped out of the elevator. His Queen, Petronelle was seated at the large conference table in the center of the room with a Granom child. It appeared she was teaching him to read, although he was obviously far more interested in the new arrivals.

“Silverwind!” Ksaveras greeted the wizard before also greeting the others by name. “It’s really great to see you all again. To what do we owe the honor?”

“We just concluded a matter up in Marga,” Silverwind explained, “and got caught in the storm. Since we were already near Querna, we thought we ought to stop by and say hello.”

“Excellent!” the king enthused. “I hope you’ll be staying with us here in the palace. There’s always room in the Garden Wing.”

Silverwind flashed a quick I-told-you-so grin at Oceanvine before replying, “We’d be honored. Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“Good. That’s settled. Let me just send a quick note downstairs to Vilimas and I’m at your disposal.” He hurried over to his desk to grab a piece of paper.

“Queen Petronelle,” Oceanvine greeted the woman at the table with a curtsy. The others quickly did likewise.

“Lady Oceanvine,” Petronelle replied warmly. “It’s a delight to see you here again.” She greeted the others similarly. “And I present our son, Crown Prince Ksaveras, heir to all Granom.”

“Your Royal Highness,” Oceanvine murmured to the six year old child.

“Lady Oceanvine,” he replied excitedly. “Momma says I can read your book as soon as I can read for myself!”

Candle smirked as Oceanvine struggled to hide her feelings about the penny dreadful novels that featured the fictional exploits of her and Silverwind. Candle knew, however, that she had read every single one of them. Mentioning that to her or anyone else was one taunt he would never stoop to. Every man, he reminded himself, had to know where the line was drawn. In truth, however, he just felt it would make their little game too easy.

“Very good, Your Highness,” Oceanvine told the young prince at last. “If you’re a really good boy, I’ll autograph it for you.”

“Oh, would you?” he asked, excited. “That would be just bully!”

“Bully?” Oceanvine echoed.

“Jolly good,” the king translated for his son. “Seems all the lads are using it lately. Not sure I really think it should be encouraged.”

“I’ve heard worse slang,” Silverwind commented. “However, short of a royal edict, I doubt even you have the power to stop it. For that matter I’m not sure anything short of making its utterance a felony would even have much of an effect, except perhaps to encourage another even more objectionable expression. My advice would be to let it lie.”

“You’re probably right,” Ksaveras replied. “I just don’t like hearing the language butchered that way. Now the matter in Marga, would that have been related to this years crop failure in the hop gardens?”

“It would, Your Majesty,” Silverwind replied. Then, together, they told him about what had happened in Kodanet and how they had tracked Arithan until his disappearance on Khordel.”

“Your boat sounds like a most remarkable craft,” the king replied at last. “I do hope you’ll give me a tour before you have to leave. So you don’t know where this Arithan is now?”

“Not so much as a clue yet,” Windchime shrugged.

“We had hopes we might be able to learn that in Querna,” Silverwind added.

“Here?” Ksaveras asked, surprised.

“Querna was the nearest capitol city,” Silverwind explained. “Here we can talk to you and your ministers and to ambassadors from all over Maiyim. We can hear about areas in which there are troubles that are out of the ordinary, perhaps.”

“And if no one can tell you anything useful?”

“We’ll take our best shot,” Silverwind shrugged. “We know he’ll show up eventually, and the *Maiyim Bourne* is fast enough that even if we’re on the wrong side of the world it won’t be any worse than if we had to wait for a ship going in the right direction.”

“If I had to bet,” Candle put in, “I’d say the next encounter will be in Bellinen.”

“How do you figure that?” Oceanvine challenged him.

“Well, the way I figure it is that the demons will want to be working on their various schemes as far apart as possible, to help keep us from concentrating our efforts, or maybe in the hope that one will be able to finish whatever he’s trying to do before we can stop him. Whatever the reason, I think they tried to work as far apart as possible. Now so far we’ve had encounters in Emmine and Granom. I think the next one will be in Bellinen.”

“Why Bellinen?” Silverwind asked. “Why not Ellisto or one of the smaller archipelagos?”

“It could be Ellisto,” Candle replied. “It’s a large enough area and has a high enough population. Terrorizing people is part of what the demons are all about. Haven’t you noticed that? Something in their make up thrills on the terror of others. They might be in Rjalkatyp, although Silverwind closed down the path that leads there, though it wouldn’t stop Arithan from taking a boat there, I suppose. They won’t be in the Southern Chain, almost nobody lives there, not all year anyway. I think there’s a whaling station down there.

“I wouldn’t expect one in Methis’ Chain either,” Candle continued. “Why doesn’t anyone live there, anyhow? A nice group of tropical islands, some of them are big enough for a city or two.”

“All three major archipelagos claim those islands,” Ksaveras informed him. “In the interest of keeping the peace none of us have attempted to form a colony there, although I did hear of a business consortium that wanted to build a tourist resort there. I doubt they’ll go through with it. They’ll need permission from ourselves as well as the Senate of Bellinen and the King of Emmine. Actually there are a few people who live there, a small tribe of fisher folk, Orentan in species, but they are an independent people, not beholden to any civilized government.”

“I didn’t know that,” Candle admitted. “Maybe it should be officially set aside as parkland. Anyway the populations of the Wennil and Saindo archipelagos are quite low, so I wouldn’t expect them to try to set up base there.”

“Arithan did set up an ambush for us in Wennil,” Silverwind pointed out.

“He did,” Candle agreed, “but it wasn’t too far out of the way toward Marga and he had to stop for supplies or a rest or something. I mean he was piloting a boat all the way. He had to be tired by that point. Also, I think he was just passing through and used the ambush as a means to slow us down.”

“He was trying to kill us,” Oceanvine disagreed.

“Well, okay yes, but I doubt he expected to succeed. What he really wanted was breathing room so he could do whatever it was he meant to on Marga.”

“You don’t think he succeeded?” Windchime asked. “The crop failure and destruction of the plants will be felt for years to come.”

“That was Gredac’s work. Arithan had only arrived recently. I suspect that he didn’t think we’d get there so quickly after being shipwrecked,” Candle replied. “Now he’s either headed back to his island, where it’s probable he’ll be caught by the Elder Gods, or to where either Xenlabit or Kerawlat are. I believe it’s the latter, of course.”

“Well, you’ve certainly thought this through,” Silverwind commended him. “If you’re right, there are two areas of demonic activity left in the world. Your Majesty, do you know of any unusual problems on Maiyim that may fit?”

“Not really,” Ksaveras replied. “I’d have thought the crop failure on Marga was a natural occurrence. But are you sure you’re looking for something that out of the ordinary? From what you tell me, demons often work through disease. Maybe you should be looking for incidents of clustered illnesses or plague.”

“Maybe so,” Silverwind agreed. “We’ll start looking tomorrow morning.”

Six

Since the wreck of the *Pride of Niah* Oceanvine had been laboring to reconstruct her dissertation notes for the second time. She did so during whatever moments she could spare from her duties aboard the *Maiyim Bourne* and even a few while on land. She was still uncertain whether she had managed to

remember everything, although the process had thrown new light on certain aspects of ward theory that had not occurred to her before so in the long run she was better off now.

The trip from Khordel had given her enough time to reconstruct her outline, but now she was through reconstructing the research. It was time to start writing. Perhaps it was the fact that on her last visit to the Wurra Palace she had made a habit of early rising in order to study for her entrance exams for University, but when she woke up bright and refreshed in the pre-dawn hours, she left Silverwind, still sleeping soundly, and made her way down to the kitchen with her notes. There she was able to get a pot of tea and a piece of pastry.

She drank a full cup before deciding where to start, but by the time she next looked up she had filled a small stack of paper with the rough draft of her first two chapters and the rest of the tea was cold. She might have been deep into the third chapter had she not been distracted.

“Master Oceanvine?” a deep masculine voice inquired. Oceanvine looked up to see Master Sandstone, the chief forensic mage of the Ksaveras’ Royal Bureau of Investigation. “It’s a delight to see you. I hadn’t heard you were in Querna.”

“We just arrived yesterday afternoon, Master Sandstone,” Oceanvine replied warmly. “I haven’t had time to look up old friends.” That might have been an exaggeration. During the case of the “Cardiokiller” Master Sandstone had been openly hostile toward the pretty blonde mage. However, he had also more than made up for that by recommending her to the University. In a very real sense he was responsible for her becoming the first woman to matriculate and graduate from the University of Querna. “Won’t you join me?”

“It would be my honor,” Sandstone replied graciously. “Just let me get coffee and something to eat. Would you like a fresh pot of tea, perhaps?”

“If it wouldn’t be too much trouble. I’m afraid this one has cooled off a bit, I think there’s some ice around the edges.”

Sandstone smiled at her joke. “No trouble at all.” He returned shortly, not only with the coffee and tea but with a small tray filled with pastries. He filled her cup and waved her toward the pastry.

“Thank you, but I’ve already eaten,” Oceanvine demurred.

“Try one of these small ones,” he insisted. “They may not look like much but they’re very special, you aren’t likely to have tried one before. The pastry chef is new here from Sahren.”

Oceanvine picked up the small spherical piece of pastry. Sandstone was right it didn’t look like much; there was no frosting or other outward form of decoration, but when she bit into it her mouth was filled with a taste burst of fresh berries. Looking at the uneaten portion she saw the filling was a clear, red jelly-like substance.

“It’s utterly delicious!” she exclaimed.

“The chef is a master of the craft. He generally makes several different flavors in each batch. Some of them are filled with custard like a cream puff, some are vanilla. My favorites are the chocolate creams, but the various fruits are always quite good as well. So far I’ve tasted nearly two dozen different fillings - all excellent.”

“I’m sorry I passed them up earlier,” Oceanvine told him. “I also don’t believe I’ve had the opportunity to really thank you for your recommendation to the University.”

Sandstone chuckled. “I’m not sure it was so much a recommendation as putting the fear of Gran into the old dean.”

“Still, that is a recommendation of a sort, a strong one considering. Uh, the old dean? Did Frostglow retire?”

“He didn’t jump,” Sandstone assured her. “He was pushed, and I helped. Two years after you were here a group of students and faculty came forward to accuse him of attempting to fix the scores in the entry exams, mostly against female applicants.”

“I’m not surprised,” Oceanvine said acidly, “Although that faculty members would denounce him...”

“He wasn’t the most popular dean in University history,” Sandstone commented dryly. “Not by a long shot and you demonstrated to young Quartzvein that women at the University was an idea whose time had come. He recruited two other teachers to his cause, one of the students told me he had met you.”

“He had? Must have been one of the boys I talked to during lunch the day I took the entrance exam. I don’t recall talking to anyone during the masters’ exams.”

“Could be,” Sandstone nodded. “Anyway, the accusations had to be investigated and I was in charge of the investigation. Officially he resigned, but I doubt there’s anyone who believes he did so willingly. It was only when his attorney pointed out to him that if it came to trial he was likely to be found guilty and serve time that he decided to take the easy way out we offered him. Wizard Bowsprit came back out of retirement to sit in the Dean’s Office, although he’ll be retiring again at the end of the winter term.”

“I must get around to visiting him and Quartzvein while I’m in town. So are there many women at University now?” Oceanvine asked.

“Only a few dozen,” Sandstone replied, “but it’s a good start.”

“If I’m not being nosy, what are you doing at the palace and at this early hour?”

“Oh that,” Sandstone shrugged. “Ever since you and Silverwind caught Snowfall, His Majesty has been making a habit of meeting with his heads of department on a biweekly basis. The RBI is so large that both Lord Natan and I represent the Bureau. That’s how I discovered the new pastry chef. And what brings you here, may I ask?”

“It seems we are on quest,” she said with a laugh. “It all began last spring; spring in Emmine that is, about two months ago. Candle had just graduated from University in Randona a year early, but before he could unpack his bags...” She went on to describe everything that had happened since the home she shared with Silverwind had burned down, including divine visitations and their face-to-face meeting with Nildar and Wenni. It surprised her that after only telling people as much as they needed to know, she was telling old Sandstone everything. An inner voice told her that he would be a receptive audience to the full tale.

“Amazing,” he told her at last. “I would love to see the *Maiyim* Bourne while you are still here. I used to sail around Querna Bay on a regular basis when I was younger, crewing on various nobles’ yachts. You and Silverwind will want to discuss your meetings with the divinities with Bowsprit, I think. He told me

once that he had met Methis when he was young. I was never sure whether to believe him, but now, well, maybe he did. It sounds like you've met or at least seen all of them in your dreams. That's quite remarkable, but then you, Silverwind, and young Candle too, are quite remarkable people."

"Thank you, Master Sandstone," Candle said as he approached their table. "I keep trying to tell Vine how remarkable I am, but she never listens. That's Oceanvine!" he added before she could. It was only the second time he had done that, but it was as effective at taking the wind out of her sails as it had been the first time. "Hey! You've finally started writing again? May I read it?"

"Go ahead," she told him, pushing the first two chapters his way.

"What is it?" Sandstone asked curiously.

"Rough draft on a wizard's dissertation," Oceanvine replied.

"Do you plan to present it here in Querna?"

"It probably won't be finished for another two years at least," she replied, "and I'm not sure when I'll be able to find the time to sit the required classes, not to mention take the final exam in the Five Demons. So I'll try presenting it wherever is most convenient to where I am when I think it's ready."

"It's possible you'll be able to pass class equivalency exams like you did here almost nine years ago. It's less unusual for wizard candidates than it is for masters," Sandstone pointed out. "I sometimes wish I had taken the time to get my wizards degree, not that I really need it. I doubt there's a Granomish mage who knows more about forensic magic than I do, but there is the prestige that goes with being a wizard. You know if you get the degree, you could be the youngest wizard in history."

"Not unless I manage it in the next two or three months. Silverwind earned his degree at the age of thirty-three. That's how old I am now. I'll likely be the youngest female wizard, although that's not much of a distinction since there have only been ten in the past millennium. As far as I know none of them reached wizard grade before they were forty-five or older. However, it's not about when I do it, it's about doing it at all."

"This isn't bad," Candle commented on the dissertation, grabbing one of the small pastries on the tray. "Hmm, good pastry too. Is this pear filling?"

"Could be," Sandstone told him.

"It's excellent and I didn't use to be much of a gourmet. If I filled my belly, I was satisfied. After that anything sweet was good enough. Anyway, I don't think you'll need to take a full two years to finish the dissertation at this rate. Look how much you've written just this morning. You ought to buy one of those typewriters to work with, though. Like the one your thesis was done on. They've improved the keyboard design and the mechanism is much smoother and easier to work now too. I used them in University - really makes a paper look professional."

"I don't need one just yet, Candle," Oceanvine told him. "When I do, I can hire someone to type it up for me."

"Well, you should think about it while we're here. Granomish typewriters are the best ones. Maybe I'll buy one if you don't. I'll need it for my thesis."

“And what are you researching, Candle?” Sandstone asked.

“I really wanted to work on the theory behind creation spells, especially as it may apply to Onestone’s special and general theories of relativity, but Silverwind says I should document the fine differences in the Bond of Aritos in the way each of the demons use it and save creation theory for my wizard’s.”

“He’s probably right. As a journeyman you shouldn’t be doing creation spells. They’re notoriously difficult and dangerous. I don’t dare try them; not anymore.”

“You have tried them in the past?” Candle asked.

“Not successfully,” Sandstone replied. “As you get older you start to find your limits. The mark of a truly great mage is one who knows his limits but goes on to fulfill his potential in spite of those limits. Well,” he continued, looking at a wristwatch not unlike the one Silverwind had bought on their last visit to Querna, “I believe I have a meeting in a few minutes. Hopefully I’ll see you both before you leave Querna.”

“He’s changed,” Candle commented after Sandstone had left the kitchen.

“True enough,” Oceanvine agreed, “and for the better. I think he was badly shaken by his assistant being the killer nine years ago. Some men might have reacted differently, but he reexamined his prejudices and discarded the ones that were obviously wrong. I like him a lot more now.”

“Yeah. So why do you really think it will take two years to write this dissertation?”

“Candle, I can’t submit a rough draft. It will take numerous proof readings and revisions to get this into shape.”

“I don’t know why, this looks pretty darned good to me so far,” Candle remarked.

“You’re too easily impressed. Try reading it as though we were trying to find fault with it.”

“I did,” he told her. “It’s pretty good. Oh you may want to reword it a bit, tighten up one or two sentences, but really I’ve read a lot worse from men who are already wizards.”

“There, you pointed it out,” Oceanvine told him. “They were written by men. A woman trying to write the same thing needs to do it twice as well just to be seen as equal.”

“Nonsense,” Candle scoffed.

Oceanvine sighed. “Too bad my committee members won’t feel the same way you do.”

“Oh, is this where you break your fast?” It was Queen Petronelle, who had just entered the kitchen. “You could join us at the official breakfast upstairs you know.”

“I’m terribly sorry, Your Majesty,” Oceanvine said, getting to her feet. “There was no offense intended, but we have been up for hours, and...”

“Oh, none taken, I assure you,” the queen laughed. “It’s just that I wasn’t sure if you even knew there was an organized breakfast of sorts in the dining hall. I don’t recall seeing you there during your last visit, but assumed that was because of Silverwind’s habit of holding breakfast meetings. I’ll tell you the truth, however, I don’t always eat there in the mornings either, although some sort of appearance is usual. I

often sit right here at this table too, so don't be surprised if I join you some morning."

"Your company will be most welcome, of course," Oceanvine assured her.

"Looks like you're getting some real work done," Petronelle observed, seeing all the papers on the table.

"Her wizard's dissertation," Candle supplied.

"Oh, good for you!" the queen told her. "That will show some of those old conservatives at University. Still because of you, we've made great inroads, haven't we? Well, I only stopped down here to have a word with the chef about dinner tonight. I usually let him decide on what to serve, but I want tonight to be special, and I do hope you two will be there, since it is in your honor." With that the queen strolled off.

Silverwind finally joined them a few minutes later, having just come down from the dining hall. "Thought I'd find the two of you here. Don't blame you, I always did think the cooks kept the best food in the kitchen." He helped himself to the last of the Sahrenese pastries. "Excellent," he commented. "Haven't had Sahrenese pastries in years."

They started planning the day's agenda and Silverwind decided that rather than using his more usual fox-in-the-henhouse approach of just showing up without warning, it might be best to arrange appointments with the various ambassadors. It was just as well, because while Silverwind and Candle were anxious to get on the case, Windchime didn't wake up until midmorning.

"What's your hurry?" he asked, when they met in the hallway outside his suite. "Haven't you taken a look outside? That storm dumped over two feet of snow last night. No one's going anywhere for a while. And when we can go out, you may want to shovel out the *Maiyim Bourne*."

"I left her warded to keep the snow from piling up on the deck," Oceanvine explained. "That, at least, won't be a problem."

"The streets may take a day or two," Silverwind informed his former partner, "but the sidewalks should be cleared by noon. It's the law. And all the embassies are within walking distance."

"Actually, I think we'll find the main streets open, at least partially even now," Candle told them both. "Maybe you looked outside, Windchime, but you obviously didn't look out front. The Courtyard is mostly cleared and it looks like the street out front is clear enough for two cabriolets to pass each other, thought it would be a bit tight."

"Master Sandstone is here for a regular meeting with the king," Oceanvine added. "He didn't look like he had to trudge through snow at all."

"In Randona, this storm would have had everything stopped for two days at least," Windchime commented.

"Well, if it's any consolation," Candle said, "they'll probably still be cleaning up a week from now. The piles of snow I could see were pretty high and judging from our last trip here they must throw most of the snow into the harbor, so what they've done so far is just a start. Still, it means we can go out if we need to."

"Well, I'll contact the embassies this morning and maybe we can talk to the Emmine ambassador this

afternoon,” Silverwind replied. “I don’t want Arithan getting too far ahead of us.”

“Excuse me,” a page from the palace came running up. He was dressed in the royal livery, but not dressed warmly. “Master Oceanvine?” He obviously wasn’t sure just who he was supposed to hand the envelope he carried to.

“Here,” Oceanvine replied, holding out her hand. She and Candle had walked down to the harbor, to get a few things from the *Maiyim Bourne* while Silverwind and Windchime went to the Emmine embassy. The page gave her the envelope, bowed and ran back to the palace. “He should have been dressed more warmly,” she commented.

“Someone probably told him it was important,” Candle shrugged. “Maybe it is; looks important. Who is it from?”

Oceanvine turned the envelope over and saw the arms that had been embossed into the paper. “The University it appears.”

“Well, open it,” Candle urged.

“It can wait until we get back,” Oceanvine shrugged.

“Not if that page thought it was worth risking pneumonia to get it to you. Someone convinced him it was urgent.”

Oceanvine sighed and opened the envelope. “It’s an invitation,” she said, somewhat amazed. “They’d like me to present a lecture on the subject of my choice.”

“Wards, then,” Candle chuckled.

“Maybe. I could talk about demons too, I suppose, or maybe about creation theory and how it related to Onestone’s relativity.”

“Go ahead,” Candle called her bluff.

“Actually, I think I ought to talk about the place for women in magic, but I’ll use ward theory as a starting point.”

“I don’t see how you plan to do that,” Candle told her.

“Subtlety, Candle,” she told him. “If I learned nothing else last time I was here it was that male Granomen in general don’t really mind women in the traditionally male professions, but they do resent women who cannot do so without making a big deal about it. On the other hand they respect women who just go in and do whatever it is they want to do and do it well.

“My initial mistake last time was to come in rather brashly and pretty much stick the fact that I’m female and think I’m just as good as any man in their faces.”

“Well, you are,” Candle countered. “So?”

“I’m not certain I could have done it any other way, really. Dean Frostglow was prepared to resent me on several counts, not the least of which was my association with Silverwind. However, it was the ladies of the Women’s Academy that tipped me off as to what I was doing wrong so by the time I encountered Quartzvein and Bowsprit, I was able to at least get a fair exam. Bowsprit was actually a tougher examiner than Frostglow. Silverwind was right; he goes hardest on the students he likes.

“So anyway, I figure I’ll talk about wards in general, but here and there I can make subtle comments about how I hope to see more women in magic and other academic disciplines.”

“They’ll see right through that, you know,” Candle told her.

“I’m sure they will,” agreed Oceanvine. “But if I do it properly they’ll respect me for my views and won’t think I’m scolding them.”

“It’s hard to think of you being subtle, Oceanvine,” Candle told her.

“I’m not a subtle person, Candle. You know that. Actually your mind is far more subtle than mine will ever be, but fortunately Granomen in general aren’t very subtle either. It’s a thin line to tread, but you could say I need to deal out subtlety with a hammer.”

“Ah! Now that sounds like you,” he agreed. She took a swat at his head but he ducked and jumped out of the way before she could take a second shot at him.

“Come on, let’s get back to the palace. It’s too cold out here to just stand around,” she said at last. “I need to send a reply, anyway. I wonder how they knew I was in town.”

“I’ll bet Sandstone told them,” Candle replied.

Oceanvine thought about that. “Probably, yes.”

Seven

“Interesting talk,” Master Quartzvein told Oceanvine the next evening as she stepped away from the podium after an extensive question and answer session. “It sounds like you’ve come along way since your master’s work.” He steered her toward the back of the low stage she had lectured from. There was a stage door they could use to avoid the crowd.

“Thank you,” Oceanvine replied as they walked toward the reception hall. “Actually, I have to admit I was using this lecture to air out the heart of the dissertation I’m working on.”

“Going for your wizard’s degree so soon?” Quartzvein asked. “I’ve been a master four years longer than you have and I’m still not ready.”

“Well, I don’t expect to be ready for another two years myself,” Oceanvine shrugged, “but I need to start writing now. It seems strange that I wrote my thesis on the way here nine years ago, but the dissertation is going to be a far more extensive study.”

“Will you be sitting your exams here again?”

“I haven’t made any decisions yet. It will depend on where I am when I feel ready. Coming back to Querna would be nice, I think, but I’m also tempted to sit at Merinne. I would only be the second wizard in history to receive a real degree, not honorary ones, at all three universities.

“Oh, and I’d like to thank you for inviting the ladies of the Women’s Academy here tonight,” she told them.

“I thought it was a condition of having you speak,” laughed Quartzvein.

“Oh, no. It was just a request. I wasn’t making demands, really.”

“That’s quite okay. Our relations with the Academy have warmed considerably since we started admitting female students, and the invitation here this evening only improved the situation. And here we are,” he concluded as they entered the reception hall.”

There was a thundering round of applause as they entered. “I guess they liked my little talk,” Oceanvine commented dryly.

“So it would appear,” Quartzvein chuckled.

“Not bad, lass,” Dean Emeritus Bowsprit told her as he hobbled up with the aid of an old-fashioned wizard’s staff. “Not bad at all!”

Oceanvine knew it for a high compliment from the ancient wizard. She thanked and hugged him warmly. “Interesting choice of walking stick,” she commented, looking more closely at the gnarled staff.

“It is a bit archaic,” he admitted, “even for a man my age, but it’s been doubling as a research project lately.”

“Oh? In what way?” she asked interestedly.

“Our historians tell us that the medieval and ancient wizards used staves as an aid to concentration. Any object could have done that of course, but I started wondering if there was something more to it.”

“I thought,” Candle commented as he, Silverwind and Windchime stepped up to join them, “that they used staves because it gave them a defensive weapon should they get into a position in which they had no chance to cast a spell.”

“That may be true as well, youngster. Let’s see, you’d be Candle, wouldn’t you?”

“You’ve heard of me?” Candles asked, then belatedly added, “sir?”

“I know you were apprenticed to this young troublemaker,” he indicated Silverwind, “last time you were in Querna. I imagine you’re a journeyman by now, right?” Candle nodded. “Congratulations. Anyway, I’ve begun pouring through some of the ancient texts on the preparation of a wizard’s staff. Most of them are nonsense, like trying to follow the grain of the staff’s aura. A staff doesn’t have an aura unless enchanted and the aura certainly doesn’t have a grain.”

“What about when it was still alive?” Candle asked. “Plants do have auras, don’t they?”

“Very good,” Bowsprit commended him, “but while a woody plant may have a grain, its aura does not. However, I did discover that certain woods, oak and ash especially, have the ability to store potential raw magical energy. I believe some ancient mages would impregnate staves with such potential energy. In that form the need to concentrate in an emergency appears to be somewhat lessened and, of course, would have allowed them to unleash more power into defensive spells, aggressive ones too, I guess, than they might normally be able to.”

“If the ancients could do this, though, why don’t we know about it?” Candle asked.

“The ancients, and those of the Age of Faith, very much felt that knowledge should only be passed on to one’s apprentices,” Bowsprit replied. “A lot of knowledge got lost when former apprentices never took on students of their own.”

“I’ll bet,” Candle commented, “that the knowledge of this was lost sometime around the beginning of the Age of Faith. Later mages would have continued to use staves simply because the ancients had.”

“Exactly when is debatable, but yes, I believe you have the right general idea.”

“Hmm,” Candle pondered, “and the larger the piece of wood you use, the more potential energy can be carried around. No wonder they used large staves instead of the puny wands that became popular much later. That settles it. I’ve got to get a staff of my own!”

“There are some tricks to charging one up,” Bowsprit warned him.

“Would you show me?” Candle asked.

“You may as well,” Oceanvine told the old wizard. “Otherwise he’ll only go and try it for himself. You know, that doesn’t sound entirely unlike what Silverwind and I did with our mage stones.” She described how they had defeated Pohn and Gredac by released the power of the spells bound up in the mage stones.

“Yes,” Bowsprit agreed, “that does sound like a similar use of magic. The crystal we use to make those stones holds a lot more energy than a similar volume of wood ever could, so a small stone would hold a tremendous amount of energy. I don’t believe the ancients ever tried to charge up stones that way, or else they probably would not have bothered with staves. Well, youngster, if you’ll come to my office tomorrow afternoon, I’ll be glad to show you what I know about charging a staff. I don’t think I’m getting it completely right yet. Maybe you’ll be able to spot what I’ve been missing.”

“Excuse me, Lady Oceanvine,” a young Granomish woman a couple of years younger than Candle interrupted. “Would you mind signing my book?” She held out a copy of *Silverwind and Oceanvine on the Island of Flaming Rocks*.

“Of course,” Oceanvine replied graciously. “This is a new one, isn’t it? I haven’t seen this one before.” She talked to the woman for a bit to get her name and her interests then made the autograph a personal one.

“What was the title of that one?” Candle asked. Oceanvine told him. “Oh good,” he replied, greatly relieved. “With that wild font the title was in, I thought it said ‘Ducks!’”

“The Island of Flaming Ducks?” Windchime guffawed. “Now that might have been a fun read. Silverwind

the Great and his wife valiantly fending off whole flocks of waterfowl intent on roasting themselves. Vine, I'm sure glad you came along and married him. It means I no longer have to see my name in print as Silverwind's spear carrier."

Just then several students came up and requested autographs from both Oceanvine and Silverwind. They carried several different cheap novels, all of which pretty much told the same story. The night wore on, with scholarly discussions sandwiched between groups of students and some faculty wandering up for autographs. After the first two such conversation breaks, Silverwind suggested they sit at a table, where at least they would have a place to put the books down as they signed them.

It was late in the evening, after most of the attendees had left the hall, when one young Granomish woman with long, unusually light brown hair and very dark eyes shyly approached the table. She was carrying a blue cardboard manuscript box. Only Oceanvine and Candle were still at the table. "Lady Oceanvine?" she asked. It was the first time all evening Oceanvine had been addressed by the courtesy title Granomish society entitled her to use.

"Yes?"

"I was hoping you might sign this for me." She handed the box to Oceanvine.

Opening the box, Oceanvine exclaimed, "Why this is my thesis!"

"Yes, my lady," the student replied. "I paid to have a copy made from the University Library. It's wonderful!"

"What's wonderful," Oceanvine replied, "is getting to sign something more worthwhile than those awful penny novels."

"They're not so bad," the student replied. "They helped me learn to read."

"Well, I suppose they do have a purpose then," Oceanvine allowed as Candle chuckled. "So, what's your name?"

"Korinna, lady," she replied. "Korinna Southgate." The name marked her as a foundling; Southgate being a neighborhood in Querna. Most such people in Granomish society would never have been able to attend University, so Oceanvine realized she was meeting someone remarkable.

"And you're a student in the University?" Oceanvine asked.

"Yes, lady, it's my sophomore year."

"You don't have to call me 'lady,' dear," Oceanvine replied. "I don't use that title except on the rare occasion I'm in court. And you are studying magic?"

"Yes, la... Master Oceanvine," Korinna replied. "I declared my major just last semester. I was the first female apprentice in the history of this University," she added proudly. "There are three others now."

"Excellent!" Oceanvine told her, and paused to consider how to sign the manuscript.

"Hello again, Candle," Korinna greeted the journeyman. Candle looked at her trying to remember when they might have met. "You don't remember me, do you? You saved my life once. Does that help?"

“The slavers the night I got lost,” Candle said, suddenly remembering. “That was you?”

She nodded. “You saved me twice that night. First, by getting us all free and second just by setting an example. You told me you were Silverwind’s apprentice and after seeing you use magic I figured you must have been telling the truth. That’s when I wanted to learn magic too. Finding a master to apprentice me in Querna would have been impossible, but with Oceanvine being the first woman to be allowed into the University, there was another path open to me. I had run away from the public orphanage, but I went back and demanded my right to an education.”

“That must have taken a lot of demanding,” Candle commented.

“Too right!” Korinna agreed. “They kept insisting the only thing a girl like me should bother learning was how to sew. But even a seamstress is allowed some time off, and I spent it in the library. The librarian was nice; she helped me learn to read and told me that according to the laws of Querna, I was entitled to attend public school if I wanted to, so I did and there was nothing the people at the orphanage could do to stop me! I shouldn’t blame them too much. They honestly thought my best chance in life was to learn a trade, but I persisted, studying every spare moment I could find between chores - all night sometimes and I managed to earn a full scholarship, well for tuition anyway. I have to work for the room and board, but I do okay.”

“You’ve done very well, indeed,” Candle told her. “I know. I started out on the streets too. Compared to you, though, I had it easy. The only work I had to do was in my studies. So what sort of magic are you studying?”

“As a journeyman candidate? So far it’s all very generalized, but Wizard Bowsprit is my advisor and he was the one who suggested I read Oceanvine’s thesis. I think I’d like to make my senior project a study of ward technology. Tonight’s lecture was so wonderful, Master Oceanvine. Would it be all right if I were to write to you with questions, especially as I get closer to my senior project?”

“On two conditions, Korinna,” Oceanvine replied. “First, stop calling me ‘Master’ everytime. I’m not on faculty here and just ‘Oceanvine’ is good enough between colleagues, don’t you think?”

“Thank you,” Korinna replied simply. “And the other condition?”

“When you get your degree, insist on being called ‘Journeywoman.’”

“I could have predicted that,” Candle laughed. “It’s what she did,” he told Korinna.

“Why not ‘Mistress’ now, though?” Korinna asked.

“Just didn’t sound right to me. Every unmarried adult woman on the island I grew up on was called ‘Mistress.’ ‘Master’ is a hold-over title from a century or two ago when you had to reach a certain guild level to be called by that title. These days only little boys and academics are called that.”

Korinna laughed. Oceanvine raised an eyebrow and Korinna explained, “You may not be as robustly built as a Granomish woman, but even here no one would mistake you for a little boy.”

“I thought of that too,” Oceanvine replied with a wink.

“You know, Korinna,” Candle said suddenly, “since you’re a mage now, you might be interested in

seeing our boat, the *Maiyim Bourne*. It has all sorts of enchantments worked into it, some of which we don't even understand yet. If you have some time tomorrow after classes..."

"I have to wait tables in the cafeteria during lunch and dinner," Korinna told him, "but I don't have any classes tomorrow afternoon."

"Great! Where shall I pick you up?"

Eight

Silverwind dreamed.

It was one of those dreams that seems so real the dreamer honestly thinks he is awake. In it he was walking through the drafty corridors of the Wurra Palace, headed for the kitchen for an early breakfast. There was a familiar mix of hot and cold air in the hallway that made it seem breezier than it really was. Silverwind stopped once to look out one of the windows into a garden area. There was still some snow on the ground, but most of it had melted. He continued on, occasionally passing palace servants until he reached the doors to the kitchen.

He opened the door and found himself face-to-face with Merinne, the Orentan mother goddess.

"Help, Silverwind," she beseeched him. "My children are dying."

At the end of two weeks they still didn't have any real idea of where Arithan might have gone. Windchime found a ship headed for Kanadu and booked passage. The next morning, after his dream, Silverwind discussed the matter with Oceanvine and Candle over breakfast.

"The situation in Ellisto with the sandwalkers sounds out of the ordinary," Candle opined. "They may attack individuals who stray too near their nests, but otherwise for all their size they're primarily scavengers. They certainly don't have a reputation for attacking whole settlements."

"I'm not sure about that," Oceanvine added, "but it seems that all is well and quiet in Granom. We ought to move on and the Bellinen Archipelago is roughly equidistant from the rest of the world."

"There may be another reason to check out what might be happening in Bellinen," Silverwind told them. He explained about the dream.

"So, something is happening in Bellinen," Candle replied at last. "It's a big archipelago. Did Merinne give you any other hints?"

"Not really," Silverwind replied. "Maybe I'm reading more into Her message than She put there, but I got the impression she was telling me everything I needed to know."

“Maybe She didn’t mean the Orenta in Bellinen,” Oceanvine suggested. “Could She have been referring to some location. Some other Orentan community. How about Ellisto? We already know there’s something going on with the sandwalkers.”

“There aren’t a lot of Orenta on Ellisto,” Candle disagreed. “It’s a primarily human colony.”

“There is an Orentan enclave in Sonatrie,” Silverwind pointed out. “About ten percent of the total population; twice as many of them as there are Granomish residents. However, the Ellistan Orenta almost all live in Sonatrie. That’s a long way away from where the sandwalkers are.”

“Well, I doubt She meant the Orenta on the Isle of Fire,” Candle commented. “All the people there are mostly closely associated with the Younger Gods.”

“Pohn returned to the scene of a prior manifestation of himself,” Oceanvine said thoughtfully. “If we checked the records back far enough, I think we’d find that Gredac had once manifested on Marga. It’s possible that Arithan is trying to return to Rjalkatyp.”

“It wouldn’t completely surprise me,” Silverwind allowed, “but I doubt Merinne would refer to the people of Rjalkatyp as her children.”

“Then let’s set sail for Bellinen,” Candle suggested. “It’s the obvious place. We can ask at the first island in the group we get to.”

“That would be Willadda,” Oceanvine told them.

“You’ve been checking the charts?” Silverwind asked.

“Last time I visited the boat,” she replied. “I was trying to figure out where we might go next and plot the best courses to them. Our best course to Bellinen didn’t require a lot of thought. Unless you were planning to go to Sanno, our best course is to sail along the northern coast of Quirmlia until we pass south of Sinid. From there we shoot across the Sea of Aritos and land in Keladril. That’s where most ships from Granom make port.”

“Keladril, eh?” Silverwind asked. “It’s got a fairly seedy reputation, but no more so than Kanaduin. So let’s make our farewells and set sail. I’ve got a sneaky suspicion we’re already late.”

Packing took only a few minutes, since they had only brought one bag each from the boat. Then after a hasty audience with the king and queen they hurried to the harbor and were once more under sail within the hour.

They had to tack out of the Querna bay as a strong gusty wind was blowing in from the north. The cold wind threw up freezing salt spray that coated the rigging and deck.

“I think Nildar should have worked out a way to enclose the helm,” Candle grumbled on their second day of laborious tacking out of the long bay. “Maybe we should rethink that course you set,” he told Oceanvine. If we turn south we could be running with the wind again, sail south into the tropics fairly quickly and not risk getting caught in another blizzard.”

“I doubt we’d be running with the wind for long,” she replied. “The normal prevailing wind this time of year is from the northwest. Once we get to the other side of this peninsula, we’ll have a fairly reliable quartering wind.”

“If you say so,” Candle shrugged. “My hands are getting frozen here though and heat spells only do so much to help.”

They finally left the bay the next day and came about to sail southeastward. The winds became steadier and soon the *Maiyim Bourne* sat up on her hydrofoils again. They stopped for the night in Talinca, then made it southward to Kenda the next day. There was no convenient port to pull into the next evening, so Silverwind steered them into a small, protected cove for the night.

“It’s snowing again,” Oceanvine reported after she had gone out to take a navigational sighting with the sextant. “Couldn’t take any sightings, but I’m pretty sure I know where we are based on the speed we were traveling at.”

“I hope it won’t turn into another major storm,” Silverwind fretted. “This is not a great place to get stranded.”

“It would be absolutely disastrous,” Candle agreed, “if we weren’t in the *Maiyim Bourne*. At least we have a heated cabin and unlimited food. Further the cabin can be sealed so that if a freak wave should manage to capsize us, we’ll get shaken, maybe injured, but we won’t be drowned. Actually, I’m starting to suspect this boat has secrets we haven’t discovered yet. Sure hope we get to keep it when this is over.”

“What makes you think we won’t?” Oceanvine asked.

“Oh, come on! A boat that provides absolutely everything anyone on it needs to thrive in luxury? Since when have the gods given a gift like that? Oh, our quest... I can’t believe I’m using that word... is extraordinary enough and they obviously want us to succeed, but after it’s over something like this will be too great a temptation.”

“Then consider it a test,” Silverwind told him.

“I’ll just try to enjoy it while I can. What’s for dinner?”

“You tell us,” Oceanvine retorted. “It’s your turn to cook.”

“It is? You sure? Oh, okay, let’s put this cooler to the test, then. I wonder if it can produce something that doesn’t exist yet.”

“That’s pretty much what it does,” Oceanvine replied.

“No. I mean I wonder if it can produce something nobody has ever seen or even imagined. That’s what I want for dinner. Something that nobody’s ever seen, but will be a favorite fifty or a hundred years from now.”

“This should be interesting,” Silverwind commented.

“It may not work that way. So far it’s only given us things we could imagine. It may be empty.”

“It may be,” Candle agreed easily, “but we won’t know until we open the door.” He walked over to the cooler, but when he opened the door he was met with a small blast of hot air, as though opening an oven. “Hey! It’s hot! I didn’t know this thing could cook for us.”

“You said it,” Silverwind reminded him. “This boat has secrets we have yet to discover.”

“What did you get?” Oceanvine asked.

“I’m not sure,” Candle admitted. “It’s flat and round. I think it’s some sort of bread covered with cheese, meat and vegetables. It smells good anyway, let’s try it.” He found some pot holders and took the hot tray out of the “cooler.”

“It’s similar to an appetizer served on Ellisto,” Silverwind remarked, “although I’ve never seen one with meat on it, or that red sauce, whatever it is.”

“Tomato, I think,” Oceanvine said after a taste. “Not bad, but I still prefer doing my own cooking. I don’t even know what sort of sausage is on this thing.”

“You’re not supposed to ask,” Silverwind chuckled.

“Well, you can keep on cooking from scratch,” Candle told her, “but I intend to use this food box to its full potential.”

“Suit yourself,” Oceanvine told him.

“I wonder if this box can cook up medicines too,” Candle wondered.

“Probably not,” Silverwind told him. “It’s for food. You’ll find medicines in the cabinet in the head. I needed something for a headache a few weeks ago. There was also something there to help ward off sea-sickness.”

“Now you tell me,” Candle complained. “Oh well, I’m acclimated to the movement of the ocean again. I’ll keep that in mind in the future, though.”

“Just remember that the purpose of the *Maiyim Bourne* is to give us anything we need to get us to where we need to be to complete this quest.”

“I notice it doesn’t supply us with any weapons though,” Candle observed.

“By which we can assume that we have everything we need along those lines already,” Silverwind told him.

“Sure hope you’re right. So how about the next lesson in creation spells?”

Oceanvine was at the helm early in the afternoon two days later. The wind had slackened off and they were unable to hydroplane. Candle was below, working on notes toward his thesis. With Oceanvine’s example, he somehow felt compelled to work on the project even though he didn’t expect to be able to submit it for some years yet.

“Ready about!” Oceanvine called unexpectedly. “Hard alee!” The boat swung around and they were

now headed directly toward shore.

“Spotted someone needing a ride?” Silverwind asked as he came back from the bow.

“Hardly,” Oceanvine laughed, “but we’ll need to stop here. Overnight, perhaps longer. We’ll be docking at that pier ahead.”

“The one I can barely see from here?”

“That would be the one,” Oceanvine agreed. “It appears we have an appointment.”

“With whom?” Silverwind asked.

“Think about it,” she told him. “I’m sure it will come to you.”

“What’s going on?” Candle asked, poking his head up from the cabin.

“Vine tells me, we’ll be stopping here for a while,” Silverwind explained.

“Oceanvine,” she corrected him tightly.

“Why?” Candle asked.

“Something about keeping an appointment,” Silverwind shrugged, hoping Candle would be as puzzled as he was.

Candle thought about it for a moment then dawning comprehension showed on his face. “Oh, yes,” he said at last. “Of course. Should have guessed.”

“As long as you two think you know what’s going on,” Silverwind grumbled and wandered back to the bow area.

“He really doesn’t know?” Candle asked Oceanvine quietly. “It’s subtle, but I could feel it once I thought about it.”

“You know Silverwind,” Oceanvine pointed out. “He never did like this sort of thing.”

“I’d have thought he’d be used to it by now.”

As they drew alongside the dock, the ends of the cables floated out of the *Maiyim Bourne* and tied themselves to the cleats. The dock was several feet higher than the deck, but a metal ladder extended down for them to climb.

“I feel a bit better,” Silverwind commented as they left the boat. “It would have been insufferable had the dock been built just for us.”

“What makes you think it wasn’t?” Candle replied. He knew he was baiting Silverwind, but it was too much fun to resist. “Whoever did it obviously made the dock too high on purpose so you would feel more at ease.”

“Thank you so much,” Silverwind replied snidely.

“Either that,” Candle continued quietly so that only Oceanvine could hear him, “or She was expecting us in the *Skate* .”

“This way,” Oceanvine said crisply. “Oh, that was considerate. We won’t have to walk.” There was a motorized cabriolet at the end of the dock. “Uh, do either of you know how to drive one of these things?”

“I was watching the driver who gave us a ride to the palace, and could steer it in the direction I want, but I didn’t quite catch what he did before turning the crank.”

“Oh, just get in,” Silverwind said disgustedly. “I doubt you’ll have to do anything. It will steer itself.”

“Are you sure?” Candle asked doubtfully.

“Oh yes, and if you think about it a moment, you will be too.”

They got into the cabriolet and it just sat there. “So much for that idea,” Candle commented.

“Try sliding into the driver’s seat,” Oceanvine suggested. “and you may want to be ready to steer.

Sure enough, as soon as Candle was comfortably seated with his hand on the steering stick, the vehicle shook to life and started rolling off. Candle steered it up a narrow paved road that led directly away from the beach. Once they were beyond the dunes the road turned gently to the left and continued on several miles until it arrived at a small cottage with a detached barn, not entirely unlike their former home in Renton . The cabriolet rolled to a stop just outside the barn and they heard the ringing sound of a hammer in a forge. Following their ears, they looked inside the barn to find a Granomish woman putting the finishing touches on a horseshoe.

“Oh there you are,” She said as they entered. She dipped the red-hot steel into a quenching trough full of water. “There,” She said laying it down gently on a heavy piece of wood. “I’ll temper that later. Or not, perhaps. I was just doing that for old times’ sake. Haven’t needed a horseshoe in years, though I suppose it’s always good for luck. Yes. Here,” she handed the now cool metal to Silverwind. “For your next house.”

“Thank you, Methis,” he replied.

“You’re welcome,” She told him. “You’re also late.”

“Wenni thought I was early,” Silverwind countered.

“Given how My cousin feels about you, you could have showed up a century later and still been too early to suit Her,” the Granomish daughter goddess told him wryly. “As it is, I expected you here two days ago. Well, there’s no helping it, but I have another responsibility to perform first. Why don’t you come along?” She led them out the door and past the house. There was a foot path that went into a copse of trees, but soon let them off near the base of a sand dune. Following Methis, they climbed up the dune and then lay down in the sand, overlooking a broad and windy beach.

“Where are we?” Candle asked. “This isn’t the same beach we landed at. The sun is on the wrong side of the sky for one thing.”

“No, it isn’t,” Methis disagreed. “It’s in exactly the right part of the sky. We’re just several hundred miles away on the south side of the island. The resort village of Avetone is a few miles to the southwest.”

“So why are we here?” Candle asked.

“You all are here because I invited you. I’m here because it behooves the goddess of invention to at least witness an invention that will change the world. Ah, here they come.”

A pair of horse-drawn wagons made their way up the wintry beach. One of the wagons was filled with Granomen. The other wagon had an oversized bed and a tremendous gray tarp over whatever was lashed down there. While Methis and the Mages watched, the men from the first wagon assembled a long track in the sand of the beach. Then they removed the tarp from the second wagon to reveal a large airy construct of wood, linen and thin metallic cabling. They carefully lifted it down and placed it on the track.

“What is it?” Silverwind asked, mystified.

“The world’s first successful flying machine,” Methis replied proudly. “Or it soon will be. Today will be its first flight. It’s not really a very good design. There are lots of flaws, and it’s not very stable in flight but you have to start somewhere. See how they have used light wooden frames covered with unbleached linen? That sort of construction will continue for a couple decades, though if they really want to make a commercial go of it, they’ll need to work out a way to carry cargo and passengers, but the first step is to just get aloft. I’ve been watching these men for a couple of years now. They started out with some complex kites, miniatures of this machine really. Last year they were flying a glider that looked very much like this machine, no engine though. That was the tough part, of course, building an engine that was light enough and strong enough to lift a fixed-wing aircraft, and frankly I think they’re going to have to come up with a design that doesn’t take a team of men to launch. Wheels would be a nice addition or maybe pontoons to land in water, but all in all, I’m very proud of what they are about to accomplish. They had to work everything out for themselves even how to build the screws.

“Wouldn’t it have been easier to attach a motor with screws like that to a balloon of some sort?” Candle asked. “Filled with hot air or some light gas like hydrogen, the craft would already be in flight so the motor would just push it along.”

“That will come in time,” Methis assured him. “But for now the engines aren’t powerful enough. Any small gust of wind would make a lighter-than-air craft quite dangerous, not that this thing you see is the surest route to a long and healthy life. Oh look, they’re about to launch!”

Two of the men looked at each other while their crew carried the craft out away from the wagon. One took a coin out of his pocket and flipped it up into the air. He checked the results and then shook the other’s hand. The man who had won the toss crawled out on to the lower of two airfoils, while another two started up the motor by forcing the two large screws to spin. The motor caught and the crew gently steadied the craft, walking with it as the motor was run up to its maximum thrust. An odd humming and puttering sound reached Methis and her guests from across the sand and then suddenly the craft was in flight. It stayed within twenty feet of the ground and flew on a mostly straight line, rising and dipping sharply a few times and finally landed less than two hundred feet from where it had started.

“And a new age of transportation is born!” Methis concluded happily. “Let’s get back to My house. We have a lot to talk about.”

“That really didn’t seem like much of a first flight,” Candle commented as they walked.

“Oh, they’ll do better. They’ll do better today, in fact, but the whole idea was not to take any chances until they got an idea of how the craft would handle. By tomorrow afternoon they’ll be flying up to a mile and a half and in circles at that. They’ll be considerably higher off the ground as well. Then they’ll go back to the shop and build a new machine.”

“A new one, already?” Oceanvine asked.

“You saw how gusty the wind was out there? Well about mid-afternoon tomorrow the machine will get caught in a sudden gust and be destroyed. Rather than rebuilding it, they’ll decide to improve it. Trust me, there’s a lot of room for improvement! It will take them a few months, but next year they’ll be flying all over the place.”

They were soon back at Methis’ home. “Is this really where You live?” Candle asked.

“Yes, of course,” Methis replied. “I’m quite comfortable here. Is there something wrong with it?”

“No, not really, it just doesn’t seem like the home of a goddess.”

“Well, it is,” Methis said a little defensively. “Nildar and Wenni don’t live in anything fancier. You ought to know. You stayed with Them a few weeks ago.”

“At the time I was still getting over being shipwrecked,” Candle replied. “It didn’t occur to me to wonder about it. I guess I was just asking if this was really here or if You were just making it seem so to let us feel more comfortable.”

“I suppose I could, but no, it’s really here and this is how I really live. Of course the house takes care of itself, which is a good thing because I don’t often have time for cleaning and if you’ll come inside you’ll probably notice that the inside is larger than the outside. Just as well as I’m a bit of a packrat. I tend to collect clever inventions and can’t bear to throw any of them away. Come on in.”

Methis’ home was half museum. If anything, she had understated her collection. While the rooms were tastefully decorated and by no means cluttered, they were also filled with books, paintings and bits of machinery, much of which Candle was not able to identify.

She led them to a dining room and gestured for them to sit at the table. “What can I get you?”

“Anything,” Silverwind shrugged. “Whatever you feel like serving.”

“There’s nothing, no food you haven’t had in ages you aren’t dying for?” Methis asked, a bit of surprise in Her voice.

“If there was, we’d have had it by now,” Silverwind replied. “Nildar and Wenni have provided for us more than adequately.” He described the *Maiyim Bourne* and what they had learned of its gifts so far.

“Ooh! I really must have a good look at it before you leave,” Methis enthused. I knew Nildar had built a boat for you, one years ahead of its time, but they didn’t tell me about enchanted food boxes and closets. I’m half tempted to sail off with you, but I do have other responsibilities. Hold on, though, I’ll get something from the kitchen.” She returned a minute later with a large tray full of meats, breads and vegetables. Around the edges of the tray were various dipping sauces. “Here’s something you won’t likely have had before. There are similar meals in parts of the world, but so far as I know nobody has

used these sauces for a few centuries.”

The meal was a drawn-out affair as they picked at the foods while talking. Methis questioned them about what they had done so far. She was very interested in the use Silverwind had found for the power locked up in the mage stones but warned them, “Don’t rely on raw power. That worked on Pohn because that’s all he represents. As you already found out Gredac had to be treated as though he was a disease. It’s lucky that Oceanvine didn’t try raw power on him, but amplified her healing spell instead.

“The thing to remember,” Methis continued sententiously, “is that each demon has his weaknesses and those weaknesses are closely related to their strengths. Determine the strength and you should be able to deduce the weakness.”

“That had all the sound of a divine pronouncement,” Silverwind commented.

“Well it would. I’m a goddess,” She replied easily, “so by definition everything I say is a divine pronouncement.”

“True enough,” Silverwind allowed, “but not everything You say echoes through our minds.”

“Oops!” She laughed. “Sorry. I try not to do that, but sometimes it just slips out. That’s not why I called you here today, though. We really need to discuss your next destination.”

“What about it?” Oceanvine asked. “Are we headed in the wrong direction?”

“Happily, no. So far anyway. You’re headed to Bellinen. Oh. By the way, Silverwind you should be flattered. As far as I know Merinne has never spoken to any other mortal. She seems to have taken a liking to you though. That joke you made in the High Court; Wenni and I were scandalized, but it appears our parents have a different sense of propriety. All these millennia and I’m still just starting to understand the Elders.”

“It’s nice to know you aren’t omniscient,” Silverwind commented.

“Omniscience is boring, Silverwind. Why bother going on if you already know everything?”

“Okay,” Oceanvine cut in, “but if we’re already headed in the right direction, why are you bothering to tell us that? Uh, not that we don’t appreciate the help.”

“You’re headed in the right direction, but I doubt you’re going to the right place,” Methis told them. “Now from what you told me, Merinne said, ‘My children are dying.’ Is that an exact quote?” Silverwind nodded. “Not ‘the Orenta are dying,’ but ‘My children.’ Have you ever heard of the Merinta?”

“Of course!” Silverwind exclaimed, slapping his own head. “The Merinta. The Children of Merinne. I haven’t heard of them in years, but Windchime and I passed through their islands some years back.”

“Who are the Merinta?” Oceanvine asked.

“A group of primitive Orenta,” Silverwind replied. “Well, perhaps primitive is not the right word, but they are somewhat isolated from what we laughingly call civilization and live a much simpler lifestyle in the hundreds of small islands in the area between Killarn, Tissa, Tinse, Thirdi & Mir. Ships usually stay out of that area because of all the shallow reefs, although some parts of the area are excellent vacation spots. As it happens the *Maiyim Bourne* is ideally suited to navigating that region, although we’ll have to keep

the centerboard most of the way up while crossing reefs.”

“I should probably not say any more, but if you land on Likke when you get there, you will run into an old friend who will be able to fill you in on what’s been happening.”

“Who?” Silverwind asked automatically.

Methis just stared at him for a bit before replying, “Silverwind if I was going to tell you that, I’d have just gone and said it.”

Candle woke up almost immediately after falling asleep. Unable to get back to sleep he left the guest room Methis had put him in and wandered back toward dining room with a pen and a small notebook. It was a habit he had picked up from his early lessons and reinforced by Oceanvine’s example. If he couldn’t sleep, perhaps he could work on his thesis for a while. Before he could reach the dining room, however, he encountered Methis who was reading quietly in an over-stuffed chair in one of the many rooms lined with books.

“Hello, Candle,” She greeted him pleasantly. “Unable to sleep?”

“Guess not,” Candle replied. “Thought I might work on the notes for my thesis.”

“This is a good place for that,” She commented approvingly. She put her book down. “I have every book ever written here. It’s a good thing I don’t sleep or I’d never have time to keep up.”

“Hmm, maybe I should return when I’m ready to start writing,” Candle said jokingly, but Methis took it for a serious request.

“You’ll be welcome if you do, of course,” She told him.

“You’ve already said this isn’t an illusion, that this really is physically Your home,” Candle asked haltingly.

“Yes?” Methis prompted him.

“I’ll admit You’re a bit isolated out here, but not horribly so. Don’t people occasionally stumble in on You?”

“I’m not in hiding, Candle. Quite a few people know where to find Me. Very few know who I really am, of course, but I have house guests at least once a month, so I’m only alone as much as I want to be.”

“But if they don’t know You are Methis, who do they think You are?”

“Just a slightly eccentric, but very well-educated young lady. I think most people would be intimidated to know I was a goddess, don’t you?”

“Probably,” Candle agreed.

“Although quite a few have guessed,” Methis continued. “Like I said, I’m not in hiding, it’s just that I’d never accomplish anything if I lived in a big city.”

“What’s that you’re reading now?” Candle asked curiously.

Methis blushed, but held up the book. It was one of the Silverwind and Oceanvine stories.

“Better not let Vine catch you reading that,” Candle warned her. “She hides it well, but she really hates those things.”

“I know,” Methis giggled. “They really aren’t very good, but they make for a nice diversion between more scientific texts. I probably shouldn’t ask for her autograph, then, should I?” That last was added playfully.

“That’s entirely up to you,” Candle warned. “She’ll sign it, but her respect for You may slip a bit.”

“Oh my! We cannot have that!” Methis replied with mock severity.

As they chatted, Candle’s eyes kept straying to the interesting artifacts on display around them. Mounted on the wall he spotted an old quadrant, a predecessor to the sextant. Nearby was a small, working model of a steam engine. But his curiosity got the best of him when he noticed a rounded, battered-looking rock. “What’s this?” he asked, picking the rock up to examine it more closely.

“The oldest specimen in my collection,” Methis told him. “It’s a hammer stone used for making flint tools. It wasn’t the first invention ever but it was one of the first made of a material that wouldn’t rot away. The idea is to find a suitably shaped stone that fits your hand perfectly.”

“This seems a bit big to me,” Candle opined, unable to find a comfortable way to hold it.

“It’s Mine, actually,” She told him. “Granomish hands are broader than human ones, in general. Here, try this one,” She suggested, holding out a slightly smaller stone that had not existed moments earlier.

Candle tried the new stone she offered and nodded. It fit his hand comfortably, “even if I don’t know how to use it,” he added.

“You’ve never knapped flint?” Methis asked. “I know the University at Randona offers archaeology classes.”

“They do, but I didn’t take any archaeology labs,” Candle admitted. “I had a hard enough time fitting the classes I did take in my schedule. Archaeology wasn’t a required discipline for a mage.”

“It should have been,” Methis told him firmly. “A good mage should have the equivalent knowledge of a journeyman’s degree, although outside of magic I understand it is called a bachelor’s degree these days, in every subject.”

“Silverwind says that,” Candle told Her.

“He’s right. The amazing thing is that a good archaeologist also needs a bachelor’s degree worth of knowledge in just about everything too. Seems to Me you should take another look at archaeology.”

“Or even a first one,” Candle laughed. “I did study world history, you know.”

“History didn’t start until people started writing it down,” Methis told him. “No, that’s not quite right. There was history, but it did not go back more than a generation or two reliably until people started writing it down. It’s amazing how much verbal history can change on repetition. Archaeology is the study of people through their artifacts. Like that hammerstone. By studying the bumps and knicks on it you can deduce how it was used. In turn that tells you a little bit about the person who used it. Get enough artifacts and you start to know the entire culture they come from.”

“This stone doesn’t have any knicks and bumps,” Candle told Her.

“It’s completely unused,” Methis replied. “Mine is knicked all over, but mostly on this end here, see? Tell you what, let’s go out to the workshop and you can try a bit of flint knapping for yourself.”

Candle followed her out to the barn. Instead of the blacksmithy he had seen there earlier, now the floor was made of firmly packed dirt with animal skins placed on it for seating. They each had a nodule of raw flint waiting for them and a variety of wooden sticks, antlers and other implements, Candle decided must be really ancient tools. Methis set about showing him how to use each of the tools and demonstrated a variety of techniques and by the time the sun rose, he had managed, with a lot of help from Her, to knap a passable handaxe.

Interlogue

I am Aritos, the Lone Power, the Evil One, the Destroyer. I am the god who makes mistakes. It was because of My insistence that My brothers and sisters joined with Me to create lifeless Midbar.

After that failure none of Them wished any more to do with creation, but it was I who studied the matter. After countless millennia I learned that in order to create a living world, the seeds of life must already be present. My siblings wanted nothing to do with the creation of a living world, so content were They with each other, but a passion burned within Me and a need to create. After many arguments They finally agreed to join Me in the creation of Maiyim.

In the sky above Maiyim We hung dead Midbar. Some will say it was in self-rebuke for the follies of the Gods, but in truth, it too played a necessary part in the cycle of Maiyim’s life.

Together, We populated the seas and the land, but the creation of people is a far more complex matter. Bellinen and Merinne joined together and gave life to their daughter Wenni. It was Wenni’s birth that gave spontaneous rise to the first Orenta. From Gran and Querna came Methis and her siblings, the Granomen. And the humans were born with Nildar from the mating of Emtos and Emmine.

It was I, of course, who discovered that just as life must come from life, intelligent life must come from intelligent life. To create life, a god must give up a bit, just a spark, of His divine essence. My brothers and sisters need not have had divine children in order to create intelligent life, but to my eventual dismay it was the only proper way to do it.

I have no mate; the Elder Gods are seven in number. So to create a people of my own, I needed to give up twice as much essence as they did. I did this willingly, even eagerly. Divine essence may not be an infinite resource, but it is infinitely renewable. By this ultimate act of creation I would be completely fulfilled.

My siblings created people in their own images, but I am the creative one. My five children were each quite unique. The eldest, Arithan, was the clever one. Pohn had the power to move Maiyim if it suited him. I gave Gredac mastery over the plant world, and to Xenlabit, the oceans. Kerawlat was granted an affinity to all animal life. Such were the gifts I gave my beloved children.

My children, while not quite gods, were immortal and indestructible, and I was proud of them, until one day I made the most appalling discovery. While I had made them intelligent none of them had souls. They delighted in the torture and deaths of others. They scattered themselves across the world and made the lives of My siblings' mortal children miserable until it was decided that We must find a way to rid the world of the children of Aritos.

"I begged and pleaded for their lives and in Their mercy, My siblings granted that We need not actually destroy My children so long as they could be permanently imprisoned.

Hunting down and capturing the Children of Aritos took many centuries to complete and in that time My children who remained at large continued to be a curse on the mortals of Maiyim. And when at last all had been captured, one discovered the means by which to escape and proceeded to wreak such havoc as had never been seen on the surface of Mayim.

My name is Aritos, and I beg your forgiveness.

Bellinen

One

They stayed with Methis an extra day at Her insistence because Candle was so exhausted after their all-night flint knapping lesson, but also the Goddess of Inventors wanted a close look at the boat Her cousins had built.

"Oh yes, it's beautiful!" She enthused like a little girl with a new doll to play with. "Yes, Nildar built most of this, I recognize His touch, but it was Wenni who enchanted the food box and closets. And the money bags too. Word of advice, Silverwind, Don't abuse the enchanted money bags."

"I wasn't intending to," Silverwind assured her. "I'm not exactly a poor man, you know. Why not, though? Did She put some sort of limit on them?"

"No, not at all. Just the opposite in fact but if one of these made it into the hands of someone far less scrupulous the damage could be as great as a demon run rampant. My cousin may not like you, but She does trust you, it seems. However, if you let Her down, I doubt you could run far or fast enough."

"It may be my imagination," Oceanvine commented, "but I don't think she rocks with the waves as much

inside the cabin as she does outside. Either that or we've been lucky every night and the winds calmed while we were sleeping.

Methis looked about and replied, "You're right on the first guess. I think They both must have worked on that one. Interesting spell, I don't even have a word to describe it, not accurately anyway. What it's doing is treating the inside of the cabin as though it is on gimbals. It's not perfect because the energy has to go somewhere and there are limits. I think the missing energy is being used to power the cornucopia spells. As I think about it, I suspect My cousins were actually looking for a power source and not trying to smooth out your ride, although They got both. I'll have to discuss it with Them next time We meet."

She saw them off the next morning, saying, "I probably ought to give you all something to help you on your way, but it seems to Me you're already well equipped so all I can give you is My blessing."

"And that blessing, Goddess," Oceanvine replied, "is more than enough. Thank you."

"You're very welcome," Methis told her. "And Candle, don't forget, you promised to return here to write your thesis."

"I will," he promised, earning an inquisitive glare from Oceanvine.

The wind was perfect as they left the dock and within minutes the *Maiyim Bourne* was aloft on her hydrofoils. Candle looked back through a fold-up telescope as they were about to pass out of sight of the dock to see that Methis was still there, apparently writing or drawing furiously in a notebook of her own. She must have sensed him viewing Her for She looked up almost immediately to smile and wave once more. A moment later they were on the far side of a protective jetty and the dock was no longer in sight.

They passed the boundary buoy of the Inner Seas of Granom late that afternoon. Oceanvine sat out on deck, as she always did at such times. Candle believed she was silently conducting her own version of the service Granomish mariners the world over performed as they passed from one sea to another, although they had never done so aloud on the *Maiyim Bourne*. Accordingly, he thought through the words of the ceremony himself, but hesitated over the passage in which he would be asking for the benevolent protection of Aritos as they crossed His sea, and instead asked for the aid of Bellinen and Merinne whose lands they were traveling to.

Candle wasn't especially pious and had rarely attended religious ceremonies of any sort, but his earliest association with Silverwind and Oceanvine had impressed him on the importance of respecting the beliefs of others. Consequently he never failed to conduct the doorpost blessing customary when entering the home of someone else when in the Emmine Archipelago. Methis' home was so similar to the one he had grown up in with Silverwind and Oceanvine, that he had nearly performed the blessing there as well and stopped only when he realized that it might not be polite to ask Emtos and Emmine to bless and protect the owner of the house and all those within, when that owner was not only the daughter of an entirely different pair of gods, but a goddess in her own right.

His first exposure to the crossing ceremony came not very long after Silverwind had taught him the doorpost blessing. He had no way of knowing at the time that the ceremony was a mostly Granomish observance. Similarly, Oceanvine, who had been brought up to revere all the benevolent deities, had never left her home archipelago before either and the ceremony became a solid part of her travels, regardless of whom she sailed with.

Silverwind had grown up with an entirely different outlook on religion. As the descendant of unknown

generations of fishermen, he had been taught that only a fool would intentionally anger the gods, so that his devotions had been conducted with keeping the gods from becoming angry in mind. Consequently as his studies progressed and he learned more about the various deities, the less he bothered to pray for much of anything. The Gods of Maiyim, he had learned, were not omniscient; something They had never tried to conceal, nor were They particularly interested in being worshipped. Further, They were far more tolerant of the follies of Their mortal children and brethren than most people ever realized. Silverwind had long agreed with the Orentan attitude toward worship, that prayer was in thanks for what the Gods had already done for the people of Maiyim, not for how they might behave in the future.

TheSeaofAritos was the wide stretch of water between the Granom and Bellinen Archipelagos. It was widely known for the fierce storms that could form there at any time of the year and was also the most frequently used migration route of the great serps when headed north for their annual breeding season. As the confluence of the Nildar andMethisOceans , it was also known as a passage in which the tides clashed and monstrously large waves could suddenly appear without warning.

The*Maiyim Bourne* shot across theSeaofAritos like it had been fired from one of the*Skate*'s ship's guns. Within an hour of entering that sea, the wind shifted around to the northeast quadrant, allowing them to hoist the spinnaker once more.

"Doesn't this mean we're riding ahead of another storm?" Candle asked.

"At this latitude, it's hard to tell," Oceanvine admitted. "We're approaching the Tropic of the Bear, although we're doing so on as oblique a course as is possible. The prevailing winds change near the line. They're called the Tradewinds because they facilitate merchant vessels coming to Bellinen from Granom. At least they do if they travel around the southernshoreofQuirmlia ."

"So we actually went the wrong way?" Candle asked pointedly.

"I suppose," she admitted, "but I chose the course we took because it was much shorter than going around the other way."

"And Methis may well have had a say in our route as well," Candle added, "She was going to have a chat with us in any case; I'm sure of that. Having us take the northern route made it easier, and I had a look at the charts as well. The Tradewinds might prevail in the direction we were headed, but I doubt the trip would have been any faster."

"Maybe not," Oceanvine nodded. "At least we've come far enough south that the weather is pleasant again."

"I haven't seen you sun-bathing lately," Candle noted.

"Haven't had the time," she replied. "Only three of us crewing on the boat and I'm the navigator. Any spare moment I can shake free goes into the dissertation. Hmm, I wonder if Methis would let me use Her library too."

"You can always ask. I think She seems to delight in having company almost as much as She takes pleasure from knowledge and the sharing of it. If She wasn't justifiably worried about being taken advantage of, She would probably open her library to the public. Not that She couldn't stop people from taking advantage, mind you, but I think She'd be very hurt if it happened and as nice as She is, She isn't naïve.

“Methis told me she has guests at least once a month and some of them manage to guess who She is,” Candle continued. “She doesn’t hide her identity, but She doesn’t flaunt it either. Like most of us, She wants to be loved for who She is, not what She can do for us. You know, that may apply to the rest of the gods too.”

“I doubt the world is ready for that revelation yet,” Oceanvine laughed.

“Probably not, but it leads me to wonder about something else. Is Maiyim the only world with life? Religious tracts only talk about Maiyim and Midbar, but astronomers have detected other worlds in orbit about the sun. They’re rather far out and only one can ever be seen with the unaided eye, and for only a few weeks each year, but they exist. They’re too cold for life as we know it, though. I should have asked Methis about it, maybe I will next time I meet her or one of the other gods if I get the chance. Anyway, if there are other worlds in this system, are there other clusters of worlds orbiting stars? If so do any of them host life and if they do, does that mean there are other gods in the universe? They could be very different from the ones we know...” Candle trailed off when he noticed Oceanvine just staring at him. “What’s wrong?”

Oceanvine shook her head, sending her long blonde hair to the wind in interesting ripples. “I’m sorry, Candle. I guess I still think of you as the little boy Silverwind apprenticed nine years ago. You’ve grown up, of course, but...”

“I’ll always be the bratty little brother you never had,” Candle finished for her.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Oceanvine laughed, “but it seems so odd to hear you pondering such deep subjects. You never did so, out loud at least, before you left for University, although you must have asked them of yourself since you were always getting ahead of the lessons Silverwind and I tried to teach you. I like that. It gives me someone else to talk with about esoteric subjects. Silverwind is wonderful that way; he knows so much, but no one knows everything and we don’t agree on everything by a long shot.”

“Just keep in mind that not every argument is two-sided,” Candle warned her, with a laugh. “Instead of getting a tie-breaker, you may well be making all the arguments impossibly complex.”

“Good!” she told him vehemently. “If there’s a point of view we’ve missed, we might both be wrong. The whole point is to uncover the truth. With three of us we have a better chance. Welcome to the team, Candle.”

“Funny, I always thought I was a member,” he shrugged.

“You were,” she assured him. “It just took me a while to realize it.”

They were still a day out from Bellinen when the storm struck.

Candle and Oceanvine had already struck the spinnaker in favor of the Granomish jib, but when the winds continued to grow stronger it became necessary to raise the Emmine jib instead. The waves became too choppy to hydroplane safely just after the spinnaker had been dropped, so by the time they replaced the large jib the swells were already reaching eight feet and breaking over the deck regularly.

“We ought to reef the mainsail!” Candle shouted to Silverwind after clearing out a mouthful of salt water.

“Hold off on that!” Silverwind shouted back. “And one of you come back here and take the wheel.” They only made out every other word, but it was enough to understand what he wanted and Oceanvine scampered back to the helm. “I have an idea for checking the size and strength of this storm,” he explained to her when she arrived. “If it’s as bad as I suspect, we’ll want to strike all the sails and set the sea anchor.”

“What do you intend to do?” Oceanvine asked, taking the helm.

“No time,” Silverwind replied. “I’ll tell you later.” He sat down nearby and closed his eyes. The next wave, however, threatened to wash him overboard. “Well, there’s an idea I need to rethink,” he muttered, wiping excess seawater from his face. He firmly gripped a nearby rail with one hand, then tried again. Several waves washed over him as he cast a huge, net-like low-power ward out over as wide an area as possible. He used the ward to monitor weather conditions for dozens of miles around him, but it didn’t take long to learn what he needed to know. He opened his eyes and instructed Oceanvine, “Bring us around and into the wind, dear. Candle and I need to strike the sails.”

“Ready about!” Oceanvine screamed into the teeth of the rising gale.

Silverwind doubted Candle heard her. “Let me join Candle, then just swing us hard alee.” He raced forward to where Candle was hanging on to the mast. “We’re striking the sails!” he shouted just as the boat started turning around.

“It’s about time,” Candle complained. “The seas are too high to fool with already. Okay, you yank the mainsail down, I’ll grab the jib.”

“Alright, but don’t worry about stowing it until after we set the anchor.”

“You got it!” Candle called back. A moment later the *Maiyim Bourne* was bow to the wind and Candle all but ripped the jib down to the deck. When it was down, he opened a large compartment and pulled out the sea anchor.

Until now they hadn’t needed the sea anchor so he wasn’t entirely prepared for what he found. He expected a large bundle of cloth, but not cloth of such a fine texture and the cloth unfolded to a far larger area than he would have thought the small tight compartment could possibly hold. Silverwind came forward and helped him deploy the sea anchor, thereby forcing him out of his curious examination of the cloth. There were a dozen strong lines that connected the sea anchor to various eye holes near the bow of the boat with snap shackles. When the shackles were all snapped into place, Silverwind and Candle tossed the anchor into the sea and watched the huge expanse of cloth unfold and fill with water.

“Impressive, isn’t it?” Silverwind asked. “Finish putting the jib away. Vine and I will furl the mainsail.”

“Oceanvine,” Candle corrected him absently.

“What?” Silverwind asked, amused, but Candle was busy folding up the jib as best he could under the conditions.

A few minutes later they were all inside the boat’s cabin, dripping salt water on an already wet floor. The door was sealed so now all they could do was wait the storm out and hope Nildar and Wenni had been right when they claimed the *Maiyim Bourne* was indestructible and that she could survive anything.

“This isn’t so bad,” Silverwind noted, once they had all changed into clean, dry clothes.

“So long as you don’t look outside the windows,” Oceanvine replied.

“Portholes,” Candle corrected her.

“Same thing,” she countered. “The view out there is rocking back and forth enough to make me seasick just by watching it.”

“There is quite a difference, isn’t there?” Candle shuddered. “Well, just don’t look. Whoa!” As he was looking a huge wave swept over the boat and the view outside the window went black as they were suddenly deep under water.

“In any other boat,” Silverwind commented, “We would have just lost our mast and rigging, but I didn’t hear any thing that sounded like the snapping of stays and sheets.”

They waited for what seemed like an eternity. The black view outside eventually lightened up to gray and then a foamy white until the boat was once more on the surface.

“That wasn’t so bad either,” Candle said, first to come out of the shock of the experience. “At least we didn’t capsize.”

“We didn’t even lurch around as much as we might have,” Silverwind added. “So who wants lunch?”

“You’re hungry?” Oceanvine asked.

“Just a bit,” he admitted. “And it’s something to do while waiting out the storm.”

“Do you really think it will blow over that quickly?” she pressed.

“Not really, from what I could tell we could be in it all night, maybe longer. It’s a very large storm, but I think it’s moving quickly. Otherwise we could be stuck in it for days.”

“Well, go ahead and have lunch if you want,” Oceanvine told him. “I’m not hungry just yet. I’ll just work on this dissertation some more.”

“I’d work on my thesis,” Candle commented, “but I’ve pretty much exhausted the few resources we have on board. Too bad the boat doesn’t provide an unlimited library.”

“It would have if Methis had been in on the project,” Oceanvine considered.

“It might have been a real flying machine if she had been,” Candle replied. “Just as well it isn’t. It’s got to be more difficult than sailing. When you’re sailing you can just sail into the wind to stop. Flying you would have to land slowly enough for it to be gentle. I saw the pilot of that machine get out after the first flight. He was half thrown from the craft when it landed and the crew was doing some serious checking of the lower structure. Methis was right, they should have used wheels.”

Oceanvine thought about that and decided, “Skids work better on sand, I would think. But to make the flying machine practical, yes, wheels and a harder and smoother landing surface would probably be best.”

“Well the idea of floats so it can land on water isn’t bad,” Candle opined, but on the larger islands you’ll need to land on wheels, I think.”

Silverwind reached into the food box and pulled out a steaming bowl of soup. As he sat down, Oceanvine observed, “You’re getting mighty comfortable with the pre-made meals that thing can dish out.”

“I’m not the cook you are, Vine. You know that.”

“Oceanvine,” she corrected him. “All right, so why don’t you tell me how you were able to figure out how big a storm this was.”

Two

The worst of the storm was over by mid-morning the next day. The seas were still choppy and the wind gusty, but conditions were not so bad that they could not sail. Unable to deploy the foils, they barely reached the buoy that marked the limits of the Bellinen Inner Sea by sunset.

“Midbar is full tonight,” Candle pointed out while Oceanvine was taking her navigational readings. “Why don’t we sail on in shifts? Lots of ships sail at night.”

“We’re not a ship,” Silverwind replied.

“It won’t matter so long as our running lights are lit,” Candle argued.

“It’s not a bad idea,” Oceanvine added. “We got blown north by the storm but assuming the border buoy we passed hasn’t drifted too, there’s no land mass between us and Orona and we won’t reach that island until tomorrow morning after dawn so long as we keep our hull in the water.”

“Tell you what,” Silverwind replied. “Do your sums and let’s make sure we are where you think and if we are, I’ll take the graveyard shift.”

They were just barely within sight of the north shore of Orona when the sun rose the next morning. Oceanvine rose early to take her sightings and found they were still on course “We’ll want to turn west and sail between Orona and Killarn,” she told Silverwind.

“Why don’t you take the helm,” he suggested. “I’ll go hoist the Granomish jib so you can deploy the hydrofoils.”

“No, dear, you’re looking tired. I’ll change the jib.”

Once the *Maiyim Bourne* was aloft, Silverwind went below and Candle came back on deck. “That Orona?” he asked.

“It is,” Oceanvine affirmed. She told him what course she had planned. “Now that we’re back on the Inner Seas, we’ll need a lookout again,” she told him, “especially at this speed.”

“Let me grab something for breakfast and I’ll take a post up on the bow,” Candle promised. Candle

didn't keep his promise immediately, however. "Just who are these Merinta," he asked.

"Candle, weren't you listening back in Methis' house?" Oceanvine asked sharply.

"I was a bit distracted," Candle told her defensively. "All those books and stuff."

"You should have tried reading some of them," she chided him.

"I did, on demons. Why, what did you read about?"

"The Merinta, of course. Okay, I'll tell you what I know. As Silverwind mentioned they aren't civilized. That's not unheard of in the world. There are dozens of small isolated cultures on Maiyim. The Fire People of the Southern Chain for example; as I recall you forgot to mention them when you were discussing possible demon bases."

"I've never heard of them," Candle admitted.

"You haven't studied anthropology," she pointed out. "You'll have learned about the civilized lands, but the few people left in the world who aren't civilized won't have been mentioned."

"Tell me about the Fire People then," Candle replied interestedly.

"They're a loose group of bands - extended families mostly - human. They subsist through fishing and gathering. They don't know how to farm at all, but they're called the Fire People because they keep a fire burning for warmth in the boats they travel in; large outrigger canoes of a sort. They spend eight months of the year almost entirely in those boats too, fishing mostly although when one band meets another at sea they generally meet to trade and swap gossip and whatever else they do. In the winter they form larger temporary societies on the larger islands where they have crude huts made of stone. But we're getting off the subject.

"You'll recall King Ksaveras mentioned there were independent Orenta living in Methis' Chain. They call themselves the Bellinina, the 'People of Bellinen,'" she continued. "That's about all I know about them, really, and I believe there's a number of primitive Granomen who live around the Arctic circle. There are also a few isolated groups of humans in the small islands south of Rallena and in the dense island cluster on the eastern region of Emmine as well. In general these peoples are small in number and while they'll often trade for civilized items, like steel knives and other tools, they keep to themselves and only marry within their own cultures. They have very little effect on civilization, although there is some concern that many of these unique cultures are being subsumed by civilization anyway.

"The Merinta are a collection of three tribes that live in those small tropical islands between Killarn and Tissa and all. Descent among them is matrilineal, that is children inherit prestige, social position and property through the female, rather than male line."

"How does that work?" Candle asked.

"In an ideal system it means that a man's heirs are his sister's children, not his wife's," she replied. "His wife's children inherit from her brother and so on."

"That's a strange system," Candle commented. "How did they ever come up with it?"

"Probably from not knowing where babies come from," Oceanvine shrugged.

“Excuse me? Do they think the stork brings them? Are there storks in Bellinen?”

“No, I doubt that, there are no storks there, but while they understand that babies come from mothers they do not equate sexual activity with pregnancy.”

“They don’t?”

“Well, they aren’t all that isolated these days. I’m sure someone tipped them off eventually, but the inheritance system was well-established by then. Their religion probably still teaches babies are caused by benevolent spirits or eating certain foods or correct behavior or something. The younger generation, I would guess, knows better, but probably behaves like it is true in any case. Hey, sex is fun and in their culture there is no shame in having a child outside of marriage. In fact, a couple cannot mate permanently until they have had a child.

“Their lifestyle differs quite a bit from their civilized neighbors,” Oceanvine continued.

“No, really?” Candle retorted. “Do they live in ten-story huts or something.”

“Don’t be silly,” replied Oceanvine. “They live in small villages of only a few dozen people. The entire population is divided into four sodalities; Monkey, Porpoise, Hawk and Turtle. The rules of marriage state that no one may marry a person who belongs to their sodality.”

“What’s a sodality?”

“A group of not-necessarily related people but who have something in common. A University fraternity is a sodality, for example. One could even say that mages in general constitute a sodality. In an anthropological sense a sodality is a group of people who consider each other kin whether or not they can describe their actual relationship. For a man to marry a woman of the same sodality would be equivalent to marrying his sister in our society.”

“But they don’t know where babies come from?” Candle commented questioningly.

“I never said it was all logical,” she told him. “Our system isn’t, why should theirs be? It’s a bit more complex than that for that matter. While it is not taboo to marry someone from another sodality, it is rare to find couples from the Monkey and Porpoise sodalities or from the Hawks and Turtles. The preferred marriages are Monkey-Hawk and Porpoise-Turtle. Monkey-Turtle and Porpoise-Hawk matches exist but are not considered as favorably.”

“Wow! In our system you only have to avoid a sibling or a first cousin,” Candle commented. “Neither of which is much of a restriction for me, though I suppose there’s always a chance if I fell in love with a girl from Tarnsa, she might be closely related. Remind me not to go dating in Tarnsa.”

“We do have one other social restriction,” Oceanvine pointed out. “We’re expected to marry inside our own species.”

“Not much of a problem there either,” Candle replied. “As pretty as some Orenta and Granomen are, there’s no real biological attraction, is there? Though I will admit the first girl I ever kissed was Granomish.”

“Really?” Oceanvine asked.

“You’ve met her. It was Korinna, the night I saved her life. We tried again the day I showed her the boat, but like I said there’s nothing there, except on the intellectual level. I do like her though. So what should I know about the Merinta?”

“Well, the islands they call home are amidst a vast maze of coral reefs so deep-draft ships cannot get to them. Even we would have trouble if we couldn’t raise the centerboard. So they’ve remained isolated from the rest of Orentan society. That may be coming to an end, however. The region is becoming a popular vacation spot for rich Orenta, where they can unwind from business stresses and enjoy the unique sport fishing, diving and other relaxing activities on those inner isles.”

“Business stresses?” Candle replied. “Not that I ever noticed.”

“You saw the academic community. It’s a whole different thing. Believe me, their businessmen and women are every bit as intense and serious as Geraint and Elewys. The tourist industry is still rather new, however, and the Merinta fish and farm for subsistence. The Orentan Senate has tried repeatedly to draw them into the mainstream of Orentan life, but so far they have resisted.”

The wind died down in the middle of the afternoon and they found themselves becalmed until after sunset. The next morning, however they caught a fresh breeze and sighted Likke by midmorning.

Most Merinta islands, they later learned, had no formal port facilities. Visitors would simply beach their boat or anchor it off-shore. There was no port security, but incidence of theft among the Merinta was low and there were still very few other people in the area. On Likke and a few other islands on which tourist facilities had been built there was still more than enough space in the small marinas for any boat arriving unannounced. Silverwind found the marina fees to be higher than any port fee he had paid so far.

“I suppose all these new docks need to be paid for, but I’m fairly sure the entire cost isn’t supposed to be collected from me,” he grumbled to Oceanvine.

“Relax, dear, you aren’t paying for it. Nildar and Wenni are, and I don’t think they will begrudge the cost,” she told him. “I must admit that I’d hate to see how much a good meal will cost here.”

“In the marina restaurant I’m not sure those bottomless sacks of gold will cover the cost,” Silverwind said cuttingly. “In town however, we’re more likely to sample true native cuisine and at a rate we won’t mind paying.”

“I’m ready,” Candle announced, stepping out of his cabin wearing an Orentan silk tunic over Emmine-style cotton trousers. In spite of his childhood objections to the bright tropical prints of Bellinen, he had later developed a taste for them and often mixed them with more conservative clothing. By itself it was a harmless eccentricity, but unlike Oceanvine, who also enjoyed Orentan fashions, Candle had a tendency to be a ring leader at school. By the time he had graduated, half the students wore similar clothing.

They closed up the *Maiyim Bourne* and Oceanvine warded the door for the sake of safety, then they proceeded into town. The town, once they were out of sight from the marina, was far less sophisticated in appearance. The entire town was built using the same frame and panel buildings which so typified Orentan architecture, but the marina area used modern wood panels and glass in the windows. Away from the marina some of the panels were covered with brightly painted, oiled paper, but most were covered with a few layers of palm leaves. The windows in these buildings were wide open, brightly color tropical flowers grew in them and there were shutters that could be closed up in a storm.

There was a sign outside of one that proclaimed it was a place prepared food could be purchased, although it did not quite fit the mold any of them were used to in an inn, tavern or pub. Like the rest of the buildings in town it was one story tall, but selected panels had been removed from the walls to allow better air circulation in the shade provided by the roof during the warm tropical day. Inside, they could see there were several long tables for customers to sit at, but there were neither waiters nor waitresses in sight. As soon as they passed through the door, however, they were greeted by a familiar voice.

“Vine!” Master Airblossom called, waving from a table at the end of the room. She and Oceanvine had been roommates as students at the University at Randona.

“Blossom?” Oceanvine asked, squinting her eyes in the dark room to make out her friend. “What are you doing here?”

“Eating lunch,” Airblossom replied brightly. “Why don’t you join me?” They started to sit down. “You serve yourselves in the lands of the Merinta,” she told them before they got too comfortable. “It’s the custom here.”

“Cafeteria-style?” Silverwind asked.

“Sort of,” Airblossom replied. “There’re several offerings available at any meal.” She pointed at a long table counter at a window that opened into the kitchen. “Take as much as you like of whatever catches your eye. The pot at the end of the counter is for donations to the house.”

“Donations?” Candle asked. “Is this a temple?”

“Not as you think of it, Candle,” Airblossom replied. “In a sense, though, all Merintan buildings are temples to Holy Merinne. The point is that according to their religion they may not ask for monetary compensation for their hospitality. They cannot even use money to buy items from each other since all are required to share. In practice, in the areas in which they are in contact with outsiders at least, it is acceptable to leave a donation to Holy Merinne in thanks and as every Merint is a priest or priestess it is not a sin to use these offerings to pay for their own expenses. Once you enter the inner islands, however, money is unknown and it is customary to give gifts of equal or greater value to one’s hosts. It’s a bit complex, but I’m starting to get used to it. Look, go get something to eat and we’ll talk some more.”

“How much should we pay for a plate of food?” Silverwind asked.

“A handful of copper pieces or maybe a small piece of silver, like an Orentan decce,” Airblossom replied. “Not much.”

“I’m afraid I don’t have anything that small,” Silverwind noted. “Will anyone be insulted if we overpay a little?”

“Silverwind, the Merinta are devoutly religious, but they’re not crazy. The larger the donation, the greater honor you pay to Holy Merinne.”

They helped themselves, then left a small gold coin in the pot. It would have been enough to pay for several fine meals in the fanciest restaurants in Querna or Randona, so Silverwind was relatively certain it was sufficient payment. The food was stir-fried and similar in appearance to some other Orentan dishes they had eaten, but the Merinta had a fondness for cooking with fruit and fruit juices, so the flavors were entirely unfamiliar.

“Now, seriously, Blossom,” Oceanvine asked after returning to the table, “what are you doing on Likke?”

“I could ask you the same thing and, in fact I will,” Airblossom replied, “but ‘seriously’ you say and serious it is. There’s been a plague among the Merinta for months now and the healers can’t make heads or tails of it. After the plague we dealt with eight years ago, I’m now considered an expert on demon-spawned diseases, so I got called in.”

“What makes them certain the disease is demonic in origin?” Oceanvine asked carefully.

“It was Master Hyssop who requested my assistance. You have to admit she ought to know a demonic disease when she encounters one. I only arrived two days ago and she left me a note to meet her on one of the interior islands, but so far I can’t find anyone willing to take me there. So what brings you to Likke?”

“Probably the same thing,” Candle replied.

“Although it wasn’t Hyssop who told us to come here,” Silverwind added.

“Well, I’m glad to see you, anyway. To tell the truth I was working myself up to asking you to help out. Hyssop seem to think I’m all she needs to solve this puzzle, but I remember how much you guys did last time.”

“I didn’t do much,” Candle reminded her, “except for breaking into the library.”

“You did the lion’s share of the work, Airblossom,” Silverwind told her. “And it was your extra hours of research that allowed us to formulate the counter-curse.”

“Maybe, but you were the one who actually wrote the counter-curse,” Airblossom pointed out.

“You made a lot of vital revisions, Blossom,” Oceanvine argued. “Face it, it was a team effort.”

“The good news,” Candle added, “is that we have the team back together again.”

“So who told you guys to come here?” Airblossom asked after a long pause.

“Now there’s a long story,” Silverwind laughed. “Fortunately we have a long time to tell it in.”

“Not if I find my ride to Telle,” Airblossom countered.

“You already have,” Candle informed her. She looked enquiringly. “Let’s just say we came with private transportation. We’ll tell you all about it aboard the *Maiyim Bourne* .”

Three

LikkeIslandhad seemed incredibly small to Candle, but Telle was the smallest inhabited island he had ever encountered. Most islands this small did not have a sufficient source of fresh water to support a population, but in spite of their seeming backwardness, the Merinta understood the process of distillation.

In centuries past their shamans used magic to remove sea salt from water and in many villages only the most accomplished elders were able to perform this feat, but Orentan copper tubing was also traded for and physical stills were used to purify their water. Silverwind remarked that it seemed like a reasonable melding of primitive and modern science.

“Although the natives seem to prefer magic-distilled rum to that produced in the newer pot stills,” Airblossom explained. “I’ve never been able to taste the difference, but then the flavor of rum varies from island to island anyway.”

They anchored the *Maiyim Bourne* in a small protected cove where they spotted a number of outrigger canoes. In turn, they were spotted by the native Merinta and three of the canoes were paddled out to greet them.

“Are visitors always welcomed this heartily?” Silverwind asked Airblossom.

“Oh yes,” she replied. “Hospitality is the hallmark of Merintan life. In fact, normally everyone in the village would have paddled out to see us in. It’s a mark of how sick these people must be that only three canoes could be filled.”

They brought the *Maiyim Bourne* in until the water around her was only waist deep and just half a dozen yards from the beach itself, but while they could have waded ashore, their hosts insisted on carrying them in the canoes; another mark of the Merintan hospitality.

Unlike their civilized cousins, the Merinta did not favor bold floral designs on their clothing, what little they wore of it, although they did employ the bright tropical pigments available throughout the archipelago. Most of the people wore nothing at all above their waists and only a short skirt or kilt below. This left Candle somewhat bemused for the first hour or so until the novelty wore off, but he didn’t really have much time to enjoy the view once they had made it ashore.

“Oh, Airblossom, I was hoping it was you,” Master Hyssop called as she came out of a small nearby hut. She was wearing her customary plain tan robes. It wasn’t that she disliked the bold prints her fellow Orentans affected, but she was forced to eschew them due to her allergies to the dyes that were used. “Silverwind? Oceanvine? What are you doing here? I mean it’s wonderful to see you, but...”

“See, nobody ever mentions me,” Candle grumbled only half-heartedly.

“My Gods! Candle, is that you?” Hyssop asked. “You’ve grown up, but shouldn’t you still be in school?”

“Graduated a year early,” he explained.

“Congratulations, Journeyman,” Hyssop replied formally.

“They’re here to help us,” Airblossom told Hyssop.

“Good! The Gods know we need it. But where are my manners? Come in and we’ll have something to eat while I start briefing you.” She lead the way back into the hut and they saw that in spite of having been made entirely of somewhat spent vegetable matter, the hut was comfortably furnished, although places to sit were carved out of the sandy floor. They sat around a low table and Hyssop served them a tray of cut-up fruits. “It’s a bit early for lunch, but this should hold us over, she explained. “It’s rather hot up here near the equator, isn’t it?”

“I would have though you’d be accustomed to that,” Candle commented.

“It’s much more humid here than in Merinne,” Hyssop explained and the buildings here are designed to breath with the weather conditions rather than resist them. I’m told one gets used to it in time, but I hope I’m not here long enough to do so. This is a really nasty disease, maybe worse than last time, although so far it doesn’t seem as wide-spread.”

“Different carrying properties, I would guess,” Silverwind commented.

“Yes, I think so. The incubation rate is faster and more predictable as well,” Hyssop replied.

“It would be bound to be different,” Silverwind replied, “even if it was solely the fault of Arithan.”

“You think it may have been caused by Pohn?” Hyssop asked.

“No, of all the demons I doubt he’d have the wit even with help.”

“Then it had to be Arithan, he’s the only one left at large, uh, isn’t he?”

“Afraid not,” Silverwind replied. “It seems that eight years ago, following the rout he suffered at our hands in Rjalkatyp, he was captured by the Elder Gods and was the last of the demons imprisoned on his island. Unfortunately Arithan turned out to be clever enough to figure out how to free not only himself but the other four. The good news is that Gredac and Pohn have been recaptured. The bad news is that Arithan seems to be working with all his brothers so we’re likely to be facing at least two demons here.”

“Here?” Hyssop asked, her dark skin suddenly getting several shades lighter. “I mean here in Bellinen, not somewhere across the world.”

“We’ve already been across the world,” Candle pointed out. “The journey led us here.”

“Perhaps you should start at the beginning as you did with me,” Airblossom suggested.

Before they could start, however, there was a commotion outside the hut. Rushing out, there were met by the sight of several other huts on fire. Some villagers were busy trying to put the fires out, a job made all the more urgent by the screams coming from within the huts. There were several teenagers standing waist deep in the cove, attacking the *Maiyim Bourne* with axes and adzes.

“Ignore the kids,” Candle said decisively. “The boat is indestructible and there are people dying in the huts.”

“Good thinking,” Oceanvine told him. “We’d better split up, most folks are trying to put out the fires, but there are some who are still setting them.” She ran toward the nearest hut and, finding herself close enough to the water, started levitating large globules of it into the flames.

Airblossom did likewise at another nearby hut, while Hyssop began caring for a badly burned victim, who had been dragged out of one of the huts. Silverwind went right to the heart of the matter and worked at levitating victims out of the huts and managed to bring several hysterical men and women, who were choking on the smoke but were otherwise unharmed.

Candle had an entirely different approach to the burning buildings. Remembering that heat rises and that

levitation had been his first spell he combined the two and lifted whole burning huts off their foundations and tossed them away to spots where the rubble could burn safely. Rescuing villagers were able to run right into the sites of former huts and tend to the victims. But even as the mages were joining in the rescue work, others were still all around them continuing to set fire and attack rescuers. Candle decided he ought to take care of the troublemakers first.

He started toward a pair of teenagers carrying torches, but was stopped by a village elder. "Please, young sir," the older man requested, "do not harm them. They don't really know what they are doing."

"Don't they?" Candle replied. "Oh, all right I'll do my best to be gentle." As he considered his next move he saw one of the youths attacking Hyssop from behind as she tended a burn victim. That by itself was enough to make his blood boil, but the fact the boy had done so by hitting her with a lit torch, nearly made him lose control. Taking a deep breath, he took a page from Oceanvine's book and wrapped the two teens in highly powered wards that held them motionless. Airblossom was already seeing to Hyssop, so Candle moved on to see who else might be creating havoc in the formerly peaceful village.

He didn't have time to react when a teenaged girl screamed and leaped at him from the side, but Silverwind caught the young woman telekinetically and left her floating high enough up to keep her out of trouble. "She's a bit young for you, I think," he told Candle wryly.

"Maybe," Candle shrugged. "I can't much see trying to have a deep and meaningful conversation with her. Looks like they're all the ones still ashore. Let's gather up the idiots trying to sink our boat before they actually find a way to do it."

They gathered up another five young men and women and eventually caged them up in a single large ward. There were still fires to be put out so Candle and Silverwind joined Oceanvine at extinguishing them.

"Please forgive our abysmal lack of hospitality," the village elder said to Silverwind when peace had once more been restored. Candle was with them. Oceanvine and Airblossom had taken Hyssop back to the boat to tend her wounds.

"It's not your fault," Silverwind assured him. "These deluded children did all the damage. We'll help you rebuild."

"Rebuilding is nothing," the elder replied. "A few houses; most of the damage is to the thatching. We change that regularly to keep our homes smelling fresh. I am more concerned about the children. Only two of these," he indicated the teens who were still trapped in the wizard's restraining ward, "are ours, but over the last few weeks some of our children have been traveling to other islands either sick or with odd ideas."

"What sort of ideas?" Silverwind asked.

"They claim to have spoken to Holy Merinne herself and that The Mother commanded them to rid the islands of all outsiders."

"There comes a time in all communities," Silverwind commented, "when people resent what they see as an unhealthy foreign influence and seek to go back to a period they see as idyllic."

"True," the elder agreed, "but Holy Merinne teaches us that we should share what we have with those who are willing to share with us in turn. It is inconceivable that She would change Her mind on such a

basic teaching. Further, She has always taught by example, not by direct contact.”

“Yes,” Silverwind agreed, “She has always been the least vocal of the Gods. She rarely speaks at all.”

“She has a good sense of humor though,” Candle added quietly, earning a glare from Silverwind, which he ignored.

“A sense of humor?” the elder asked. “Young man, I perceive no blasphemy in your manner, but for the sake of propriety please do not take our Holy Mother Merinne lightly. There are others who may not understand.”

“Yes, elder,” Candle replied. “My apologies.”

“So these missing children have been returning with odd and contrary notions,” Silverwind concluded. “How long has this been happening?”

“For half a cycle of the stars,” the elder replied.

“Half a year then,” Candle translated.

“Yes,” the elder agreed, “that is the word I should have used. I do not speak your language regularly.”

“You speak it very well,” Candle assured him. “You usually speak ‘Old Orentan?’”

“So I have been told. We don’t have a name for it. So it was half a year ago that the young men and women started disappearing. When they return they have the plague, most of them, others are as these poor benighted souls you have trapped. This is the first time they have attacked on this island, but the word gets around. You are of the outside world,” he turned to Silverwind. “Knowledge is power, therefore your magic is more powerful than ours. Is there anything you can do for them?”

“I don’t know,” Silverwind admitted. “I believe we are dealing with a case of demonic attack. The five demons are all different from each other and I’m not an expert on every one of them. Each does work differently and the question is have these young people been duped into acting the way they did because of a curse or because someone was able to simply talk them into it. If they truly believe they were doing right then all we can do is talk to them and show them the error of their ways. If they have been possessed, however, we may be able to remove the demonic influence.”

The elder nodded, “How soon will you know?”

“Candle and I will start looking now,” Silverwind assured him. The elder looked a bit concerned at that so Silverwind told Candle, “Do a basic scan on them and be on guard against the Bond. Understand?”

“I’ll be careful,” Candle replied and walked off swiftly toward the captive adolescents.

The elder whispered to Silverwind, “The young man is knowledgeable?”

“Very much so,” Silverwind smiled. “He used to be my apprentice, but when it comes to demonic activity he probably knows as much as I do. I know he seems a bit young and brash at times but I have a suspicion that he’ll turn out to be one of the great wise men of our age.” He knew the Merinta equated knowledge with wisdom.

“Truly?”

“Truly. However, I wouldn’t want him to know I feel that way. It might go to his head,” Silverwind grinned, getting to his feet.

The elder smiled his appreciation of the joke, and then said, “I must see to the people of the village. You will let me know?”

“Of course, Elder,” Silverwind replied easily. He joined Candle and asked, “Anything yet?”

“Definitely the Bond of Aritos, but a variant I’ve never seen. Have you?”

Silverwind took a look, but had trouble making out the nature of the spell through the ward and the overlapping auras of the young men and women. “What are you looking at?” he asked at last.

“The one on the far left,” Candle replied. “It’s clearest around her feet.”

Silverwind took another look and saw what Candle was talking about. The Bond was a flexible sign in this variant. It wobbled around as he looked at it, but within he could see power flowing like water in an incredibly complex bit of plumbing. It was a greenish blue, not entirely unlike the color of the tropical ocean and as he watched, the flow of energy gradually slowed down, stopped, and then started flowing in the opposite direction. “Like the tide,” he wondered aloud, hardly aware he had done so.

“That’s what I thought,” Candle agreed, “but there’s more to it than that. I think we’re going to have a harder time with this than we did on Arithan’s version, not because it’s more complex, but simply because it tends to move so a change we make in one place may be somewhere else by the time we actually act.”

“We’ll have to examine each one individually,” Silverwind told Candle.

“We may have to wake them up too,” Candle muttered.

“Why are they unconscious?” Silverwind asked.

“They were making too much noise awake,” Candle replied. “It was distracting me, so I put them to sleep. I figured it would do no harm and might actually do them some good. Their eyes were pretty bloodshot and you can see the dark bags under them. I don’t think they’ve been sleeping lately.”

“Possibly not,” Silverwind agreed. “Demons are never considerate of the people they enslave. Instead they just work them until they drop.”

“They’re even less feeling than a Hook master,” Candle added. “I know. Well, I’d like to make some extensive notes and sketches of this variant before we completely eradicate it. Also I want to compare these auras with those of the plague victims. I’m willing to bet they’re related.”

“You could be right,” Silverwind. “I’ll get these sleepers separated while you run back to the boat for a notebook.”

“Thanks,” Candle told him and rushed off.

“See what I mean?” Candle asked the others around the table in the cabin of the *Maiyim Bourne*. He had sketched the Bond of Aritos in the forms it had in both the plague victims and the young men and women who had attacked the village that morning.

“Yes,” Hyssop agreed, “but why did you rely on sketches. Didn’t you have the materials to make a thaumagraph?”

“A what?” Candle asked.

“Hyssop,” Airblossom said, stepping in, “That’s an Orentan invention, remember?”

“Oh, right. Sorry, Candle, I wasn’t thinking.”

“Wait a minim,” Candle cut in. “What’s a thaumagraph?”

“It’s a fairly new process,” Airblossom explained. “I’m sure you’ve seen some of the light-based imaging processes from time to time, right?”

“Sure like the tintypes you can get at fairs,” Candle replied, “and the School of Art at University had what they called a photography show last year. They’re interesting and maybe potentially useful in some instances, but they’re going to have to improve the definition and focus, I think. And how would you use one to capture the image of an aura? Most auras really don’t emit visible light.”

“It’s similar, but usually only a journeyman or better can work the spell necessary to create an accurate enough image for this sort of work,” Airblossom told him. “You need to start with some specially prepared paper. That part is easy enough. It can be purchased in any number of stores in Merinne. While only an accomplished mage can produce a perfect image, quite a few people can learn how to work it. Their images are fuzzy and often strangely colored, but it’s a popular party game this season. I’ve seen a few children who show some real potential. I brought a box of it, but I’m afraid it was destroyed when the hut went up, along with all my clothes. Didn’t last long, did it?”

“We can supply you with fresh clothing,” Oceanvine reminded her.

“That’s true,” Airblossom remembered from her short journey on the *Maiyim Bourne*. “Hyssop, wait until you see what this boat can do.”

“I just had an idea,” Candle told everyone. “Hold on,” he continued before someone could ask if it had hurt. He turned around to one of the drawers on the chart wall. “You know this drawer that’s always full of notebooks?” He opened the drawer and found it full of stiff shiny paper that was a light gray in color. He pulled out a few dozen sheets and plunked them down on the table. “Is that the stuff you’re talking about?”

“I thought you hadn’t ever seen this,” Hyssop remarked.

“I never have,” Candle confirmed. “Like I said before, usually this draw is full of notebooks. Our closets are full of clothes. Constantly changing clothes, for whatever we feel like wearing. We always have the correct charts for wherever we want to sail and later on you can put the food box to the test.”

“Amazing,” Hyssop whispered.

“A gift from the gods,” Candle replied in a most blasé manner. “It’s amazing how you get used to things like this. This boat is insidious that way.”

“You don’t like the boat?” Silverwind asked.

“I love the *Maiyim Bourne*,” protested Candle, “but what happens to her when we’re done?”

“Maybe Nildar and Wenni will take her back,” Silverwind suggested.

“Not sure I’d like that either,” Candle replied. “Oh well, we only think she’s indestructible, right?”

“Right,” Silverwind agreed.

“But this is real thaumagrophic paper,” Hyssop said wonderingly.

“Yeah, good trick, huh?” Candle replied. “Later you can show me how to use it and I’ll redo these pictures, but in the meantime we’re way off the subject. Do you see the similarities between the two applications of the Bond of Aritos here.”

“As you’ve drawn them,” Hyssop commented reservedly, “They look nearly identical.”

“They are,” Candle insisted.

“And not just as he drew them,” Silverwind spoke up. “You haven’t had a chance to look at the kids who attacked us this morning yet.”

“I’ve never known Candle to sketch anything inaccurately,” Oceanvine added, remembering some idle portrait sketches the boy had done not long after he had joined them. They had been all too accurate.

“All right,” Hyssop said at last, “but you’re asking me to believe the plague I’ve been researching here is the same possession as these children are suffering.”

“Is that a problem?” Silverwind asked quietly.

“But that would mean that the spell is designed to work in either of two ways. The attackers seem outwardly healthy, while the plague victims are manifesting symptoms quite openly.”

“The last demonic plague we faced had a wide variety of symptoms,” Airblossom reminded her. “Not everyone had the same symptoms.”

“But they were all sick,” Hyssop maintained.

“If there were people possessed by that curse,” Silverwind responded, “They were on the Isle of Fire. But that might have actually been a different spell cast by the same demon, and while this might be as well, it looks to me that it’s the same curse, designed to act differently depending on the individual.”

“Can you cast a spell like that?” Hyssop challenged him.

“I do all the time,” Silverwind replied. “So do you, I’m sure.”

“Want to run that one past me again?” Hyssop asked.

“Ever cast a ward? It just sits there until something touches it. So it has two states, active and potential. This curse also appears to have two states, only both states are active. It’s possible that there are other conditions.”

“I don’t think this is the same as constructing a triggered ward,” Hyssop argued. “This curse behaves completely differently in its victims. The plague we handled eight years ago affected all its victims physically. Perhaps there were some affected mentally only, but not here. I suspect you were dealing with two different curses cast by the same person.”

“Person?” Silverwind countered.

“Oh, all right, demon then. I keep trying to tell myself there are no demons.”

“You know better than that,” Silverwind reminded her. “You’re going to stand for your Wizard’s exams someday, aren’t you? Have you forgotten what the final exam is?”

“Oh, I forgot about that,” Hyssop said suddenly, “not the exam, but have you heard about Wizard Meadow?”

“No,” Silverwind replied concernedly, “What about him?”

“He’s in hospital back in Merinne. The Gods alone know how he survived.”

“What happened?”

“He was picked to sit on a wizard’s exam committee. It’s the sort of thing he could never refuse. I’m not sure which island they visited but obviously it was one of the Demons. Watroak and Hearthfire were on the committee too. Meadow was the only survivor.”

“Watroak was on my committee,” Silverwind said sadly. “How did Meadow manage to survive?”

“I don’t know,” Hyssop replied. “Somehow he made his way back to the waiting ship and the captain brought him back to Merinne. He was still unconscious when I left.”

“I’ll have to stop in and visit him as soon as we can,” Silverwind said at last.

“I thought you two didn’t really like each other,” Oceanvine commented.

“Actually, I like him well enough, although he’s never appreciated my sense of humor much, but I do respect him and ought to visit him when we get the chance.”

“We’re wandering again, folks,” Candle put in testily, “and I’m getting hungry, but I’d rather finish my little exposition first. Anyway, the spells are the same spell. Don’t like it? That doesn’t change the fact that they are. Maybe it is a bit more complex to build a spell with multiple conditional triggers, but let’s not forget the demons have been practicing magic for millennia. Frankly I never thought of it myself, but it doesn’t seem all that difficult; not for a simple argument, anyway.”

“Simple argument?” Airblossom asked.

“Yeah,” Candle replied. “Call it an either-or argument. The spell works in such a way unless some condition is met, in which case it works another way. As I think about it the conditions could be far more complex. You could have the victim have to meet a series of conditions, each of which would result differently, so perhaps the spell would make red-haired boys, with one finger missing suffer from boils, while a girl with the same qualities might run a fever and boys and girls with black hair would be nauseous and so forth.”

“Why would you want to build such a complex spell?” Hyssop asked.

“Well, here’s a more practical application,” Candle suggested. “Let’s say I wanted to put a ward around the *Maiyim Bourne* that only Silverwind, Oceanvine, or I could negotiate. I’d start out with one of Vine’s alternating current wards, because so far nobody’s managed to figure out a way to get around one, then I’d put in the following conditions; 1) is the ward being broken? 2) if no, go back to the first argument, If yes and if the agency is a person go to the fourth argument. 3) the agency is not a person, go back to the first argument, 4) if the person passing through is Silverwind, go to the first argument. 5) if the person is Oceanvine, go to the first argument, 6) if the person is Candle, go to the first argument. 7) paralyze the person breaking the ward.”

“What if someone threw a rock and trained an animal, a monkey say, to enter the boat and steal something?” Airblossom asked.

“Obviously I’d have to come up with something to counter that,” Candle laughed. “It was just a suggestion though.”

“But constructing such a spell,” Hyssop said in wonder. “You would have to keep all the conditions in mind as you cast it.”

“I suspect we’re looking at a new definition of ‘mastery of the art,’” Oceanvine commented.

“I think we could make complex spells modular in nature,” Candle added. “Work on each module and have them all triggered not to activate until all parts are done. I’ll have to think about that, but the point right now is that this is the sort of spell we’re dealing with. Actually all I’ve been trying to say is that the complexity of the spell isn’t as important as finding a way to undo it.”

“And how do you propose we do that?” Hyssop asked.

“Don’t know,” Candle admitted, “That’s why I drew all these sketches so maybe you could tell me.”

“You did a pretty good job with them,” Silverwind commended him. “Normally I like to just prod and poke through a spell I’m trying to undo, but this is an especially slippery one, especially the way it’s always in motion.”

“Now that I have been thinking about,” Candle replied. “It seems to me it’s always flowing back and forth like the tide, so what we need to do is time our reaction so that it hits at just the right time. It’s not going to be easy though, and I suspect that it will prove a nastier spell than many masters can handle.”

“But you think you can?” Hyssop asked skeptically.

“I’ll let you know when we figure it out,” Candle replied. “What I’d really like to work out is a counter spell that spreads the same way this curse does so that we only need to cast it once. Of course we’d

have to design it with multiple triggers the way we were just discussing.”

“Don’t you people ever discuss theory in a strictly hypothetical manner?” Hyssop asked.

“Where would be the fun in that?” Silverwind countered.

Four

“Are we making any real progress?” Airblossom asked Oceanvine dispiritedly. It was late afternoon and they were sitting together on the deck of the *Maiyim Bourne* .

“It’s only been a week, Blossom,” Oceanvine replied. “It took us much longer eight years ago, and while we don’t have a single counter-curse, we have been able to eventually cure every victim. We also know from the teenagers we cured that the curse is transmitted through bodily contact, although it’s not instantaneous. It takes several minutes of sustained contact, then another week to incubate.”

“Yes, but why are some victims possessed and others suffering from plague?” Airblossom asked.

“You’re the expert on demonic disease,” Oceanvine shrugged.

“I’m starting to wish I had decided to specialize in trees like Waterfall,” Airblossom replied sourly. “Well, no, not really, but I hate being called an expert when I feel like I know so little.”

“You’re better versed on the subject than we are,” Oceanvine pointed out. “You were the one who established that Arithan is working in concert with Xenlabit here.”

“We knew he wasn’t alone,” Airblossom pointed out, “and Kerawlat’s known properties don’t run to water imagery. The others are already trapped you tell me.”

“I have it on fairly good authority,” Oceanvine replied, smiling.

“Methis, herself,” Airblossom said quietly, “and Wenni and Nildar as well. I’d give almost anything to meet them.”

“Nildar and Wenni claim they are not really reclusive,” Oceanvine commented, “although I wonder if they only said that to be polite. Methis invited Candle back and he thought the invitation was welcome to any of us. She evidently entertains on a fairly frequent basis. Maybe when this is over, I’ll take you to Quirnlia and you can meet Methis for yourself.”

“Did you really see a flying machine?”

“I really did. It isn’t very practical yet, but I imagine it will get better. That sort of thing usually does.”

“Amazing.”

“That thaumagraphic paper was new to us, you know,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Yes, but did you notice how well Candle did on his first attempt?”

“Oh well, that’s Candle. He picks up new tricks like you and I breathe. Don’t tell him I told you that.”

“Of course not,” Airblossom giggled. “He is very good, though isn’t he?”

“I think he’ll go stand for his masters degree in two years, maybe a bit less and I wouldn’t be surprised to see him beat Silverwind’s record for being the youngest wizard ever. His thesis will be on the demons, but you can bet he won’t make it a specialty. If I had to put money on it, he won’t ever specialize really. That’s mostly Silverwind’s and my fault. We’ve been generalists as long as Candle has known us, so he just naturally wants to be the same.”

“If he’s really that good,” Airblossom opined, “he ought to be. The world needs magical geniuses.”

“Shh!” Oceanvine quieted her, “I hear someone coming.” She looked around and saw Silverwind, Hyssop and Candle wading toward the boat.

“Well, that finishes our business on Telle,” Silverwind commented as he pulled himself aboard.

“That’s it?” Oceanvine asked. “Did you find a reliable cure?”

“No, but we finished curing everyone here in the same haphazard method we started with days ago,” Candle replied

“So what now?” Airblossom asked.

“The village elder spoke to most of the victims and it seems that most of them were infected on Miorn, some distance southwest of here,” Hyssop told her. “We plan to leave first thing in the morning.”

“We ought to leave right away,” Oceanvine commented. “We could save several hours if we did.”

“It would hurt the villagers’ feelings,” Silverwind replied. “They want to have a feast in our honor tonight. They feel badly that we’ve done so much for them and they haven’t been able to return the favor. I tried to explain how much they have done for us, but they don’t see it that way.”

“We’ve been working hard, one night off will be pleasant,” Oceanvine commented.

They didn’t leave Telle until well afternoon the next day, because the feast the villagers treated them to lasted until nearly dawn. The feast had been more than just food and drink. The villagers had entertained them with their ornately rhythmic music and dance as well. Nor were they to be passive observers to the festivities, but were actively encouraged to join the dancing and Candle took a turn on a large drum which turned out to be more difficult to play than it had at first looked. Aside from the obvious drum head, the rim and sides of the instrument had smooth and textured sections for producing a range of different sounds.

They were also given necklaces of obsidian beads, which Hyssop explained was considered quite valuable to the Merinta, being the material they traditionally made their best cutting tools from, even though they often traded for steel blades. Obsidian was thought to be a special gift from Holy Merinne and Candle worried that by accepting these gifts they were depriving the villagers of a valuable resource.

“Well, yes and no,” Hyssop had replied. “Most of these beads are made from the leftover chips from stone knapping. We are depleting their resources in a sense but only because they are used in trade. However it would be a dreadful insult to try to return them. You know, these are very nice, I may wear them at department parties when I get back to University. Some of the professors in the anthropology department have them, but I think theirs are cheap tourist versions. These beads definitely look like higher quality material.”

The next morning, they presented the village with enough silk, in the bold floral patterns of civilized Orenta, to reclothe the entire village, courtesy of the magical closets of the *Maiyim Bourne*. Then after making their farewells they weighed anchor and set sail for the island of Miorn.

The light wind that day was not enough to lift the hull up on her foils, so Silverwind chose to leave them undeployed and they floated serenely past Merintan islands as the afternoon wore on.

“I think I’d like to go for a swim when we stop for the evening,” Oceanvine commented.

“I wouldn’t if I were you,” Candle shot back.

“Why not?”

“Take a look in the water all around us. Those large gray streaks and the fins above the surface aren’t a pod of friendly dolphins,” Candle explained.

“Sharks?” Oceanvine asked.

“Looks like, yes,” Candle replied dryly. “Still want to take that little dip tonight?”

“They probably won’t be anywhere near us by then,” Oceanvine replied.

“Don’t count on it,” he retorted. “They’ve been with us since we left Telle. I think they’re following us.”

“Is that normal behavior for sharks?” Oceanvine asked both Candle and Silverwind.

“Have you been chumming the waters?” Candle asked. At Oceanvine’s puzzled look he explained, “Throwing buckets of ground up fish into the water as we sail by. I didn’t think so. Well I’d have thought you would know this as well as I but, unlike whales and porpoises, sharks do not generally hang around the surface like this, unless they think that’s where the food is.”

“Maybe I’ll forego the swim,” Oceanvine replied.

A few minutes later an odd roar filled the air and Airblossom and Hyssop rushed up on deck to join the others.

“What was that?” Hyssop asked nervously.

“Serp hunting call,” Silverwind replied, “at least I think it is.”

“Here?” she asked. “But serps never enter reef waters like this.”

“Well, hardly ever,” Silverwind countered.

“It’s off the starboard beam,” Candle reported.

“What do we do?” Hyssop asked. “Have you ever fought a serp off?”

“Several times,” Silverwind admitted, “but I don’t think we’ll have to worry this time. Not if our last encounter is any indicator. Better be ready, just in case, but if there are only one or two, Oceanvine, Candle and I can handle them.”

“Ready to do what?” Airblossom asked.

“Just keep it away from the boat,” Candle told her, “but like Silverwind said, we aren’t likely to have any trouble.”

“But don’t serps always attack boats and ships?”

“Not this one,” he replied. “Maybe it has something to do with the enchantments Nildar and Wenni put on it, or maybe we just smell wrong, I don’t know. Anyway last time we had three serps converging on us. Well one of them couldn’t have caught up, but the other two just suddenly veered off and swam away.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, and a patch of oceanvine just opened up and let us sail on through.”

“Amazing.”

“Just another day on the *Maiyim Bourne*,” Candle replied.

They heard the odd hunting call of the serp again and then it was suddenly a mere one hundred yards away, but it wasn’t attacking the boat. Instead it was attacking the sharks. The water around the boat turned red with blood as the sharks went into a frenzy and attacked each other and the serp itself. The boat sailed on, leaving the scene of carnage behind, but it was obvious that in spite of the number of sharks the serp was killing, the sharks were gradually winning because of superior numbers.

“I don’t want to ever see something like that again,” Airblossom commented sickly.

They found a small uninhabited island around dusk and anchored the boat in the lee of the island. None of them felt like staying up much after dinner and except for Oceanvine and Airblossom sitting up on deck chatting for a few hours, the rest went to sleep early that night.

Five

There was a freshening breeze the next morning and the boat rose up on her hydrofoils effortlessly with the mainsail and Granomish jib hoisted. Airblossom had experienced the *Maiyim Bourne* sailing at high speed, but Hyssop was completely taken aback as the boat rose up out of the water and started accelerating to speeds entirely beyond her previous experience.

“Are you sure this is safe?” she asked nervously.

“In general,” Silverwind replied, “I’m fairly sure it’s a bit of a risk, but on this particular boat, I think we’re safe enough.”

They made good time and arrived at Miorn late that afternoon. Miorn was larger than most of the Merintan islands and it was home to several villages. They chose one that had a small dock and brought the boat in.

A few villagers came out to greet them at the dock itself but it was a very tepid welcome compared to the send-off they had gotten on Telle. Nearly half the natives here were ill and those who were able had a weary look to them. Many huts were damaged, although not by fire. On talking to the people, the mages learned that there had been raids here from one or more of the other villages a few days earlier. However in spite of their guardedness, the villagers eventually let Silverwind and company treat their sick members.

Treatments continued throughout the next two days during which a runner from the nearest next village had arrived, trying to negotiate an alliance and mutual protection pact. On learning what the mages were doing, the runner begged them to visit his village, a short walk away. Leaving Oceanvine and Airblossom to continue working with the people of the first village, Silverwind left with Hyssop and Candle to visit the other.

The other village was in worse shape than the first. Many huts had been burned here the night before and several villagers, mostly the sick and elderly, had died in the fires. A heavy stench of burned palm wood hung in the air and there were as many burn victims as there were plague victims. Hyssop found herself tending the people who were suffering burns because her experience in that sort of injury was better than Silverwind’s or Candle’s.

Meanwhile Silverwind and Candle continued to experiment with counter-curses. Due to the fluid nature of the curse they were trying to dispel their results were not entirely unsuccessful and sometimes they were able to cure several victims in the same hut nearly simultaneously, but trying the same technique elsewhere might have no effect whatsoever.

“Is it my lack of experience,” Candle asked as they trudged back to the *Maiyim Bourne* that evening, “or is this an especially difficult project we’ve taken on?”

“I’ve done more difficult things,” Silverwind admitted, “but this is a pretty hairy problem. The good part is that we can cure victims. I’ve had to deal with problems, not curses mind you, that by now I still wouldn’t have even had this much of a handle on.

“Have you been taking your usual notes on each of the victims you’ve treated?” Silverwind asked Candle.

“Of course I have,” Candle replied, a little miffed that Silverwind felt he had to ask.

“Good,” Silverwind replied, ignoring Candle’s tone of voice. “I think it’s time we put Vine and Blossom back on tabulation duty. They did such a wonderful job of it last time, it would be a waste not to have them do it again. And frankly, together, they were able to see patterns where the rest of us couldn’t.”

“Do you think we have enough data to work with?” Hyssop asked tiredly. Her spirits had been flagging the last couple days. Silverwind wasn’t surprised; she had been battling this curse for weeks longer than

the rest of them had.

“Oh, sure,” he replied easily. “We have for a while now, but we just didn’t think of attacking the problem that way. I’m not too surprised. Last time we were handling it almost entirely as a laboratory research case, with occasional examinations of victims. This time we’re spending all our time in the field. That tends to blind us to the big picture even as we search for it.”

It wasn’t Silverwind’s intention to keep Oceanvine and Airblossom up all night as they tried to tabulate what data they had, but he had forgotten the intensity both women displayed when working together on an important project. Once the seed of the idea had been planted neither of them would entertain the notion of getting any sleep for hours. Oceanvine finally stumbled into the cabin she and Silverwind shared just as the sky was starting to lighten and was fast asleep when the sun rose a short time later. They were both still sleeping soundly when the rest left to return to their work.

They continued curing victims in the same piecemeal fashion that day and returned to find Airblossom and Oceanvine hard at work on a new chart in what was now a series of five. “Anything to report?” Silverwind asked.

“Nothing we can work with yet,” Oceanvine replied. “I keep thinking we almost have a handle on this thing and then Blossom here points out something I’ve overlooked and we need to start over again.”

“Sorry about that,” Airblossom replied, “but you’ve shot down as many of my ideas as I have yours. The problem, I think, is that we just aren’t attacking the problem from the right angle. We keep touching on the edges of a solution, but everytime we do, we find new facets that just won’t conform to the picture we’ve already drawn of what we know.”

“Well, we already know that this is a multi-argument spell as we discussed days ago,” Candle pointed out. “I think a cure is going to have to be just as complex. Can you pin-point even one of the conditions that determine the way this curse acts?”

“We’re close,” Oceanvine replied. “That’s why we keep making up new charts. What we need more of are the possessed victims. We didn’t take good enough notes on them.”

She and Airblossom were working late again that night when the boat was rocked by an explosion.

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Oceanvine muttered as they got up from the chart table.

“I’d have worried about you if you did,” Airblossom replied. “We ought to wake the others.”

“We’re up!” Candle called as he stumbled out of his cabin. “What happened?”

“I don’t know,” Oceanvine replied, “but I’m going to find out. You wait for the others while Blossom and I go investigate.”

“Hey! I’m not sitting around here while I might be needed out there,” Candle protested.

“Get Silverwind and Hyssop and follow us,” Oceanvine clarified as she and Airblossom left the boat. They ran down to the end of the short dock and into the nearby village where the commotion appeared to be coming from. Another explosion temporarily blinded them and then knocked them to the ground.

“Could have used a pair of those dark glasses we used for plague victims last time around,” Oceanvine

commented as she tried to orient herself. The screams were still coming from in front of them. Airblossom recovered first and started leading the way. They saw a few panicked villagers heading toward them, but as soon as they came into sight, they would turn and run in another direction. After another few minutes they found a single young Merintan man in the center of the village. He was obviously wearing a wig made of stiff, dried grass, because the “hairs” were thick and stuck out haphazardly in all directions. He had painted his face black which accentuated his white teeth and his eyes, which were glowing bright blue. It was difficult to tell whether he was unaware of Oceanvine’s and Airblossom’s presence or just did not care. He just stood in the middle of a large ceremonial fire pit in which the flames rose to his waist, but did not appear to burn him. Suddenly, he pointed at one of the nearby huts and it exploded in a great burst of light and sound.

With this little warning, Oceanvine was able to close her eyes to protect them against the blast, but both she and Airblossom were hurled backward by the explosion. Oceanvine was able to roll as she hit the ground and got quickly back to her feet, but Airblossom was slammed against a tree and just slumped to the ground.

Oceanvine spared a moment to look at her friend. Airblossom was not completely unconscious, but neither was she able to do much more than groan in pain. Oceanvine snarled and prepared a destructive spell with which to obliterate the man in the fire, but just before she was able to cast it, a heavy weight came down on her right shoulder. She blacked out as she hit the ground.

By the time Candle, Silverwind and Hyssop arrived two minutes later, the center of the village was deserted. Several huts were now smoldering ruins and the fire in the central fire pit was just a collection of glowing coals.

“I could have sworn this was where all the noise was coming from,” Candle commented after they had surveyed the area.

“It was,” Silverwind told him. “Check out the spell traces in this fire pit. Whoever was here was very sloppy. We’ll be able to read the entire nature of the spell so long as these coals continue to burn.”

“We’ll need some thaumagraphic paper to get all the details down perfectly,” Hyssop pointed out.

“Candle can do that,” Silverwind decided. “We need to look for Vine and Airblossom.”

“Hey!” protested Candle. “Why do I get left behind?”

“Someone needs to make a copy of these spell traces. Not just the fire but the huts and anything else you can find that might give us some needed clues,” Silverwind told him.

“Actually I probably ought to do that,” Hyssop interrupted before Candle could find a retort. “Candle has gotten pretty good with the thaumagraphy, but I do have more experience with the process. If you don’t mind, I’d feel more confident in the images I capture this time.”

Silverwind was briefly amused by Candle’s obvious struggle between taking offense and relief that he might not be left behind. “All right,” Silverwind agreed at last, “Come on, Candle.”

“How do you know where Oceanvine went?” Candle asked. “Is there some sort of string between you from the wedding?”

“You mean like the apprenticeship spell I put on you a long time ago?” Silverwind asked. “No. I know the priest made a big deal about being bound to each other, but those were just words. There was no magic involved in the ceremony.”

“I didn’t think so,” Candle admitted, “but sometimes you two seem to know what each other is thinking, so I just sort of wondered. In which case, where do we look for them?”

“There are some faint spell traces heading off to the north,” Silverwind pointed out. “We’ll try that direction.” Silverwind cast a light spell on the area ahead of them and they started off.

They ran into the forest, following the trail that still bore traces of the spells that had been cast here, with the area of light always just ahead. The traces disappeared after the first few paces, but they continued on anyway, unable to think of another option.

“Any idea of where we’re going?” Candle asked a few minutes later when they had slowed to a fast walk.

“I imagine there’s another village in this direction,” Silverwind replied. “We just haven’t had the opportunity to go this way.”

“Okay, I’d already figured that out,” Candle admitted, “but how far is it?”

“The whole island isn’t more than ten miles across in any direction, so we probably won’t have to go much further than that,” Silverwind replied.

A few minutes later they arrived in another village, but this one was almost completely in ruins. The huts hadn’t been burned like those in the first village, but instead appeared to have rotted away. The stench of rotting vegetation filled the air, but here and there were fresh-looking huts.

Candle checked for spell traces and auras and was surprised to learn, “This village was destroyed by magic.”

“So it was,” Silverwind agreed.

“Any idea of how?” Candle asked

“I’m not really sure. Is there any way to speed up time selectively?”

“Um, I think Onestone’s theory accounts for an effect like that,” Candle replied uncertainly, “but so far as I remember, it involves traveling and for it to be measurable by our current technology those speeds would have to be close to that of light. I doubt anyone could move parts of this village like that. In fact as I think about that the effect is the other way around; the person or object moved would experience less time than that which did not, so forget all that. Not only is it unlikely anyone could achieve it, but they’d have to move the entire world and leave these huts in place then put everything back without anyone noticing.”

“We can call it impossible then,” Silverwind agreed. “I wonder how I would do such a thing if I wanted to, then.”

“There is one possibility I can think of,” Candle said a minute later, after looking around the village a bit more. “Life is a chemical reaction, well a large set of chemical reactions, really, and rotting is another set of such reactions and magic can be used as a catalyst to accelerate chemical reactions. I think that’s how this happened.”

“Someone accelerated the decomposition of these huts?” Silverwind mused. “Yes, I could do that. Not sure why I would want to, though. Did you hear something?”

Candle listened and thought he heard someone moaning in one of the remaining huts. “Over there,” he pointed, rushing toward the small building.

They found an old Merintan woman inside. She was in great pain and barely aware of their presence. Candle felt her forehead and thought she had a fever. “She’s very ill,” he said to Silverwind, “Orentan normal temperatures are generally two degrees lower than human, but she feels very warm to me.”

“It’s the same plague the other villagers have,” Silverwind reported. “Whoever destroyed this village, must have left her for dead.” He studied the magical component of her illness and found it as hard to get a handle on as what he had seen in other victims. However, having countered this curse dozens of times already, he had a general feeling for how to handle it. A few minutes later, he looked up and said, “She’ll recover now, but it may take a while. She’s very weak.”

Her eyes opened and she made a weak croaking sound. Silverwind lifted her partly up to a sitting position. Then he concentrated briefly and a cup full of water materialized in his hand. He brought it to her lips and she drank it eagerly, although he carefully made her drink slowly. A few minutes later she sighed and fell asleep.

“Someone is coming,” Candle reported, going on guard, just in case of trouble. He need not have bothered. The new arrivals were three villagers returning to see the damage. There were two men and a woman, the two men were each carrying a freshly caught fish.

Candle was still having trouble speaking Old Orentan, and the Merintans who had just returned did not speak modern Maiyim, but with effort he managed to tell them about the old woman. They entered the hut and helped Silverwind make her more comfortable.

“Thank you for helping our Elder,” the woman told Silverwind. “We feared she was dead. You are sure she will recover?”

“With care and time, yes,” Silverwind replied. “You three all appear to be healthy. Were you here when the village was destroyed?”

“No, we were on a fishing expedition; not much of one. Sharks kept stealing our catches. Most of our families were ill when we left.”

“I don’t know where they might be, then,” Silverwind told her sadly. “Hiding out in the bush, I imagine. When they return call for me, I’m staying at the next village to the south.” She nodded her understanding. “We were following some people who raided the village we are staying in and their trail lead here. Do you have any idea where they may have gone from here?”

“Tallinawa’s village, where you are staying is to the south and we came in from the west,” the woman replied. “The only other trail leads off to the northeast, to Hamadawa’s village.”

“Thank you” Silverwind replied. “Then that’s where we must go next. Come on, Candle.”

They continued on, but after a few minutes they found a fork in the path. “Which way now,” Silverwind mused.

“One of these paths must be new,” Candle opined. “Elsewise that woman would have mentioned which trail to take.” Candle took a closer look, by casting a light spell of his own. “Yeah, see here? This trail has been cut recently. We probably ought to turn out the light spells though and let our eyes get used to the dark.”

“You’re right,” Silverwind agreed. “Midbar is up and nearly full tonight, and we probably want to sneak up on whoever we’re following.”

They waited a few minutes and then continued on through the dark jungle. They made their way slowly down the trail until at last they spotted a clearing with a large fire ahead. Silverwind pulled Candle off the trail and they carefully walked around the cleared area, trying to get a clear view of the place without tipping off anyone in it that they were being observed.

There were none of the typical Merintan huts in the clearing but a dozen or more crude lean-tos had been erected all facing the fire. There were several people sitting by the fire and others were lying down in the lean-tos, apparently asleep. Outwardly, it appeared to be a large, but otherwise ordinary hunting encampment.

“I’d suggest that maybe we came to the wrong place,” Candle whispered, “but I think Oceanvine’s in that shelter over there.”

“I think you’re right,” Silverwind agreed. “I doubt there are a lot of other blondes floating around these islands. It looks like she may be tied up.”

“Hard to tell in this light, but I notice that everyone in this camp is infected with the same curse we’ve been battling, though I think all of these are of the possessed variety,” Candle noted.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Silverwind nodded. “I figured they must have been working out of some sort of central location since all the villages were being raided. Can’t tell how old they all are in these conditions, but frankly that doesn’t matter much at the moment. We need to get in there and see how Vine is.”

“And Airblossom,” Candle reminded him. “Do you have a plan?”

“I think we’ll need a diversion,” Silverwind answered, “Then we can move in and get them out.”

“If they’re injured we’re going to need more than a diversion, and there are enough people in those lean-tos that I doubt they’ll all go chasing after whatever you have in mind. I think we’ll need a containment ward like we used on Telle.”

“Be ready to cast one, but I have another idea, though it too involves a ward.” Silverwind paused and carefully considered what he wanted to do. “There,” he said at last. “Better cover your eyes and ears. This is going to be a bit flashy.”

A moment later, Candle thought that was putting it a bit too mildly. Several loud booms, accompanied

bright flashes went off not too far from the edge of the encampment where the path entered it. There was silence for a second before the people at the fire reacted with loud shouts of their own. Silverwind caused several more loud explosions to take place until the people in the shelters were roused as well.

There was something wrong about the display as Candle saw it, but it took him a moment to realize what it was. The flashes of light went off at exactly the same time as the loud booms, even though they appeared to take place several hundred feet away. There should have been a brief pause between the light and the noise. "Illusion?" he asked Silverwind.

"Of course. I wasn't trying to tear up the landscape. Okay, most everyone is running off to investigate. I think we can handle the rest," Silverwind said. "Keeping that containment ward ready to go?"

"I'm ready," Candle replied. "I guess."

"Let's go then," Silverwind told him and suited actions to words. They made it to the shelter they had spotted Oceanvine in and discovered that Airblossom was tied up and blindfolded next to her. Both women were unconscious, however and had wounds that were still bleeding slowly. "I don't like the look of Oceanvine's shoulder," Candle remarked. "That's a horrible bruise and it could be broken as well. We'll have to move them both carefully."

"Agreed, but we won't be able to do so until we take care of that lot out there," Silverwind replied. "I think I got most of them with my ward, but not everyone actually left the camp, and here come the rest."

Five young men and women were approaching the shelter, so Candle cast his containment ward around them and then caused it to shrink a bit so they would not have too much freedom within it. That worked for a moment until one of the men shrugged a little and his eyes started glowing bright blue. Then he simply stepped through the ward as though it wasn't there. He turned to face Silverwind and Candle directly and pointed his finger at them, but Silverwind erected a quick shielding ward, that deflected the spell. A massive explosion shook the ground off to their right.

Candle took a different tack entirely and caused one of the stones that ringed the fire pit to shoot at the man's head from behind. There was a soft thunk and the eyes stopped glowing and the man slumped to the ground.

"Is that everyone?" Candle asked.

"I think so," Silverwind replied. "All but this lot is cured. They managed to infect Vine and Blossom, but I've already countered that. Do you think Hyssop will find five victims a sufficient number to study?"

"I don't think she's going to have much choice," Candle replied.

Six

Once freed of possession, the young Merintans were more than eager to help out, so Silverwind sent two of them off to get Master Hyssop, which he felt would be safer than trying to move Oceanvine and Airblossom. They returned an hour after dawn with Hyssop in tow. The rest of the young people he had sent back to their villages to help rebuild.

"Airblossom is badly bruised, but that's all," Hyssop told Silverwind and Candle after inspecting to two

injured mages. That was no surprise as it was pretty much what Airblossom herself had been saying since she had woken up two hours earlier.

“However,” Hyssop continued, “Oceanvine’s clavicle or collar bone is broken and the way they dragged her here didn’t do her any good whatsoever. I’m going to have to set it here, which is not something I have a lot of experience with, and she’s going to be in a fair amount of pain when she wakes up.”

“We have pain medication in the *Maiyim Bourne*,” Silverwind replied.

“Well, stay away from that Granomish aspirin for a while. It’s an anticoagulant and she has some internal bleeding so it may hurt more than it helps. What else do you have?”

“I’m not sure,” Silverwind admitted, “but the medicine cabinet seems to be as well stocked as everything else in the boat. I’ll just have to trust it to come up with whatever is right.”

“I don’t suppose it will tell you what the proper dosage is? I haven’t noticed that anything in those miracle boxes comes out with labels.”

“One pill as needed at a time I guess,” Silverwind shrugged.

“You’re assuming it will be in pill form,” Hyssop pointed out.

“It will be in whatever form I need it to be.”

“Just be careful, especially since you don’t know what you’ll be giving her,” Hyssop warned.

A few hours later they had Oceanvine comfortably ensconced in her bed on the *Maiyim Bourne*. Hyssop had fashioned a workable figure-eight splint to hold the shoulder and collar bone in place and for now had strapped her arm in place as well. To their surprise the bed she shared with Silverwind had changed. Where before it had been a single wide flat mattress, now there were two mattresses side by side, one was flat and the other was raised at the head of the bed so that Oceanvine was able to sleep nearly sitting up, which Hyssop said would be even better than extra pillows to elevate Oceanvine’s upper body while she slept. “It’s important that she doesn’t roll over on the broken shoulder,” she explained.

As Hyssop had predicted she had woken up to severe pains, but Silverwind cast a local anesthetic spell so they could speak for a bit before giving her whatever the medicine cabinet recommended. She described the young man with the blue glowing eyes and Silverwind told her they had him confined in an alternating current ward. When it turned out she had nothing new to add, he gave her the little yellow pill the cabinet dispensed and allowed her to go back to sleep.

“We’re going to have to deal with the ringleader, you know,” Candle told him when he came back up on deck. “Hyssop had no trouble curing the others, but the curse seems to have a more tenacious grip on him. It’s like he took it on willingly.”

“Maybe he did,” Silverwind guessed. “That may be the key to how the spell works. It’s always possible that the less a victim resists, the more powerful they become. Most of the possessed types are young adults at a time when many tend to rebel against parental authority. The ones with the plague may have tried to fight more. That made them all the sicker and is killing them unless we perform a cure. Let’s go run that hypothesis past Airblossom and Hyssop.”

“It’s a possibility,” Airblossom admitted a little while later. “The sick people were being attacked by the curse on a surface level, but the possessed seem to have embraced the curse. This last one has the curse running in his veins. That’s pretty scary, but then so is he.”

“Running in his veins?” Silverwind asked. “I haven’t had a really close look at him yet.”

“Of course not, you’ve been taking care of your wife,” Airblossom agreed, “but now you ought to take a bit of time to see for yourself. It’s almost as if he’s the living embodiment of the curse and he fights every attempt to cure him.”

They went to take a look at the man in question and soon Silverwind had to admit Airblossom was right. “It’s a good thing he can’t get out of that ward,” Silverwind commented, but we’d better cure him soon because we can’t keep knocking him out. There are some spells he could cast if he thought of them and I would rather he didn’t have the opportunity to figure it out.”

Silverwind studied the curse for several minutes and made a few attempts at lifting it, but the fluid nature of the curse made it hard to get a hold on it. Other victims had been relatively easier to cure because the curse was not so deeply embedded in the physical being of the victim, but in this case, Airblossom was right. It was almost as if this man was the curse. Silverwind pondered that, wondering if it was literally true, and then discarded the notion. Instead he tried using a different metaphor through which to study the spell.

Until now he thought of the spell as a sort of complex knot that he needed to untie, but while that helped in other cases, this time the knot was far too tight. Instead he tried seeing the curse in terms of how it was connected with the victim. He wondered why he hadn’t thought of that before, but quickly shelved that question to concentrate on what he had to do. The curse was attached to the young man in hundreds, maybe thousands of points. He started detaching those points but while it seemed he was making progress the points he detached were reattaching themselves as he went along.

He tried again, attempting to detach the connection points faster, but he could get no further than about halfway through all the connection points before they would start reattaching.

“You’re doing better than Hyssop did, but the curse keeps healing itself,” Candle noted. “Is there something I can do to help?” Silverwind described the metaphor he was using to attack the curse with and after a minute or so Candle said, “Okay, yeah, I can see it. As I understand it, there are two options; I can start at the other side and try to meet you in the middle, or just try to follow behind you and sort of roll the curse up as you detach it.”

“Roll it up?” Silverwind asked.

“You’re seeing it as a sheet with tendrils aren’t you?” Candle asked.

“No, more of a vine wrapped around him.”

“Oh. Well it doesn’t matter, you start over again and I’ll do what I can to keep it from reattaching itself.”

“It’s worth a try,” Silverwind shrugged. “Here goes!” he started detaching tendrils as quickly as he could and immediately felt Candle working just behind him. This time as he kept working, Candle was holding the metaphoric body of the spell away from the young man it affected. Finally, Silverwind got to the last tendril and the curse just dissolved and disappeared.

“That was sort of anticlimactic,” Candle remarked.

“Almost too easy?” Silverwind asked archly. “That’s because you didn’t try it on your own first.”

“But it *was* easy for the two of us working together,” Candle replied. “It’s like two of us working together did more than just double what we could do. Admit it, together it was a snap.”

“It was,” Silverwind admitted, “but it takes a lot for two mages to work in concert like that. Timing is essential and the two have to be totally aware of each other. Had you tried that the first time without warning me, you could have pushed me off balance and done all sorts of damage, like binding both of us to the curse.”

“Well, sure, but you did know what I was about to do, that’s why we discussed it first.”

“Even so it can be dangerous,” Silverwind warned him. “If you and I hadn’t been working together for years I wouldn’t have risked it. In fact the only other two mages I might have tried that stunt with are Oceanvine and Windchime. Generally it’s safer, if you have to have two mages working in concert is to be very specific as to what each will do and then don’t fall to the temptation of trying to do more than planned.”

“Good point,” Candle allowed. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

The young man they had just freed of the curse did not appreciate their efforts however. He woke up immediately after the curse had been removed and immediately tried to destroy Silverwind, Candle and Airblossom with magic, but his ability to use magic had been part of the demonic spell; he had no ability on his own. Finding he could no longer wield the power, he lashed out violently with his hands and feet, but Candle cast another containment ward that held the young man.

After an hour of physically trying to escape the magical cage he was in, the young man, whose name turned out to be Masanawa, broke down and started crying. It wasn’t until the next day that they heard any intelligible words out of him, although at the time Silverwind, Hyssop and Airblossom were out in the other villages, curing plague victims.

Candle had been left to help Oceanvine, but Oceanvine didn’t feel the need for help. Whatever the pill from the cabinet had been, it had banished nearly all her pain and the next day all the cabinet would dispense were the Granomish aspirin pills. Hyssop, on examining her, announced that while her collar bone was still broken, the internal bleeding appeared to have stopped. Oceanvine was healing more rapidly than Hyssop had ever seen, although it would still be a month at least before the bones finished knitting. However, the bruises had grown much smaller and lighter and she looked more like the injury had taken place a week earlier, not just a day and a half. However, Hyssop had made Oceanvine promise she would stay in Tallinawa’s village with Candle. With her arm bound to her body to keep from stressing the collar bone while it healed, she didn’t really have much choice.

“Why?” Masanawa asked miserably in Old Orenta.

“You were killing your own people,” Oceanvine told him coldly. “We take a rather dim view of that.”

Masanawa called her something that sounded ridiculous when literally translated but was a deadly insult in his own language.

“Watch your mouth,” Candle told him harshly. His grasp of Old Orenta was still ungrammatical, but his meaning was obvious as was his threat, “Do that again, and I’ll give you a taste of what you’ve been dishing out, only when I do it, it will last longer.”

Grasping for words took the bite out of it for Candle, but Masanawa blanched anyway. “Lord Xenlabit will destroy you! He will feast on your bones and soul!” he told Candle defiantly. “Then he will return and reward me for my loyalty.”

“That will be the sunny day,” Oceanvine laughed harshly. “Demons aren’t known for their gratitude, especially for those who fail them.”

“Actually they’re more known for killing their faithful followers for the power it gives them,” Candle added. “Once you had done your job, Xenlabit would have returned to kill you too.”

“A glorious sacrifice,” Masanawa replied, “and I would have lived forever in paradise.”

“Xenlabit is a fraud,” Candle spat back. “He has no power to send you to paradise. All he would have done is destroy you and your soul for the power it would give him. After that you would have ceased to exist forever.”

“Liar!” Masanawa screamed. “Lord Xenlabit is good and pure. He is my god and I worship him!”

Candle cast a tranquilizer spell on Masanawa and put him back to sleep. “That just about does it. When I meet Xenlabit, he’s gonna have a lot to pay for.”

“Careful, Candle,” Oceanvine warned him. “Xenlabit is a demon, just like Arithan, Pohn and Gredac. He’s more powerful than any of us could ever hope to be.”

“We’ve handled them before,” Candle pointed out.

“Because we worked together. Don’t go trying to take him on by yourself.”

“Oh, I’m not that reckless, but I do have a few ideas of how to handle a demon whose strength derives from the ocean. And as soon as I figure out just which will work, he’s done for.”

Oceanvine stared at the journeyman she still thought of as a younger brother. “Just be careful, will you?”

“Sounds strange, coming from you,” Candle replied.

“I’m always careful,” she retorted. “I just have a temper.”

“Ha! Don’t I know it,” Candle laughed. His laughter reassured Oceanvine, but try as she might, he wouldn’t discuss his ideas of how to handle Xenlabit. “They’re just not fully formed enough to discuss yet,” was all he would say.

They were on Miorn another two days until all victims of the curse had been cured. The villages joined together to honor the mages as best they could, but loss of life on Miorn had been high and the villagers were so obviously forcing cheerfulness that none of the mages could bear to make them go through the motions any longer than what was necessary to honor the bounds of courtesy.

The Merinta of Miorn had neither the facilities nor the inclination to confine Masanawa and all the village

elders asked Silverwind to set the young man free. "It is not our way to force a person to live in captivity," Tallinawa told Silverwind.

"He'll only cause more trouble," Silverwind warned him. "If not here, then somewhere else."

"I truly hope not," Tallinawa replied, "but we cannot act against our nature and the dictates of the Goddess."

Silverwind let a sarcastic retort about silent Merinne die on his lips and instead merely nodded his head to the old Merint. The day before the mages left, Masanawa was seen trying to swim away from the island. Asking around among the formerly possessed, Candle learned that Masanawa had claimed to have met his "Lord" on an island called Narulle some three days by canoe to the southeast, so that was where they sailed next.

Seven

They sailed away from Miorn under a stiff breeze that had the boat aloft on her foils in no time at all. At Oceanvine's insistence, Hyssop had unbound her arm and placed it in a simple sling instead. "It doesn't hurt to use my hand," Oceanvine explained, "and I can move my arm without pain too. I'll keep it in the sling until I'm healed, but I do need at least that much freedom just for balance."

The wind, which had begun the day as a fresh breeze, died off two hours later and left them becalmed miles away from any island.

"We can pilot the boat," Candle suggested a few minutes after the wind had died off, leaving the sails utterly slack.

"We can," Silverwind agreed, "but let's wait an hour or so. I know we're in a hurry, but using the old pilot's trick won't move us very fast."

"Did you know the sharks are back, by the way?" Candle asked.

"Are they? That's quite odd. I wonder if Hyssop has any ideas on the subject."

"What was that?" Hyssop asked from inside the cabin where she was sitting with Oceanvine and Airblossom. All three women climbed up on deck. Candle repeated his observation. "Sharks don't do that," Hyssop said instantly and leaned over the side to take a closer look. "Those sharks are under a compulsion spell," she reported a moment later.

"Compulsion?" Airblossom asked. "To do what?"

Oceanvine looked deeply at the sharks circling the boat and then looked even more deeply on the spell that was at work. "Interesting," she murmured. "I wonder if that was intentional."

"What's that?" Silverwind asked.

"Well, the spell is yet another one based on the Bond of Aritos, but it has that same water-like signature we've been associating with Xenlabit. In the water you can hardly see it. It's almost as if someone was trying to hide the full nature of the spell."

“Maybe they were,” Silverwind suggested. “I’m not sure of what the caster was trying to accomplish with this spell, though. From what I can tell these sharks have been compelled to follow boats around these islands and attack any living thing in the vicinity of those boats. That would explain why the islanders of Miorn have been catching so few fish. The woman I spoke to said they had lost most of the fish to sharks. Now we know why.”

“That seems like rather petty harassment for a demon to engage in,” Candle opined.

“Not when you realize that most Merintans like to go for a swim right out of their boats. They often go spear-fishing that way,” Hyssop informed him.

“Oh, that would be a nasty surprise, wouldn’t it?”

An hour later, the wind was still calm and they started taking turns propelling the boat by the pilot’s spell. As Silverwind predicted, it was slow going but they were able to reach a small island before dusk.

Two Merintans, a man and a woman Candle estimated to be in their mid-twenties, met them as they waded ashore on the pink sand beach.

“We greet you,” the woman said in Modern Maiyim.

“May Merinne smile on you,” Airblossom replied in Old Orenta. Both Merintans smiled. “We were not aware there was anyone living on this island.”

“Oh, we do not live here,” the man replied. “We came here to gather various fruits and plants. Our village is that island to just west of here. We saw you approaching and thought we should invite you to dine with us. I caught a large fish earlier today, more than the two of us alone could eat.”

“We would be pleased to join you,” Airblossom replied, “if we may contribute to the meal as well.”

“We would be honored to share your food,” the woman replied formally. “I am Sarina and this is my husband Larinawa.

“Please to meet you,” Airblossom replied and introduced herself and the rest of the party.

After a few more minutes of pleasant chatting during which the two Merintans stopped being quite so formal, Airblossom and Candle returned to the Maiyim Bourne to get some food for their impromptu feast.

“What should we bring?” Candle asked “Something special, I should imagine. How about a beef roast? They won’t be likely to have had any.”

“Don’t be so certain, Candle,” Airblossom replied. “Beef is available on the outer islands of the Merintan sub-archipelago and some Merintans travel all over these islands. Still, they don’t generally enjoy beef as much as they do venison.”

“Venison?” Candle asked. “Here?”

“Oh yes, there are deer all over these islands. You can occasionally see them swimming between islands in fact. I think, though some nice large shrimp should go over well.”

“Sounds good,” Candle replied, “I think a couple of those flat bread things would be unusual enough too.”

“Hmm, better not,” Airblossom told him. “I haven’t seen any adult Merintans eating or drinking milk products. I think they may grow intolerant of milk as they get older. It’s not uncommon among Orenta in general, actually. But some of that Palsondir cuisine you came up with last week should go over very well indeed. I know Vine prefers the milder dishes, but all Orenta love the hot peppers too.”

“So we can bring some of both, along with the shrimp. Should we bring something to drink? Wine *orals*, perhaps?”

“Most Merintan drinks are rather fruity,” Airblossom noted. “I think they prefer that, but there’s a wine and fruit juice concoction Waterfall makes for me sometimes. We can take a pitcher of that.”

They opened the food box and found everything they were planning to bring neatly packaged. The Palsondirish dishes were covered to hold the heat in, the shrimp were on ice and the wine drink was well chilled in a clay pitcher cold enough that the moisture in the air formed frost on it.

The Merintans marveled at the ice and the cold drink. In their simple, equatorial lifestyle ice was an unknown quantity. Candle suspected their mages, while not as advanced in magic as most modern journeymen, could have created ice using Silverwind’s freezing technique, but the concept of chilling something was not something that would have occurred to them.

The fish the two Merintans served had been coated with some of the herbs they had gathered on the island and then wrapped in some large, wet leaves and baked at the edge of a fire. It was served with some fresh-picked greens and a roasted orange tuber that Candle had never seen before. He found the flavors as unusual as the Merintans found the food he and Airblossom had brought from the *Maiyim Bourne*, but in spite of the strangeness, he enjoyed everything they served.

It was as the meal was ending that Sarina politely asked what brought the mages to Merinta. Hyssop fielded the question, explaining that they were investigating the disease that was affecting so many in Merinta. “We’re hoping to find a cure,” she explained. “How are the people of your island?”

“We have heard of the plague, of course,” Sarina replied, “but fortunately we have been spared so far. Where are you headed next?”

“We’re on our way to Narulle next,” Oceanvine volunteered.

“You won’t find anyone there,” Larinawa told them. “That island was deserted.”

“How long ago?” Silverwind asked.

“Eight months ago,” Larinawa replied simply, “maybe a bit more.”

“What happened?”

“The plague broke out there,” Sarina took up the tale. “It was there first, I think. The people who didn’t die thought the island was cursed, so they moved away.”

“Where did they go?” Candle asked.

“Kalapa, It’s only a few miles away from Narulle, but it was uninhabited before the plague.”

The mages bade farewell to Sarina and Larinawa the next morning and continued out toward Narulle.

“Should we be going to Kalapa instead?” Airblossom asked once they were under way.”

“We probably will eventually,” Silverwind explained, but that boy was on Narulle and I got the impression it was less than four months ago. If Xenlabit and Arithan are using Narulle as a base, that is where we need to go.”

The wind that day was better than the day before, although it was still not strong enough to hydroplane. They sailed gently through the islands for most of the day until around the middle of the afternoon.

Candle was sitting up at the bow on lookout duty when he spotted a pod of pilot whales on a convergent course with the *Maiyim Bourne*. “Thar she blows!” he called out. “Off the starboard beam and closing.”

Oceanvine and Airblossom were sunbathing in the stern and Hyssop was taking a turn at the helm, while Silverwind chatted with her. They all turned to see the whales. The group of about thirty small whales turned to approach the boat then changed course again to match that of the *Maiyim Bourne* until she was surrounded.

Candle thought the whales were a bit too close to the boat and closed his eyes to examine their auras. He only needed a quick look before he jumped to his feet and shouted, “They have the curse!”

As if that was a cue, the whales closed in on the *Maiyim Bourne* and as a group started knocking the boat back and forth. The boat rocked back and forth violently until Oceanvine erected a ward that forced the whales away from the sides of the boat. They started ramming the ward forcefully which also shook the boat, but not as badly as direct contact had done. All the mages attempted to lift the curse from the whales, but water, it turned out, insulated the curse from their attempts to lift it.

It was Silverwind who finally found the key to breaking the curse on the whales. It was not so much a matter of developing a counter-curse as it was of hijacking the original curse and turning it to a purpose of his devising. As he worked on the spell, he noted that this was not the exact same spell they had been dealing with, but a variant for sea creatures. Like its land-bound relative, the spell was devised to be contagious, spreading by contact, but instead of a choice between possession and illness, this one merely possessed. Silverwind left those components intact, but changed the orders the beasts were following. Now they would feel compelled to seek out other possessed sea creatures and pass on Silverwind’s modifications. He also added a time limit to the spell which would cause it to dissipate at the next full moon, nearly a month away. The result would be a contagious cure to the sea-bound version of the curse, but not one that would work on land.

“Why not?” Hyssop asked as they watched the pilot whales swim away from the boat.

“The land-bound curse is too complex. There are too many different ways in which it might manifest. We may not be able to come up with a mass cure, you know, but we’re starting to get a handle on the individual cures.”

“I’ve been studying what we learned on Miorn since we left,” Candle told them. “I think there’s an active connection to Xenlabit. If that’s the case, the curse will dissipate if we can drive him back to his

island. There will still be a lot of sick people, but they'll be able to recover."

"An active connection means there has to be a string between the victim and the demon," Oceanvine pointed out. "I haven't seen such a string here yet."

"I know, but I think we've just not been looking for it in the right manner. Until we can break the connection, if it exists, anyone we cure can keep getting reinfected. We have to stop it at the source."

Oceanvine considered that. "The Hook!" she exclaimed at last. "That's what this variant reminds me of."

"I hadn't thought of that," Candle remarked, "It is rather similar in effect to the Hook, at least when it possesses its victims instead of making them ill. I need to take another look at those thaumographs."

"I'll come with you," Oceanvine volunteered. A few minutes later they had a dozen different pictures of the curse auras spread out on the chart table in the boat's cabin.

They studied the pictures for the next two hours until it was time for dinner, then picked up where they had left off, with occasional help from the others. Around midnight, after Hyssop had gone to sleep and Airblossom and Silverwind were on deck sailing by the light of a waning Midbar, Oceanvine finally spotted what they needed to see.

"Right there," she pointed at the feet of a victim. "See it? Could you hand me that one next to the one you're looking at too? I'd just reach over, but it is on my bad side." Candle handed her the picture. "Yes, see? This one too, just a glimmer, but it could be a string."

"Uh, yeah, it could be a string. Underground?"

"Why not?" Oceanvine asked.

"Xenlabit draws strength from the ocean, not land. He would be deliberately reducing the effectiveness of the spell. Unless..." Candle trailed off.

"Unless what?"

"He could be using the power he gets from the ocean to sort of force his will through the short stretches of land. It's not a trick that would work on one of the larger islands. I'll bet even some of these small ones are a real challenge to him. Too bad this spell is so hard to see in the water."

Oceanvine caught on, "There are probably thousands of strings out there right now. Of course, we've never actively looked for them, have we?"

"We've never looked at night either," Candle added. Less than a minute later they were both up on deck surveying the sea around them.

"What are you two looking for?" Silverwind asked amiably.

"Spell springs," Candle replied. He repeated what he and Oceanvine had discovered and immediately Airblossom and Silverwind started looking too.

"Oh yes," Silverwind said a few minutes later. "I see them."

“You do?” Candle asked. “Where?”

“All around us,” Silverwind replied. “At first I thought I was just looking at the sea itself, but then I realized I was spotting a large network of strings. The sea water sort of fuzzes them out. That’s probably why we never saw them during the day.”

“Oh yeah, I see it now,” Candle said a moment later. Oceanvine and Airblossom spotted them quickly enough as well.

“I was hoping we might get a sense of where all these strings were coming from,” Oceanvine remarked sadly. “A central nexus of sorts, but this is almost like an impossibly huge spider web. So large, in fact, that we cannot see which way the center might be.”

“It’s not a perfect web, though,” Airblossom pointed out. “The strings aren’t evenly spaced at all. They’re rather clumped, in fact.”

“That would be because the spell is spread by the Law of Contagion,” Candle replied, “so a lot of these strings are connected to the people who infected other people, maybe most of them. You, know, it could be that Xenlabit only cursed a few people and that they’ve been out doing all his work for them. What would happen if we just started cutting the strings? Would it be as fatal a shock as it is for Hook victims?”

“Good question,” Silverwind replied. “We’ll have to find out on the next island we find people. Of course, in a sense that’s exactly what we’ve been doing so far, so my guess is we can cut strings whenever we find them, some impermeable wards could do the job for us, but I don’t want to try that without being near the victim, just in case. We could do a lot of harm otherwise.”

It was late morning the next day when Airblossom spotted the tall column of smoke directly ahead of them. As they sailed closer it became obvious that it was a very large fire on Narulle. The island was only five miles across, so Silverwind decided they should sail around it first, trying to find a safe place to land. They eventually found a broad sandy beach that while only one hundred feet from the palms that covered the isle, was as much distance as they were likely to get.

With her arm still strapped tight, Oceanvine chose to stay on board the boat and Airblossom stayed to keep her company. Silverwind, Candle and Hyssop started walking along the beach until they found a path leading inland. They walked for a good quarter of an hour before they actually smelled the smoke, but by then they were nearly at the edge of a wide, burned-out section of the jungle.

“Was this a village?” Candle asked. Inside the burned out area were a lot of blackened and fallen trees, but some of the piles of charred rubble looked like buildings that had collapsed in on themselves. “Isn’t it a long walk from the shore?”

“It’s a small island,” Hyssop explained. “It’s probable that the water in the wells would be brackish if they were any closer to the shore. I’ve seen larger islands that had no fresh water at all, but there must be some here or this wouldn’t have been inhabited.”

“In some parts of the world,” Silverwind commented, “my guess would be that this would be a ceremonial center of some sort, but I haven’t seen any such centers in Merinta.”

“I know the sort you mean,” Hyssop nodded. “Areas in which several villages come together for social and religious purposes. You’re right, though. The Merintans don’t build that sort of settlement. They

would consider a place only used occasionally a waste and an insult to Holy Merine. They do visit each other at festival times, however. With their attitudes toward hospitality, having guests, or being guests for that matter, makes such occasions special.”

“I can understand that,” Candle remarked. “I wonder what started this fire, though.” He closed his eyes to concentrate on the area in front of him. “Not good!” he reported. “The entire area is one big Bond of Aritos. Good thing we didn’t step out of the jungle. It’s not a Xenlabit spell though. This is the work of Arithan. Look for yourselves.”

“Yes,” Silverwind agreed. “It certainly was. Impressive size too; much larger than strictly necessary.”

“No doubt he’s overcompensating for feelings of inferiority,” Candle chuckled.

“You sound like you had one freshman psychology course,” Hyssop observed.

“It shows?” Candle asked, deflated.

“A little bit of knowledge can be dangerous. Although in this case, it’s more amusing than dangerous, I think.”

“I may be having trouble with Xenlabit’s magic, but I’m an authority on Arithan,” Silverwind remarked.

“Maybe,” Candle agreed, “but I’ll bet he still has nightmares when my name comes up.”

“I’ll bet he does,” Silverwind laughed, “but in the meantime, I’d better defuse this particular bomb. I wouldn’t want anyone wandering into this accursed area.” Then without further commentary, he set his mind to the task at hand. He began by drawing on all the power he had at hand, then after verifying this really was just a large version of Arithan’s favorite spell, he formed a pattern that was the exact opposite of Arithan’s special variant of the Bond of Aritos.

“Wow!” Candle gasped. “That’s amazing.”

“And visible,” Hyssop commented dryly. “Are you sure that isn’t over-powered, whatever it is?”

“Just a little idea I came up with while trying to devise a counter-curse to Xenlabit’s spell,” Silverwind explained, opening his eyes to admire his handiwork. “I must admit that making it visible wasn’t intentional, but with all the power loose around here, it’s more amazing that Arithan’s isn’t visible. Anyway, you might want to cover your eyes or turn around, maybe both.” He paused a moment then closed his own eyes again, then he thought better about that and turned around too. He didn’t have to actually be facing the magical construct to sense and control it. Once he had his back to it, he let the two spells touch each other.

A hurricane of magical energy was released when they joined and imploded. All three mages threw themselves to the ground instinctively and felt the force that blasted over them. It wasn’t quite heat or cold or wind or even sideways gravity, but something else, or maybe a combination of them all. The force continued to stream out and over them, until it reached some unknowable limit and then it slowed down, stopped for a long moment and then started flowing backwards. As they waited, the roar of power became even louder than the original implosion, but soon it became apparent that the force was beginning to spiral in on itself and shrink in area of effect. It took the better part of half an hour but eventually the mages were able to see what was happening. The two spells, Arithan’s and Silverwind’s, had melded with each other to form a new construct that was feeding off itself and gradually dwindling.

Oceanvine and Airblossom were sitting in the sun on the *Maiyim Bourne* when the shockwave reached them.

“It’s going to take forever to even out my tan after all this comes off,” Oceanvine complained with a grimace at the restraints her broken collarbone had forced on her.

“You worry too much about that,” Airblossom laughed. “The whole point of sunbathing in Bellinen is to relax. An even tan is just a side benefit. Besides, you’re a mage. If you want, you can maintain a tan while spending a year underground.”

Oceanvine shivered at the thought. “A year underground? Why would I want to do that?”

“There are some microbes, I’ve learned about recently that can barely tolerate light. I ran into an old friend a few months ago who had just spent the better part of the previous three months studying such creatures in a sub-Maiyim laboratory. In order to keep from hurting the microscopic critters, he had to use only low-powered, dark red lights and since it took a couple hours for his eyes to adjust to such lighting, he decided he would get more work done if he lived in the lab most of the time. He came up once a week or so, but that was another hard adjustment. By the end of the study, though he was paler than a human and not looking anywhere near as healthy.”

“Not all humans have light skin,” Oceanvine pointed out. “The natives of Eastern Emmine are nearly as dark-skinned as Orenta. Now that I think of it, the people of North Horalia have darker skin than those of my native Kern.”

“Did you just notice that?” Airblossom asked, surprised. “I mean Candle is several shades darker than you, even with a tan.”

“I never really noticed,” Oceanvine shrugged, “Not consciously anyway. Should I have? It’s not like it’s an important difference. Candle and I differ far more from our early upbringing than the colors of our skin.”

“There are some to whom it would matter,” Airblossom began, but was cut off by the sudden flash of light from the interior of the island. “What was that?” she asked, but Oceanvine’s reply was swallowed up by the roar of the magical energy that erupted from the jungle just behind the light. It formed a slowly expanding cloud that did not quite reach the *Maiyim Bourne*. In fact, from what Oceanvine and Airblossom could see it conformed exactly to the shore of the island, stayed there a moment and then slowly started swirling and contracting.

“What the hell happened?” Oceanvine wondered aloud. Airblossom didn’t answer so Oceanvine decided, “We’d better go check. The Gods only know what happened to the others.”

“Vine, are you sure you should be running around with your collar and arm like that?”

“Blossom, I don’t need to swing my arms to cast a spell. You know that, and Silverwind could be in trouble. Let’s go!” and with that she stepped out over the edge of the boat and gently levitated herself down into the waist-deep water. Realizing the water was a bit deeper than she had thought, she lifted herself up a bit more and levitated herself closer to the shore until the water was only knee-deep.

“Show-off,” Airblossom laughed as she lowered herself into the water. “I don’t think we need to hurry too much. We don’t want to actually get too close to that storm, whatever it is.”

“No, perhaps not,” Oceanvine replied, “but Silverwind and Candle are in there - Hyssop too – and I intend to be there as soon as it’s safe.”

The outermost edge of the magical maelstrom retreated slowly at first and then with increasing speed, so a few minutes later they didn’t have to worry about waiting for it to get out of their way. “Don’t run!” Airblossom reminded Oceanvine. “I’d hate to think what you would do to yourself if you fell down.”

“It’s hard not to run,” Oceanvine admitted. “You’re right, though, but I will walk quickly.”

“Just be careful, huh?”

They moved on. In spite of her admission Oceanvine tried to run, but soon stopped trying when she realized how off balance she was with the arm taped up. Much to their surprise the trees were not burnt to a crisp, although many leaves had been blown off, clogging the path. As they got deeper into the jungle, however, they started seeing more obvious differences. In one section all the foliage had turned bright blue. A little further on the tree trunks had all bent over at right angles and stayed that way. Finally they reached the area that had been burned out by the fire. Oceanvine skidded to a halt and Airblossom had to jump to the side in order to avoid crashing into her.

“Vine, there was a fire here before the magic storm, remember?” Airblossom reminded her.

“Hmm? Oh yeah, but where are they?” Oceanvine asked worriedly.

“Don’t know,” Airblossom admitted. “Maybe we should send up a signal?” with that she pointed at the sky and a bright red light shot upward from her index finger. It sailed up several hundred feet and then burst like a skyrocket, accompanied by a loud bang and a shrill whistling sound. “There. Let’s see if we get a reaction from that.”

“I hope they realize they’re supposed to react to it,” Oceanvine commented. “Silverwind can be amazingly stubborn when it comes to that sort of thing.”

“Stubborn?”

“Hey, if he can ignore a summoning spell from the Gods, what chance does a mere fireworks display have? I should have thought of casting a summons, though.”

“But if he can ignore it,” Airblossom began.

“Candle or Hyssop probably wouldn’t though,” Oceanvine replied to the unfinished question. Before Airblossom could find something else to say, however, three more fireworks went off overhead in reply. “That’s got to be Silverwind,” Oceanvine concluded with relief. “It came from that way. Let’s go.”

They started off again and several minutes later found Silverwind, Candle and Hyssop examining a large carved stone head on the far side of a hill.

“I thought you were staying on the boat?” Silverwind asked.

“So did we,” Oceanvine replied, “but that little display of magical energy sort of changed our plans.”

“Oh? Did it extend that far?” Silverwind asked. “Sorry to alarm you. I would have sent Candle back to

let you know we were okay if I had realized.”

“What happened?” Airblossom asked. Hyssop explained about the giant application of the Bond of Aritos.

“Silverwind,” Oceanvine asked, “was that really the best way you could think of to counteract the spell?”

“Hey, you weren’t there,” Candle told her. “It was tremendous and powerful. Maybe he could have just defused it, but we might have been killed in the magical backlash. At least the way Silverwind handled it the energy released was neutral in nature. If he’d made a mistake undoing the Bond of Aritos, it would have been anything but neutral.”

Oceanvine nodded. She didn’t want to admit Candle was right, so she changed the subject and looked at the great stone head. “This is the first statue I’ve seen in these islands.”

“It’s not typical,” Hyssop explained. “That’s why we’re studying it, but it doesn’t have any magical aura.”

“I think it got neutralized along with the Bond of Aritos,” Candle opined. “If it was part of Arithan’s spell here, any trace would have been wiped out.”

“Wait a minim,” Oceanvine stopped him. “Arithan cast that spell? The people left here eight weeks ago. Arithan wasn’t here eight weeks ago. He was still in Granom, or maybe on his way there, I forget. But he certainly wasn’t here.”

“Who said he cast this curse eight weeks ago?” Silverwind asked. “His spell was what was causing the fire we saw. I doubt he cast it over a week ago. In fact he may have been here as recently as yesterday. I doubt he’s here now, though. If he was, my counter-curse would have gotten his attention.”

“And the magical back blast wouldn’t have improved his day much either,” Candle added. “Hmm, it could have neutralized him along with his curse. What do you think?” he asked Silverwind.

“Only if he had a thread attached to the spell and was caught in the blast. I doubt he was here. He hasn’t stopped anywhere for long since we started following him. The real question is why did he do it? Unfortunately, my solution wiped out all traces that might have given us an answer.”

“Well, we know where we can get answers about this big head,” Candle pointed out. “The people from this island moved next door and supposedly are still there.”

Eight

Narulle Island was devastated physically, but the devastation they would discover on Kalapa was of an entirely different nature. The mages spent the remainder of the day on Narulle searching fruitlessly for anything that might help in their search for a way to battle the curse that plagued the Merintans and in their quest to defeat Arithan and the other demons. However, as efficacious as Silverwind’s counter-curse was at erasing Arithan’s work on this island, the result also scrubbed clean any other traces of magic. In the end, Narulle was completely free of any magic whatsoever.

“Very unusual,” Silverwind commented. “Usually you can find the traces of old blessings and household spells if you look deep enough. Here there is none of that.”

“Silverwind,” Oceanvine asked suddenly. “Where does magic come from?”

“From within on some spells and from all around us on others,” he replied automatically. “You know that.”

“I do, but can we still do magic here?”

“Of course we can,” the wizard told her firmly. “How else did we produce those fireworks earlier?”

“Those came from within,” she retorted. “What about a spell that uses the ambient magic all around us?”

Silverwind considered it, but it was Candle who replied, “No, nothing there. It feels very odd to cast a spell and have nothing at all happen. Not an experience I recommend. There should at least be traces of the original blessings by the Gods to draw on, but, no... nothing.”

“I never considered that,” Silverwind admitted. “I may have done more harm than Arithan did in setting his curse here.”

“I don’t think so,” Candle disagreed. “His spell was extremely malignant, it may actually have been what stripped this island of the Gods’ blessings. Your counter-curse likely just exposed the damage. The question is how to repair that damage. Seems to me we ought to have a priest here.”

“Priests do have a specialized set of tools to work with,” Silverwind admitted, “and they use them more frequently than we normally would, but there is nothing stopping us from reconsecrating Narulle.”

“And to whom do we consecrate it?” Hyssop asked.

“Merinne, perhaps,” Silverwind replied. “She is the Merintans’ chief deity and she was the one who pointed me in this direction. We’re going to need to get to the edge of the area affected though, because I’ll need as much beneficial power at my command as I can muster, and since this is more than just a shrine we’re consecrating, we’ll all need to combine our efforts to accomplish it.”

They made their way back to the *Maiyim Bourne* and discovered that while the island itself was stripped of all magic the effect stopped precisely where the water began.

“Interesting,” Silverwind muttered.

“Obvious,” Candle countered. “The original curse was probably confined to Narulle, and even if it wasn’t, the water is in constant motion, any spell on it would soon get diluted, so only stray energy might have escaped. Hey! Is the boat still enchanted? Oh, yes, I see it is,” he answered his own question.

“The maelstrom didn’t quite extend past the beach,” Airblossom commented.

“That fits,” Candle nodded.

“All right,” Silverwind said, bringing them all back to what they needed to do, “I think our best procedure will be to stand with one foot in the water and one on dry land.”

“That isn’t going to be easy with the waves sloshing back and forth several feet,” Oceanvine pointed out. “Perhaps we should form a line with some of us in the water and some on land. With our hands linked, we should get the same benefit.”

“Good thinking!” Silverwind approved. “Hyssop, Airblossom, maybe one of you should do the honors while the rest of us add our strength. Merinne is your mother goddess after all.”

“I wouldn’t know where to start,” Hyssop confessed. “We commonly thank Merinne and the other gods for what they have done for us, but we don’t actively worship them, not even Wenni, although the Merinta do worship Merinne and the people on the Isle of Fire worship Wenni and the other younger gods.”

“You do it, Silverwind,” Candle encouraged the wizard. “She likes you.”

“And She talks to you,” Oceanvine added. “If anyone here is likely to get Her attention and assistance it’s you.”

“It’s not Her attention I’m trying to get here,” Silverwind countered. “We just want to consecrate this island in Her name.”

“Then do so.”

“I don’t really know the right words,” Silverwind hedged.

“I don’t recall that the priests in the New Forest used any particular words until the end of their rituals,” Candle commented, “though the priestess of Methis challenged Arithan once or twice along the way.”

“The Priestess of Wenni spoke several prayers,” Oceanvine pointed out, “but I doubt that’s what really did the job.”

“Nevermind,” Silverwind told them. “I’ll wing it.” He took his place at the water line while the others stood on both sides of him, clasping hands. He gathered his thoughts, considering what he wanted to do and as he closed his eyes, he was able to perceive the basic difference between the island and the rest of the world. There was no aura, no background energy that land elsewhere had. Narulle was basically as dead as the moon Midbar. If he didn’t find a way to infuse it with the power of life again the plants on the isle would soon wither and die.

In contrast the ocean fairly glowed. Silverwind marveled over the fact that in the past he had barely noticed the background aura of living Maiyim. It was something a mage normally had to filter out. Now awareness of that aura was essential. What he really intended to do was to transfer life energy into Narulle from the surrounding area. The end result would be a slight reduction overall in the region, but he was fairly certain that it would replenish itself in time. In essence he was priming the pump. It was possible that he only needed to infuse a small amount of energy to accomplish what he intended, but not knowing that for certain, he worked toward averaging the life energy across as large a region as he could reach. Together with the others he was able to reach out at least twenty miles all around. When he was ready, he willed the life energy to gently swirl into the barren region that Narulle represented and for good measure he intoned, “Holy Merinne! We consecrate this island, Narulle, in your name and hope you will grant it and all who may live here your blessing!”

It may have been his imagination but as the energy gently rushed in to fill the vacuum he could have sworn he heard the words, “So be it,” gently echo in his mind.

“Whew!” Candle exclaimed when it was over. “That sure took a lot out of me. You guys too?” The others nodded tiredly.

“I wanted to move on to Kalapa before nightfall,” Silverwind remarked, “but perhaps it would be best if we stayed here overnight.” The others agreed readily and they all tiredly made their way back aboard the *Maiyim Bourne*. None of them felt like eating and all retired to their cabins.

Three hours later Candle woke up feeling refreshed and very alert. He made his way into the galley quietly and unable to decide what he wanted to eat, started making a pot of coffee. He was just pouring himself a cup when Oceanvine joined him. “I’ll have one,” she told him quietly.

“Drinking coffee again?” Candle returned lightly, “That could become a habit.”

“I prefer tea, but I do drink the occasional cup of coffee,” she replied defensively. “You ought to know that by now. Hey, you know what I’d really like right now? Some fried chicken like they sell in that place just off campus in Randona.”

“With coffee?” Candle asked. “I’d rather have a good lager.”

“I think you’re the only licensed mage other than Silverwind and Windchime who drinks so much,” Oceanvine told him.

“My faculty advisor told me pretty much the same thing. Well, actually he never mentioned Windchime.”

“And what did you tell him?” she asked, opening the door to the food box.

“Nothing that made him particularly happy,” Candle laughed.

“Let me see if I can guess. You told him that if it was good enough for Silverwind,” she started.

“Close enough,” he interrupted.

“Candle, beer has nothing to do with why Silverwind is a great wizard,” Oceanvine told him seriously.

“Oh, I know that, and actually I don’t drink all that much. I’m just not afraid of having a beer or two on occasion like most of my classmates are. I may not be as good as Silverwind is at concentration under adverse conditions, but given the way he trained me, I’m way ahead of my classmates and most of my teachers as well. I’m not bragging. I know the masters and wizards know much more than I do, it’s just that I’m used to working with a lot of distractions. The funny thing is I used to wish I could just find a quiet place to practice my lessons, but for the first couple years, I almost never had a really quiet place. It’s amazing I ever cast my first spell if you believe what the teachers said.”

“I admit I always thought Silverwind was pushing you a bit more than he should, but when you soaked up everything we taught you it just showed I had underestimated what you could do,” Oceanvine told him. “Uh, could you take the chicken out of the box? It’s a bit too heavy for me to do one-handed.”

“Is that chicken I smell?” Airblossom asked, as she entered the galley. “Looks good. Hey, let’s go eat on the beach. We can sit around the fire.”

“What fire?” Candle asked.

“The one we’ll build when we get there. I’ll take the chicken. Vine, grab a pitcher of something to drink and, Candle, you can bring the cole slaw and potato salad.”

“I can as soon as you close the food box,” Candle sighed. Before they left the boat, Silverwind and Hyssop had joined them, each bringing something else out to the late night barbecue on the beach.

In spite of the late night on the beach, they weighed anchor early the next morning and sailed to the nearby island of Kalapa. No one came out to greet them as they approached the island, but the outrigger canoes in a small, protected cove showed them where they should anchor their boat. A foul smell seemed to be coming from the village a few hundred yards from the cove.

“I wonder if there’s anyone alive here,” Oceanvine commented worriedly.

“I think someone must be,” Airblossom replied. “I can smell a fire ahead.”

They continued on until they arrived in the village. At first it appeared to be deserted, but then they spotted a woman tending a small cook fire near one of the huts. She looked up as they approached and they could see she appeared to have not slept in a long time. They learned her name was Canera and that she and her husband were the only two healthy people left in the village, if one didn’t count exhaustion as an illness.

“Lirinawa is out hunting, although it has been days since he managed to catch anything,” Canera informed them. “We’ve been surviving on greens, coconuts and yams.”

“Not a great diet,” Candle commented.

“Yams are a staple here in Merinta,” Hyssop informed him.

“Maybe so, but Merintans are not vegetarians, we ought to bring them some fish and meat.”

“Oh that would be wonderful,” Canera told them, “but we have so little to return for your gifts.”

“Your smiling faces and welcome into your village will be sufficient,” Silverwind told her, “but where are the rest of your people?”

“In their homes,” Canera replied. “Those who still live.”

“The entire village?” Candle asked.

“True,” Canera told him. “And while I do not like to complain, I do not feel so well either.”

Candle closed his eyes and studied her aura, “You don’t have the plague,” he informed her a moment later, “but if you’re tending to the needs of an entire village you may be working yourself to death.”

“We can cure the plague,” Airblossom told her.

“Truly?” Canera asked. Airblossom nodded. Canera dissolved into tears and while Airblossom and Oceanvine tried to comfort the woman Candle took matters into his own hands and walked toward the nearest hut.

Inside were two elderly people. They were in obvious pain, but had become so weak that the only indicator was their feeble twitchings on the pallet they lay on. Candle wasted no time and after a mere moment of studying them, began working on freeing them from the curse that was draining their lives away. They were so weak he didn't dare to try cutting the strings he and Oceanvine had recently discovered, but instead eased the curse out of them as he and the other mages had on other islands. It was a long, slow process because he didn't dare try anything that might shock them, weak as they were, and when he was finished he gave them a bit of his own life energy to help strengthen them.

Candle stood up to leave the hut and reeled under a sudden fit of dizziness. "Guess I put a little too much into that after all," he whispered to himself and stumbled back to the fire.

"How are the elders?" Canera asked fearfully.

"I think they'll get better," Candle told her, then realized he hadn't answered in Old Orenta and repeated what he had said. "I'll have Oceanvine or Silverwind double check my work. I think I did it right, but they were so weak I was more concerned with keeping them alive long enough to cure them. Where are the others?"

"They said they were following your example," Canera replied. "Does that mean you are curing my people?"

"We're certainly trying to. I think we will, but this is the worst we've encountered so far." At that moment Silverwind came out of one of the huts and Candle asked him to look in on the elders. Then, getting back to his feet, Candle went to another of the huts to cure the next victim.

In all, however, there were only fourteen survivors on Kalapa out of an original population of thirty-five. Canera's husband, Lirinawa returned that afternoon with several fish; a good catch for a single fisherman, but scant feeding for the entire village. Oceanvine checked him out and found he was carrying the curse. Because he still seemed healthy, however, she quickly mentioned it to Silverwind. "Is it the possession variant?" she asked him.

Canera was already telling Lirinawa the good news and Lirinawa flashed a dark scowl over at the mages.

"Something more, I think," Silverwind replied, "not quite like Masanawa, but not far off." Instead of waiting for Lirinawa to make a move, however he quickly reached out with his mind and cut the nearly invisible string that bound Lirinawa to the curse. The Merintan man dropped to the ground like a stone and Canera screamed, but then a long moment later, Lirinawa sat up shaking his head like a man coming out of a dream. He looked over at Silverwind then and smiled. Silverwind approached and asked, "How are you feeling?"

"Much better now, thank you," Lirinawa replied.

"What happened here?"

"I was on a fishing trip about a year ago, when we still lived on Narulle," Lirinawa explained. "Everyone knows where the best places to fish are so it is not unusual to meet others on the water."

"Is there a lot of competition for the fish?" Candle asked.

"Competition?" Lirinawa asked. "No, that is not our way. We help each other. If one fisher is having a

bad day we share our catch so he and his people won't go hungry. Mostly, though, we just stop and exchange news. We all have kin on other islands and that is the best way to find out how they are when we aren't visiting each other.

"So this one day, I ran into a man I had never seen before. That is not unheard of either. People move around sometimes. Fishing grounds get quiet so you try somewhere else for a while. He had run out of water and was thirsty so I gave him some of mine. In return, he gave me some of the squid he caught. We talked for a while longer but he came from an island I had never heard of and we shared no kin so eventually we went back to our own business. I came back here and we had the squid that night. That is the last clear memory I have. Everything since then feels more like a bad dream or as though I was watching someone else do it." He went on to describe how people on Narulle became sick and how some of the younger people started disappearing. The village elders felt the island was cursed so they had moved to Kalapa and for a while everything was better. Then a few weeks earlier, everyone except Lirinawa and Canera had gotten sick again and the dying started.

"Another variant on the curse?" Airblossom asked Silverwind after they had heard the full story.

"Maybe, but I think it's just an indicator of how willingly Lirinawa accepted the offering of squid. It made him a carrier of the curse, but otherwise not outwardly affected by it. It may also have been an early version of the curse by Xenlabit. When the curse didn't spread fast enough that way, he modified it and made it more complex as well. At least that's my guess.

"We know something else now too," Silverwind continued. "We can just cut the threads of victims. There was very little shock involved when I freed Lirinawa, so unlike cutting the string on a Hook victim, doing it in this case will help victims, not hurt them."

"And the best place to do that from is on the water," Candle pointed out. "The best time is at night. So we should set sail this evening and start cutting every mystic string in sight?"

Canera and Lirinawa asked the mages to stay so the village could honor them properly, but Airblossom explained how they needed to move on immediately before still more people died from the curse. The Merintans accepted that explanation with more grace than Hyssop would have believed. Having lived among the Merinta for three months she understood how strongly ingrained their sense of hospitality ran but it was Candle who explained their anomalous behavior once they were aboard the *Maiyim Bourne* again.

"They really didn't want us there. Not now, anyway. If we had stayed they would have honored us as best they could, but they've lost over half their people to the disease. They need the time to grieve and as long as we were there, they couldn't without violating their own cultural rules of hospitality."

"We could have joined them," Oceanvine pointed out. "I would have felt better if I could have shared that with them."

"It would have made it worse for them," Hyssop told her. "For the Merinta the sharing of joy is a blessing, but grief is something they keep to themselves. No, we were far better guests for leaving as soon as we could."

"Well, I'm glad they still allowed us to give them some food," Airblossom commented. "They were still very weak and might not have survived otherwise."

"They knew it too," Hyssop replied. "Otherwise they would never have accepted the gift without giving

in return. “Still if we have a chance, we should return there soon to give them the chance to return our generosity.”

“Unless we get very lucky,” Silverwind remarked, “Oceanvine, Candle and I will be on the chase again as soon as we finish here, but you and Airblossom can have our shares. Now we have an hour until sunset. Why don’t I set a course northward while we have an early dinner?”

They spent the entire night cutting strings although by midnight they saw very few of the magical threads. As they sailed, one of the mages would spot a cluster of strings and as one string was cut, very often several others would instantly disappear as well.

“For a demon-devised spell,” Silverwind commented in the early morning still two hours before dawn, “this is not the cleverest one I’ve ever encountered. It’s rather clumsy in fact. It looks to me like Xenlabit’s entire propagation strategy was based on our not being able to detect the strings. A pretty weak plan, if you ask me.”

“If I recall, Xenlabit was imprisoned on his island for two or three centuries,” Candle commented. “I doubt he’s been able to keep up with what we mere mortals have learned to do while he’s been on his enforced vacation.”

“I doubt our ability to detect spell strings has improved all that much,” Oceanvine commented. “It’s something even the ancients knew how to do.”

“Then maybe he just isn’t as clever as we’ve been giving him credit for,” Candle suggested. “Just because we didn’t see through him immediately doesn’t make him smarter than we are. Seems to me we’ve been overestimating those guys all along. Well, maybe Arithan is as clever as we think, but the others? Well, we know Pohn is a real dullard and frankly I think Gredac was of average intelligence compared to mortal people at best. Maybe Arithan is the only real genius among demons?”

“It’s a strong possibility,” Silverwind admitted. “When Aritos created the demons he tried something different with each one. With Pohn it was power and for Gredac it was an affinity with the plant world.”

“Xenlabit is at home in the sea,” Candle added, “and Arithan is above average in intelligence.”

“They are all mages,” Oceanvine pointed out, “and even a below average mage can be formidable after a few thousand years of practice.”

“Maybe so, but we’re no slouches either,” Candle retorted. “We learn faster too.”

“But do we learn fast enough?” Oceanvine asked. To that Candle didn’t have an answer for a change.

Nine

The next day was a quiet one with Candle, Oceanvine and Hyssop sleeping in their cabins while Airblossom took lookout duty and Silverwind manned the helm. They had improved at spotting the strings by daylight, but by now there were far less strings to be found in this part of the archipelago, so Silverwind turned the boat back to the southwest to run with the wind and hydroplane for a while until they could find another area rich in strings.

It was not until afternoon, when Candle and Oceanvine had come back up on deck and Airblossom had gone below that they found one. The area was filled with them, but it was Candle who pointed out what they had in common. "They all seem to be either coming from or headed toward someplace due west of here. Maybe we should follow one of these strings to their source."

"Which way do you suggest?" Silverwind asked.

"Well, we haven't been plotting the orientation of them, but it seems to me that most of the ones we've seen this past hour are sort of fanning out to the west. That suggests that they'll meet somewhere to the east."

"You may be right," conceded Silverwind. "If so and we go that way we should eventually find a lot of strings very close together."

"Also," Oceanvine added, "when we cut those strings all the others that come from them will break as well. It's a good plan."

"All right," Silverwind nodded. "You've convinced me. Ready about! Hard allee!"

They held the course, following a small cluster of strings for the rest of the day and into the night. Around midnight, Candle handed the helm over to Airblossom who was working with Hyssop and went below. When he came back at dawn, Silverwind was back at the helm with Oceanvine working as lookout. Candle took his usual watching post on the bow and settled back to take a look at the string they were following.

It came as something of a surprise to see that instead of the small cluster he had seen several hours earlier, they were now surrounded by thousands of strings fanned out from the east. It astounded him that there could be so many direct victims of Xenlabit's curse, but then reminded himself that these strings did not just connect to Merinta but to sharks, whales, serps and other oceanic hazards.

He went back to the stern and asked Silverwind, "Should we cut some of these strings? If they get much thicker we may not know which way they're going."

Silverwind shrugged. "Go ahead a cut a few, but make sure you leave me one to follow."

"They seem to be pretty straight and have been since we first saw them," Oceanvine opined. "I doubt they going to started twisting and turning about now."

"No, but if they connect to Xenlabit as I suspect they do," Silverwind countered, "he's eventually going to come and investigate into why his basis of power is dwindling. If we still have one string to follow, we'll still be able to find him."

"Hey! Look at this!" Candle called to them. He created a knife-edged ward and sent it shooting through the water to the north. While the ward and the strings were not normally visible, the bright flashes of light as each string broke were and they were able to watch the flashes continue right up to the horizon. Then Candle repeated the trick to the south. When he was done there was a small cluster of strings left on either side of the boat. He carefully pruned them down to a single string just to port of the hull..

"Nice use of a projectile ward," Oceanvine admitted. "And I think you got Xenlabit's attention, judging by the way the remaining string is acting."

Candle and Silverwind took another look. The string was no longer a thin nearly invisible tendril of magic energy. Now it was a thick cable of blue-green that pulsed angrily. A few minutes later a deep roaring noise could be heard in the distance. The water started getting shallow and the reef below them was only a few feet below the surface.

They hastily struck the sails and raised the center board just before the *Maiyim Bourne* touched bottom. “Stow the jib, Candle,” Silverwind ordered, “while Vine and I get the mainsail furled.”

“That’s Oceanvine,” Candle said softly in unison with Oceanvine’s automatic response. As he worked to stuff the jib in its compartment, he wondered idly whether she was even aware of saying it in their rush to get the sails secured.

The *Maiyim Bourne* was resting firmly on the bottom and listing heavily to starboard by the time they finished. Candle slid down the deck toward the stern and the cabin hatchway even while Oceanvine and Silverwind were making their way inside. He paused for a minute to examine the exposed coral formations, sponges and other marine creatures just beside the boat, then took another look to the east in time to see an impossibly tall wave headed toward them. He dived into the cabin while Oceanvine closed the hatch behind him.

“What’s happening?” Airblossom asked as she fell out of the room she shared with Hyssop. Hyssop entered a moment later with only slightly more dignity.

“It seems we managed to precipitate an encounter with Xenlabit at last,” Silverwind replied dryly.

“Although he is still attacking by remote means,” Oceanvine added. She explained what had happened just as the tsunami Candle had spotted crashed over them. The boat rolled around and was tossed about chaotically as it fought to regain the surface and only a hastily cast spell similar to the one Silverwind had used in Tarnsa to hold their attackers in place kept everyone and everything in the cabin from being thrown dangerously about.

The view outside the portholes stayed black a long time. It gradually turned dark gray and then suddenly turned white in the foaming seawater. However while the white foam gradually faded the view turned sea blue on one side and sky blue on the other; the *Maiyim Bourne* had capsized.

Silverwind gently deposited everyone down on what had been one side of the galley. “Well, there’s something Nildar managed to forget,” Candle commented acerbically. “We could have used a self-righting device of some sort.”

“I imagine he figured we could handle that on our own,” Oceanvine retorted. She relaxed a moment then used levitation to turn the boat keel downward once more. “We probably should go look for damage topside.”

“Nothing got thrown around inside?” Hyssop asked.

“In the cabins, probably,” Silverwind replied, “but I held everything in place until we were upright once more. I doubt anything topside was damaged, this wasn’t the first time we took a wave, but I suppose we should at least take a look.”

“That was one hell of a wave,” Candle commented a few minutes later in the still choppy sea, “but while the boat isn’t capsize-proof, I must admit that I’m starting to believe it truly is indestructible. We didn’t lose a single line and with all storage compartments belayed, nothing fell out. Do you think that wave was

directed at us?”

“If so it was a very clumsy attempt and somewhat heavy handed, although I doubt he would care how many Merinta he will have killed as a by product of the attack. Frankly, though, I think it was just a fit of anger. We cut Xenlabit off and he threw a tantrum.”

“It’s hard to think that he may have just killed all those poor people on Kalapa,” Airblossom commented soberly.

“He may not have,” Silverwind replied. “We’ve come a fair ways north of Kalapa and there are a lot of islands around here. The wave may have missed or have been broken up before it could get there. But make no mistake, he’s probably just killed a lot of Merinta. There is one bright point, however; they did not die while still attached to his curse. If they had been he would have gained the use of all their life energy and may well have been undefeatable.”

“He still may be,” Candle pointed out. “we don’t know how many strings were still intact.”

“I doubt there were many, Candle,” Silverwind replied. “As we’ve sailed closer to the source the strings were naturally much closer together. We’re also near the eastern edge of Merinta, so we were between Xenlabit and most of his victims. I’m not saying he’s going to be a pushover, but he won’t be anywhere near as formidable as he might have been.”

“Well, I still see one thread off to the south,” Candle remarked. “It must be the same one we were following.”

“Good,” Oceanvine cut in. “Let’s unfurl those sails and get moving, because I for one am not going to give him another chance to kill innocents.”

The breeze was stiff and soon they were up on the hydrofoils. The ride was choppier than any of them liked but they sailed on with a grim determination to hunt down Xenlabit and Arithan.

They sailed on through the night and even though Midbar did not rise until late, Silverwind kept the foils deployed while Candle and Oceanvine cut the few strings they could find along the way. Aroundmidnightthey passed a gong buoy with a blue line around the middle that Hyssop informed them marked the boundary of Marinta. “The next island on this course, she remarked, “is Mir.”

“That’s not a small island at all,” Oceanvine noted. “But still Xenlabit’s power is based in the water; I think we’ll meet him before we actually get there.”

“But where?” Airblossom asked.

“Any time now is my guess,” Oceanvine replied. “But if I had to guess, probably nearMirIsland . He’s teamed up with Arithan, and that one is better suited to life on land. Can’t say I like it, though. We’re more than a little vulnerable on a boat. In fact if that boat was any but the*Maiyim Bourne* I’d be right to be frightened by the thought of getting caught at sea, but this craft has some interesting enchantments. I don’t know if any of them will be effective directly against Xenlabit or Arithan, but we seem to be able to repel serps and Oceanvine patches. I was kind of surprised the pilot whale manage to attack us, but they aren’t normally a danger to seacraft, so maybe they were overlooked by Nildar and Wenni.”

“They really built this boat?” Airblossom asked.

“You keep asking that,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Sorry,” Airblossom apologized. “It’s just the idea of really meeting the gods. It seems so strange in this day and age, and yet, I’m jealous,”

“I’ve already promised to introduce you to Methis.”

“I’d really like to meet Wenni,” Airblossom said wistfully.

“In spite of their hospitality, I don’t know if Nildar and Wenni would welcome us. I think they treasure their privacy and while they do go out in the world from time to time it’s on their terms. Methis seems to delight in company though and I know she doesn’t share the Granomish prejudice against Orenta. Anyway, yes they did build the *Maiyim Bourne*, although I believe it was Nildar who did most of it. Wenni helped with some of the later enchantments. What I never asked was why they built it. I suspect they built it for us, but it just seems so self-centered to even consider such a thing. Still it seems ideally suited to this quest of ours. We could never have gotten this far and this fast if we had to rely on commercial shipping.”

“She’s a fine boat,” Airblossom commented, stroking the rail. “I’d better go wake up Hyssop and Candle, it’s their watch and Silverwind has been at the helm since this morning. If you’re right, we’d better all be alert tomorrow.”

“That smudge on the horizon is Mir,” Candle informed Oceanvine and Silverwind an hour after dawn the next morning. “Maybe I’m getting impatient, but I’d rather have this over sooner than later.”

“Careful, Candle,” Silverwind cautioned, “That feeling might not be your own. Remember Arithan’s nightmares?”

“Yeah, and I remember how I turned them back on him, but I take your meaning. Still it might be better if we meet him on our terms rather than waiting for his attack.”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Well, it involves cutting this last string, but before we actually cut it, I think we should send a little message back on it. How do you think Xenlabit would react if we sent his own curse back on him?”

“That did seem to be effective on Arithan,” Silverwind admitted, “although I wouldn’t try that on him twice. He’ll be expecting it you know.”

“I know, I tried it in back on Horalia. It had no effect because he was ready for it, or maybe he just wards himself against that sort of trick. Well, two can play that game, I doubt he could catch any of us with that trick again either. Too bad for him, because it seems to be his favorite.”

“Don’t let your guard down and don’t count on his not having several even more powerful weapons in his arsenal,” Oceanvine warned him.

“Of course not,” Candle agreed, “But what about trying it on Xenlabit?”

“I think it would make him very angry,” Silverwind replied carefully.

“Angry enough to make some stupid mistakes?” Candle asked.

“Possibly.”

“Angry enough to come after us without the assistance of Arithan?” Candle pressed.

Silverwind considered that for several minutes while Candle and Oceanvine waited. “Maybe,” he said at last. “Certainly it’s worth a try. Okay, go ahead and try it, but we’d better get Airblossom and Hyssop up on deck first.”

Candle was fairly jumpy with excitement by the time Airblossom and Hyssop stumbled up on deck with large mugs of tea a few minutes later. His frustration was exacerbated still further when Silverwind advised him to allow the two Orenta to finish waking up before he went ahead.

“Why, what is he about to do?” Hyssop asked warily. Silverwind explained Candle’s plan. “All right. I’m awake now!” she said nervously.

“Me too,” Airblossom nodded. “Next time just use an alarm clock, huh?”

Candle grinned and, rubbing his hands together, announced, “Watch this!”

The moment he said that the string, normally invisible to the unaided eye, started glowing a brilliant aqua shade. As they watched, a fat, red bead of energy formed on the string and grew until it was two feet across. Then with a grunt, which revealed how hard Candle was concentrating in spite of his attempt to emulate Silverwind’s habit of making all magic look easy, he snapped the string behind the bead and they all watched the powerful spell recede rapidly toward MirIsland .

“I give it a minute or two before he gets the message,” Candle said smugly.

It was a very long minute as they continued ever closer to MirIsland , still sailing on the hydrofoils. Suddenly in the distance they saw a brilliant flash of red amid a giant spray of water from a submarine explosion.

“Even better than I hoped,” chortled Candle. “Better get ready now, I think something is headed this way.”

“Stand by to retract the hydrofoils!” Silverwind announced. A moment later he suited his actions to the words and the *Maiyim Bourne*’s hull was once more in the water.

They could see the wake of something very small and fast headed toward them in the distance and both Oceanvine and Candle erected protective wards between the boat and whatever was approaching. A minute later Candle adjusted his ward, which was slightly outside Oceanvine’s to expel energy in the form of heat and also he bent it into a gentle right angle so that a moment later when Xenlabit slammed into it, his momentum threw him high into the air.

“Hah!” Candle laughed sharply. He adjusted the ward once more into the shape of a cup and caught the demon as he fell back downward and before he could reach the water. “Got him!” The demon started struggling and Candle found himself in an incredible tug-of-war to keep the demon aloft. “Vine! I need

your help here. We have to keep him in my ward until he weakens.”

“I’m here,” she said and took his hand. Immediately he felt her power added to his and he closed the ward over, forming a sphere. With the extra power at hand he had a chance to actually look at Xenlabit. The demon was small- four feet tall at most. However he was as wide as he was tall and blue in the same way Gredac had been green. Xenlabit had pale blue skin and dark blue hair. His hands and feet were webbed and looked more like flippers than anything else. He was wearing a rude, furry tunic that was also blue, although Candle privately wondered whether it was really a garment or just a part of the demon that looked like a tunic. In fact, the only parts of Xenlabit that was not blue were his eyes, which glowed a bright sea green.

As Candle and Oceanvine battled with Xenlabit on a mostly mental level, the demon was not restricted to telekinetic tugs-of-war. Even while struggling to pull himself back into the water, he also caused several great spouts of water to erupt all around the boat. None of the water could get through the spherical ward, but it battered at all the mages, threatening to knock them down or overboard. Waves formed and crashed against the boat. As the minutes went by the waves got progressively larger, but Silverwind, recognizing that the demon was still just resorting to telekinesis, had a counter to that and with the aid of Airblossom and Hyssop, they beat the waves back down to minor swells.

“Arithan!” Xenlabit screamed and a moment later a thin energy string stretched out and touched the demon through the ward. He was enveloped in a brilliant blue nimbus. The difference was immense. Candle and Oceanvine were forced to use all their considerable strength just to keep the demon inside the ward, which kept deforming under the mental force exerted by the demon.

Candle felt someone take his other hand and from the immense power surge that merged with his and Oceanvine’s he knew it was Silverwind. The ward grew stronger and Xenlabit pounded on its inner surface impotently. Then just as suddenly as his strength increased, it suddenly dwindled and not only did his body stop glowing, so did his eyes.

“Arithan!” Xenlabit screamed again. The first time had been a plea for help, but the second was obviously that of an enraged sense of betrayal. Inside the globe he kicked and screamed to no avail, but telekinesis was not Xenlabit’s only ability. Like all demons he had experience with direct mental combat and with a strike that was more desperation than strategy, he sent bolts of searing pain into the minds of all five mages.

Had Xenlabit planned to stay and continue the fight it would not have helped him for very long. Compared to Arithan, his abilities along those lines were neither particularly strong nor clever, but it wasn’t his intention to stay around; the heat of Candle’s ward had sapped too much energy from him and the demon turned and swam at high speed back toward Mir.

“Deploy the hydrofoils!” Candle shouted and he ran up to the bow in case the jib needed to be walked across. The others rushed to prepare for the chase and they were soon up on the foils once more.

“We’re faster than he is,” Silverwind observed, “but he got a head start. I think he’ll reach Mir before we do.”

“It’s okay I tagged him while he was in the ward,” Oceanvine commented, “and when that string came in from Arithan, I incidentally tagged him as well.”

“Good job,” Silverwind commended her. “Where is Arithan right now?”

“Crossing Mir at high speed. My guess is that he’s headed for Misper and just like at Northport, he probably plans to steal another boat.”

“Well so long as we can find him later. We still have Xenlabit to deal with.”

As they sailed, they grew gradually closer to Xenlabit. Candle caught him in another ward similar to the last one, but the demon countered the spell and threw a five-foot tall wave back at the *Maiyim Bourne*. Airblossom and Candle both attempted to flatten the wave, but as they weren’t working together, they achieved only modest results. The boat lurched as it hit the wave, but it came back out the other side and the ride grew smoother again.

A low rumble filled the air and the sea turned into a mass of chaotic waves, but none of them were very large, and they failed to slow down the mages’ pursuit. “What was that?” Hyssop asked.

“He tried causing another tsunami,” Silverwind replied, “but he’s much weaker now. He doesn’t quite have it in him anymore.”

“I can’t make the ground shake even that much,” Hyssop replied.

“Have you ever tried?” Silverwind asked pointedly.

“Well, no and I’m not likely to either. I may or may not be able to do it, but it’s too dangerous to try.”

“Good answer,” Silverwind told her. Just then a sudden fountain of water erupted just in front of the *Maiyim Bourne*. The boat sailed through it and was lifted up by the fountain. It wasn’t lifted evenly, however and it came down at a steep angle that threw everyone except Silverwind against the starboard rail. Silverwind held on to the wheel and through his handling of the boat’s rudder and his own magic managed to keep the *Maiyim Bourne* from capsizing, but the boat lost a lot of speed when she came back down again as was no longer hydroplaning.

Silverwind saw that Candle had actually fallen over the rail and was clinging to it trying to lift himself back up onto the deck and Airblossom had been knocked out when Oceanvine had fallen on top of her. So he slacked off on the mainsail to give Candle a chance. “How’s Airblossom?” he asked Hyssop who was examining the younger Orentan mage.

“Badly bruised and I think she’ll have a nasty headache when she wakes up,” Hyssop replied, “but she’ll be okay and it’s a good thing she was on the bottom or Oceanvine here could have punctured a lung or worse.”

“Vine?” Silverwind asked.

“I’m okay,” she replied.

Xenlabit surfaced just then, intent on attacking the *Maiyim Bourne*, but Candle caught him up in another hot ward that held the demon up and over the waves. This time, while the demon struggled to break free again, Candle reached into his pocket and pulled out his only mage stone and just as Silverwind and Oceanvine had done with their own stones, he harnessed the energy within and directed it at the demon, willing it to drain the demon of his water-born strength.

Xenlabit screamed and with a final burst of strength that came out of the pain, managed to break free of the ward. Instead of attacking or trying to swim away, however he dived straight down into the water.

Oceanvine closed her eyes a moment then reported, “Xenlabit is right below us and diving for the bottom. Maybe we’d better... no, never mind. He just entered one of those mystic passages he and the others are so fond of. I’m a bit worn out, but maybe if you and I team up we can close it up.”

“Let’s get Candle back here for good measure,” the wizard suggested, betraying his own exhaustion. A few minutes later they had closed up the path and Xenlabit was forced to return to his own island. “Now, how about Arithan?”

“He’s about three hundred miles to the northeast and no longer traveling very fast, dear,” Oceanvine replied. “Let’s find a port and a dock to tie up to. I think I’m going to need to sleep around the clock after this.”

Saindo Archipelago

One

“I don’t get it,” Airblossom admitted the next morning in Nanira. “Why did Arithan cut and run? It seemed to me that when he joined with Xenlabit we were hard pressed to even hold our own against them. Then just as we were about to collapse, he runs?”

Once they had finished with Xenlabit, Oceanvine had set a course for the largest port on the east side of Mir. Nanira was a large city, and although most of the port was filled with fishing boats, there were several larger ships in port and there was also a navy base on the other side of the bay. The city, like most Orentan cities was clean and none of the buildings stood taller than two stories. Oceanvine had insisted on a long bath, a luxury not available on the *Maiyim Bourne*, so they had found rooms in a harbor-side hotel and were now enjoying a light breakfast in the hotel’s courtyard.

“I’ve never really understood Arithan,” Silverwind admitted. “Not really. I understand some of his weaknesses; for one thing he has absolutely no sense of humor, especially concerning himself. However, I can’t always explain how he thinks or why he does what he does. He is cruel and evil. He doesn’t think in straight lines either, so whatever he is up to it isn’t as straight-forward as anything you or I would do.”

“I’m not even certain he intentionally helped Xenlabit,” Candle opined. “He didn’t do it very long. I suspect he responded to Xenlabit’s call just long enough to scope out the situation. After he broke the contact, Xenlabit was weaker than he was when Arithan contacted him. I think Arithan drained a lot of power off of him.”

“Why would he do that?” Hyssop asked.

“For reasons of his own,” Oceanvine replied. “It’s like Silverwind said. He doesn’t think in straight lines. Whatever he is planning I think it’s at best peripheral to what the other demons are doing. Now that I think of it, Arithan abandoned Gredac at the first sign that we were getting the upper hand and after he

left, Gredac was not quite as powerful as he had been before either.”

“Well, much as I’d love to continue on with you,” Airblossom remarked a few minutes later, “Hyssop and I are going to have to get back to Merinta and make sure the plague is over.”

“I suspect it is,” Hyssop added, “but we’ll need to see for ourselves. Although I don’t know how we’ll get back yet.”

“I may be able to help,” Airblossom told her. “The naval base is commanded by a friend of my father’s. They may not even know about that tsunami that hit Merinta yet, and I’m sure they’ll want to investigate the damage. It’s part of their job, so it shouldn’t be too difficult for a pair of master mages to hitch a ride. And if our job is done, like we’re hoping, we may even be able to travel back to Merinne with the courier boat that carries the commander’s report.”

“And we’ll need to leave shortly and see if we can catch up to Arithan again,” Silverwind declared, “before he decides to duck down another of his pathways and we lose his trail.”

“If he wanted to do that, why didn’t he just use the same one Xenlabit did?” Candle asked.

“Maybe he can’t swim,” Silverwind shrugged. “Or maybe that path didn’t go where he wanted to go next. I haven’t the foggiest notion how those pathways work, nor how to travel along one.”

“It must be possible,” Candle mused. “Demons are powerful mages and indestructible, but we know they can feel and be incapacitated by pain, so it must just be some trick we don’t know. It might be useful to know how it is done.”

Oceanvine looked at Candle for a moment. “It sounds like an easy way to get killed too,” she told him at last. “We don’t have any notion of what the conditions along such a path might be. What would you breath, for example? A demon might be able to hold his breath long enough, but can you? The pressure of having that much earth and water over you could be crushing as well, and don’t forget the path on the Isle of Fire went through a volcanic pipe and down below Maiyim’s crust. How would you keep from burning to a crisp?”

“Problems to be solved for certain,” Candle shrugged, “but in the end we might have to follow Arithan through one of those paths.”

“I hope not,” Oceanvine shivered.

“Candle,” Silverwind added, “I really wouldn’t suggest trying it. You haven’t handled the closing of one of those paths yet, maybe you ought to do the next one we find. You’ll see why Vine and I are warning you against it.”

“But imagine how travel across Maiyim would change if we could do it and find a way to send others that way!” Candle insisted.

“Hold up and see for yourself,” Silverwind told him firmly.

They lingered over breakfast for another hour until Oceanvine noticed Candle was fidgeting. It was a sign she knew well; he was anxious to get going again and when she thought about it, so was she. So with great reluctance they made their farewells to Hyssop and Airblossom and cast off to begin the chase after Arithan.

It was two hours later as they rounded Mirala Point, a thick peninsula on the northeast quadrant of Mir Island, that Candle asked, "Do we really want to catch up to Arithan?"

"What do you mean?" Silverwind inquired.

"Well, he's probably headed toward wherever Kerawlat is. We don't know where that is yet."

"It's an interesting notion," Silverwind agreed, "but no matter where Kerawlat is, we'll eventually hear about it. I'll feel better if we can stop Arithan from doing whatever he's trying to do. Too many people might die if we wait until he makes his move and I don't care to have that on my conscience. Do you?"

"No, I guess I didn't think it through," Candle said ruefully. "That's a bad habit of mine. I ought to work on it, huh?"

"You'll be seen as wise beyond your years if you can manage it," Silverwind told him gently, "even if you live to be a hundred."

"My degree wouldn't be on probationary status if I'd managed that earlier," Candle also admitted. "Now I don't even have a mage stone to show for it."

"It was lost in a good cause and you can always get another," Silverwind told him.

"Sure, my master's stone," Candle nodded.

"No, you can commission a replacement for the journeyman's stone if you really want it," Silverwind informed him. "They aren't cheap, in fact most mages could never afford one, but I doubt Nildar and Wenni would begrudge you the use of that money bag in your cabin to pay for it. After all, it was lost in the quest they endorsed even if it was the Elder Gods who actually commanded it. And to tell the truth, I suspect we'll be using Vine's master's stone and my wizard stone before we're done. So far it has been the only way we've been able to find the power to totally defeat the demons."

"I hope you're wrong," Candle replied. "We have defeated demons before without sacrificing our stones after all."

"This time is different," Silverwind replied. "We got lucky with Pohn the first time we met him and with his power combined with Arithan's my master's stone was the only way to meet their combined might. Vine's stone was needed to put enough healing power into her spell against Gredac and you would never have been able to sap Xenlabit's strength quickly enough if it had not been for yours. Oh, by the way, about gaining wisdom beyond your years, don't let it destroy your sense of fun. It's part of what makes you who you are."

"You mean I should try to stay perpetually in trouble?" Candle asked playfully.

"Um, yes," Silverwind replied, surprising Candle. "Probably, so long as it's constructive trouble."

"There! See? Now that's why I didn't mind it when the dean told me you would be supervising my probation."

"I'm sure it isn't what he had in mind," Silverwind laughed. "More likely he thought he'd be giving me a taste of my own medicine."

“Shows how little he understands either of us,” Candle laughed.

They made good time the first two days and Oceanvine reported that Arithan was no more than one hundred miles ahead of them, but then the wind shifted around to west by northwest and they were forced to tack back and forth, never having favorable conditions to hydroplane in.

“The only good news,” Silverwind commented, “is that Arithan isn’t making much better headway.”

He was mistaken, however, and by the time they left the inner seas of Bellinen, Oceanvine told them that Arithan was midway between Bellinen and the Saindo Archipelago. “Where do you think he’s going?” Oceanvine wondered out loud that evening over dinner. They had set the automatic navigator and were all enjoying the meal together.

“I think he’s headed for Rjalkatyp,” Candle replied.

“Why?” Oceanvine prompted him. By now even when she disagreed with him, she found she enjoyed listening to his reasons for concluding what he did.

“So far I think all the demons have been returning to places they have been in the past. I checked the royal library while we were in Querna and there are records of a similar wilt on Marga a few centuries ago. Tales of demonic activity there exist as well, although the writer of the paper I read dismissed them as peasant superstition.”

“And we know that Pohn was revisiting the site of his most recent activity too,” Silverwind added. “I wonder if Xenlabit has been among the Merinta before.”

“It could have been far back enough that all the Orenta lived like that,” Candle pointed out. “Anyway you once said that it seemed Arithan had a certain affinity for the Isle of Fire. Maybe it was only the path of least resistance, but he may not realize that and after the last time we defeated him in Rjalkatyp, he may want to go back and destroy the place for revenge on us, them and the world in general.”

“It’s a possibility, I suppose,” Oceanvine allowed.

“Well, Silverwind said he’d have to swim there to get back, but I suppose sailing is close enough. I kind of hope he is headed there,” Candle continued. “It would be nice to see Blizzard again. I haven’t seen her in over a year and a half.”

“Where did you last see her?” Oceanvine asked.

“In Randona. She came as part of a trade delegation to the court of King Hacon. When I saw her picture in the “Daily Herald” I stopped by the Isle of Fire’s embassy to look her up. We had dinner together a couple times while she was in town and she invited me to a cocktail reception at the embassy one afternoon, but unfortunately I had a final exam at the same time. But why are you asking? I wrote to you about it at the time. I remember doing so.”

“It must have gotten lost in the post,” Oceanvine replied dismissively. “Too bad, I would have liked to

invite her to Renton .”

“She wanted to drop in on you,” Candle told her, “and I told her it would be okay, that you’d probably love it, but the other members of her delegation insisted that she leave with them and she didn’t feel so secure of her political position to tell them where to get off. It was close, though, she told me.”

“Much as I would like to see Blizzard again,” Silverwind commented, “I would rather not have Arithan in Rjalkatyp again. He’s caused those poor people too much pain and suffering already.”

“Well, there is one reason he may not be headed there,” Candle admitted a minute later. “The path that was there doesn’t exist any more. You took care of that. If he goes there and confronts us, we’ll have him cornered. He may be twisted and evil, but he isn’t stupid.”

“So which do you think it is?” Oceanvine pressed, having caught Candle taking both sides of the argument.

“I still think he’s going there. What else is there on this heading?” Candle countered.

“Maybe he’s headed to Saindo City or Mati. Those are the only real cities in the Saindo Archipelago, although he might be heading to one of the smaller islands or attempting to set up another ambush like he did in Wennil,” Oceanvine speculated.

“He’ll have a harder time setting up an ambush this time,” Candle pointed out. He must have had Xenlabit’s assistance with the serps and oceanvine, although it may have been Gredac who helped out with the oceanvine.”

“Perhaps, but he drained power out of both of them, Pohn as well for that matter. He may have gotten more than just power in those transfers,” Oceanvine replied.

“Then we’ll have to be on guard for anything that might happen,” Silverwind remarked.

“I doubt we need to worry about serps or oceanvine,” Candle told him. “He’s tried those often enough to know that he can’t touch us that way. Whales might give us a bit of trouble, however.”

“Sharks too,” Oceanvine added.

“They never actually attacked the boat,” Candle argued. “Besides, Arithan is too clever by half. Just as we probably can’t trick him the same way twice, he isn’t likely to try a failed tactic more than once, although I’ll make an exception for that nightmare stunt, it seems to be a favorite of his. In fact, I just hope he tries it again.”

“Why?” Silverwind asked.

“What do you have planned?” Oceanvine asked at the same time.

Candle smiled. “You remember what I did to him on the Isle of Fire?”

“You cast his own nightmare spell back at him,” Oceanvine replied.

“Not really, no. I would have mentioned it years ago, but neither of you ever asked about it after we left Rjalkatyp even though I know you both meant to. I know how he does that curse, of course. I did quite

a bit of independent research while in Randona too and I eventually decided it was a highly advanced illusion charm with a touch of permanence of some sort as well. I finally concluded it worked with a closed feedback loop, the longer it lasted the more ingrained it became. That's why Silverwind and Windchime were able to cope with the nightmares after a long while. That sort of thing either drives you crazy or you grow accustomed to it. The spell forces you to invent your own worse nightmares. I suspect the more imaginative you are, the worse the curse is. My biology professor back at University had so little imagination it probably wouldn't have worked on her at all, but I'm digressing. What I really did was to redirect that particular spell back at Arithan's own mind and to make it as permanent as possible I linked it to the spell Silverwind cast that turned him pink and green."

"He must have found a way around that spell by now. Didn't he cast nightmares at Windchime on Marga?" Oceanvine asked.

"I doubt it. You see when I reversed his color scheme it was really just to make sure my little punishment was still active. He fooled Geraint into causing his own nightmares. He blustered and waved his hands a lot, but if he cast a spell, it was definitely something else. Waved his hands? Really! Like that would make a difference. If he was practicing prestidigitation, maybe it would make for a nice distraction, but we all know you don't need any of that for real magic."

"Are you saying he can't do magic at all?" Oceanvine asked.

"I wish that was so, but no," Candle replied, "I didn't stop him from doing magic, just that particular spell and if he ever figures out how to undo the spell Silverwind put on him he'll be free to use the nightmare curse again. I'm kind of surprised he hasn't figured it out though, it's easy enough."

"Are you saying you can reverse that spell?" Silverwind asked quietly. He hadn't said very much in this conversation. More and more recently he found he was having more fun just watching Oceanvine and Candle bounce ideas aback and forth.

"Sure," Candle shrugged. "Child's play. Well, okay, I doubt there are many journeymen who can handle it and I've run into a few masters and wizards who might find it a challenge until they understood it, but I've been trained by you two so I could have shrugged that spell off as an apprentice. The fact that I modified it to add my own little twist shows that. It's really just a permanent illusion spell, right?"

"It's a little more than that," Silverwind replied and a moment later Candle found himself with green skin that was covered with pink dots.

Candle glanced at it and closed his eyes. A moment later he was back to normal. "See? Nothing to it."

"Most impressive," Silverwind commended him "When did you figure that out?"

"That it was an illusion? Well, I figured it almost had to be since I couldn't think of anyway to change skin that color that wouldn't make the subject ill or dead, but I only knew it was an illusion for certain when I changed it in Marga."

"What if it hadn't been an illusion?" Silverwind asked.

"Then my attempt to change it wouldn't have worked," Candle shrugged. "I was already in mid-taunt, I would have just gone on to insult him in some other way. It's not like I had to worry about making him angry. Hey, it's getting late and I'd like to work on my thesis notes a bit tonight. Why don't I do the dishes then I can get to work? Uh, stick around if you want. I have a few problems I could use some

help thinking through.”

Two

The wind finally shifted around the next day and they were able to sail on the foils once more. A few hours later, however it appeared they were racing ahead of a storm.

“Can Arithan affect the weather?” Candle asked.

“That depends on what you mean,” Silverwind countered.

“Is he capable of calling up a storm and guiding it to follow us across the world?” Candle clarified, noting that the villainous black clouds did, indeed seem to be trying to chase them.

“I doubt it,” Silverwind replied.

“We can call down lightning, can’t we?” Candle pointed out, “and cause it to hit whatever target we want.”

“Yes, but only if the potential for lightning is already there,” Silverwind explained. “If there are rain clouds or some other means by which electric potential might be built up we can unleash that potential. That’s what I did to Arithan in Rjalkatyp, but in that case the potential was in the volcanic cloud. But not all clouds can be used that way and the chance of unleashing a bolt of lightning on a bright and sunny day is slim unless the conditions are very peculiar. However, we cannot do very much toward causing a storm to brew up out of nowhere.”

“What if the air was saturated with humidity,” Candle continued, “and all we had to do was lower the temperature a bit? No, wait. That would Make it foggy. Getting it to rain might take something more, depending on conditions.”

“You’d want a strong updraft to form a thunderhead too,” Silverwind added. “You would also have to affect a very wide area and even if you were trying to keep power use down it would probably take more than anyone could manage. Why do you think rain magic almost never works?”

“So this storm is normal?”

“As far as I can tell,” Silverwind replied.

“Hard to believe,” Candle commented, taking another look at the black clouds slowly spreading toward them.

“I seriously doubt any demon or even all five of them in concert could whip something like this up,” Silverwind told him. “Only the Gods have that sort of power and they know enough not to try to play with the weather. Doing so could set off a drought or an ice age all too easily.”

The storm behind them got a bit closer, but the hydroplaning sailboat managed to pull away from the advancing front an hour later. Candle kept an eye on the clouds, but by sunset they were a mere smudge on the horizon and there was no sign of them the next morning, although soon after the sun rose a high layer of clouds moved in from the north.

“He’s stopped now,” Oceanvine reported at breakfast. “He’s on one of the Saindo islands. I haven’t

had a chance to figure out which one. One of the ones on this side of the archipelago, though. I'll just have a quick bite and work on that as I know we'll be within sight of Parna within the hour and if we need to adjust our course north or south, we'll want to do so as soon as possible or else lose time."

"I know where he is," Candle commented. "It's obvious now that I think about it."

"You thought it was obvious he was headed for the Isle of Fire," Oceanvine pointed out.

"I can be wrong sometimes," Candle said defensively. "I'm very good at it," he added with a laugh. "Just ask Dean Moonrise."

"Oh, all right," Oceanvine sighed a long moment later. "Where do you think he is?"

"SnakeIsland," Candle replied. "The treasure pit, of course!"

That island was famous across Maiyim because of a structure that had been dubbed the "Snake Island Treasure Pit" although to date only one small piece of gold chain had supposedly been found by treasure hunters who excavated that pit. The pit itself was considered a death trap by many and even if it did hold a fabulous treasure in its depths as was maintained, it was unlikely to be recoverable. So far excavators had dug through dozens of layers of packed earth, raft-like log layers, layers of carefully placed stones, clay, iron plates and even coconut fibers and not found anything. After the first hundred feet one of the devised traps was triggered and the pit filled up with sea water carried there on the rising tide through cleverly constructed and hidden channels. Subsequent excavations had continued by drilling and had increased the depth of investigation to half again the level at which the pit had begun to flood without finding the bottom or any further sign of treasure. Excavators tried a number of equally ingenious means by which to extract whatever of value might be in the pit, including several attempts to dig parallel pits, which also flooded and had to be abandoned before any positive results were achieved.

Candle had first learned of the Treasure Pit while staying in Merinne some years earlier and the subject had fascinated him enough to discuss it with everyone he knew. However none of the people he discussed it with thought there was really anything of value in the pit, but privately he continued to wonder why anyone would have built such a thing if it didn't have some purpose. He kept up his interest in the island, however, and two years earlier had heard that the current company of treasure hunters had drilled through a cement and iron vault, although attempts to retrieve the vault had all failed so far.

"I'll check," Oceanvine told him. "He may be there at that. Okay, both of you take your breakfast up on deck, I need this table."

Candle and Silverwind went back up and waited for Oceanvine to determine their course. They didn't have long to wait and a few minutes later they heard a noise midway between a shout and a moan of disappointment.

"She just figured out I'm right," Candle told Silverwind smugly.

"Try to be nice about it," Silverwind advised.

"Why?"

"Because I don't want to have to fight Arithan with a headache your bickering will cause me. Okay?"

"You take all the fun out of it," Candle accused him. "You know that, don't you."

“Yes,” Silverwind replied. “As a matter of fact, I do.”

Oceanvine poked her head out of the cabin, looked at Candle, and told him, “Lucky guess. Dear,” she continued to Silverwind, “bring us around to a bearing of three hundred fifty-three degrees and we’ll be at Snake Island by late morning.”

They were unable to hydroplane consistently after making the course change, but even with the foils retracted, Oceanvine’s prediction proved correct and less than three hours later they were within sight of Snake Island.

The islands of the Saindo Archipelago were volcanic in origin, although there had been no volcanic activity there so long as written records had been kept. However, even through the light overcast and humid conditions which brought visibility down to under ten miles, they could see a dense plume of gray and black smoke rising from Snake Island.

“Fire?” Oceanvine wondered aloud.

“Some of that probably is from a fire,” Silverwind commented, “but I’m pretty sure that’s volcanic ash.”

“Since when does Snake Island have a live volcano?” Oceanvine demanded.

“How long ago did you say Arithan arrived? I’d say sometime between then and now,” Silverwind conjectured.

They sailed on grimly as the volcanic plume grew thicker and taller. The top of the plume got caught in an upper level wind and suddenly flattened out and blew off to the east. Inside the plume, lightning flashed and the deep roar of the volcanic spasms could be heard.

“Could anyone have survived on that island?” Candle asked.

“It doesn’t look like an excessively violent eruption,” Silverwind opined. “If they ran fast enough there may be survivors somewhere, assuming anyone was there to begin with. Those treasure hunters tend to come and go. It’s an expensive proposition.”

“I hope you’re right,” Oceanvine fretted.

As they drew near the beach of Snake Island, the newly activated volcano suddenly stopped erupting for a few minutes and then roared to life once more with a plume of ash and fire. Hot, fluid lava was flowing freely out from a low hill a few hundred yards from the beach. They quickly struck the sails and pulled up the center board, in the hopes they would be able to land.

“That’s where the supposed treasure pit was,” Silverwind informed Oceanvine and Candle. “Last time I was here there were actually two shafts; the main one that you hear about most of the time and another one nearby that excavations indicated may have collapsed in on itself while it was being built or could have been some sort of air shaft for the builders of the main shaft.”

“Or a false lead as so many of the clues to the treasure pit have proven to be,” Candle added. “Then there was that strangely inscribed stone found just before the first shaft was flooded, that one cryptographer claimed said there were tons of gold about forty feet further down. They drilled down another ninety feet and still didn’t find a whole lot.”

“The drilling set off a major collapse in the pit,” Silverwind told him. “That’s why Windchime and I were asked in. According to the company that was digging here at the time, it seemed as if a platform of iron and wood had been built over a long empty space in the shaft. The augur they were using weakened that platform as it went through it and they think everything fell down at least fifty feet. It was hard to tell, of course, through the sea water in that pit, but that’s what they told us. We took a stab at a number of strategies to get into the pit, including holding back the water while they drained the pit, but you can only keep that sort of thing up for so long.”

“Well, heck,” Candle responded, “you were holding back the tide. I’ll bet you gave in before the second high tide peaked.”

“That’s about right,” the wizard admitted.

“Why didn’t you just excavate by telekenesis?” Candle asked.

“Several reasons,” Silverwind replied. “The amount of power you need to lift an object increases exponentially with distance from that object. I can make a boulder move from a hundred yards away or more, but it takes a lot of energy to accomplish that, so it’s not something you want to do more than once. To actually lift it, I can be maybe a hundred feet away, but once again, it can wear you out very rapidly. Excavating the pit that way would involve lifting many tons of such boulders from over one hundred feet away. It would have killed Windchime and me after the first week. It was one of the few jobs we ever walked away from. Right now, I’m not sure that was a smart move or not.”

Just then another volcanic explosion took place and the entire hill on which the treasure pit had been disappeared in the largest plume of ash and rock so far. The ground shook violently and in the middle of that massive plume a pink and green glowing figure could be seen as he appeared to shake molten lava off himself. The Demon Arithan hovered naked in mid-air. The odd polka-dotted color scheme of his skin no longer seemed amusing at all. In his hands he held a two foot long golden rod of some sort. He looked down and saw the mages in the *Maiyim Bourne* and laughed.

“Catch me now, Silverwind!” he called down triumphantly. Then, he bent over and dived back into the active volcano. The ground shook some more and the ocean started to recede from the edge of the island. Silverwind instantly turned the boat around using the pilot’s spell and moved it as fast as he could away from the island, attempting to keep up with the receding sea.

Candle saw what Silverwind was doing and quickly shouted, “Vine, get below and secure yourself. We’ll be down in a minute or so!” Then he joined his power to Silverwind’s to help speed the boat on its way. They kept that up for five full minutes until they found themselves climbing up the slope of a breaking tsunami. Candle broke free of the spell first and jumped down into the cabin, pulling Silverwind in after him. He just barely had time to secure the hatch before the wave crashed down and buried them.

“You left the forward hatch open this morning,” Oceanvine told him as they nervously waited in the large wave’s grip.

“Sorry, I was airing out my cabin,” Candle explained. “The air was getting a bit stale in there lately. Did you...?”

“Are you breathing air or water?” Oceanvine asked acidly.

“Thanks,” Candle said simply. “How are you feeling?” he asked Silverwind.

“A bit shaken,” the wizard rasped, “I wasn’t really ready to get pulled away from that, you know.”

“I figured the shock would be better for you than drowning,” Candle replied.

“You’re probably right,” Silverwind agreed after a bit. “My gills are a bit underdeveloped.”

A few seconds later the boat bobbed back to the surface like a cork. Candle took a peek out side and while the water was choppy there was no sign of any other large waves.

“If there was anyone on that island,” Candle commented, “there isn’t anyone alive there now. That wave washed right over it. I don’t think anyone is going to want to live there for some time to come.”

“There’s a mystic path leading from the island,” Oceanvine pointed out. “Should we close it up?”

“It’s a good idea,” Candle remarked. Silverwind still a bit shaken from having been forcefully yanked out of a spell he had been casting just nodded. “I guess it’s my turn this time?”

“Would you like some help?” Oceanvine offered.

“Well, maybe some guidance,” Candle admitted. “Why don’t you watch me while I do it?” Oceanvine nodded and Candle sat down on the rolling deck and went to work. He stretched his mind out and found the path and then in the manner both Oceanvine and Silverwind had described. He closed up the entrance of the path and then collapsed as much of it as he could detect. When he opened his eyes the eruption on Snake Island had dwindled down to a few wisps of smoke.

“You didn’t shut down the volcano,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Was I supposed to?” Candle asked. “Closing the path stopped the worst of it, but frankly I think the volcano was ready to erupt eventually anyway. What I want to know was what the heck happened here?”

“And what was that thing Arithan was holding?” Oceanvine added. They both turned to Silverwind.

“Haven’t the foggiest,” he replied. “But if I had to guess...”

“You do,” Oceanvine and Candle retorted in unison.

“I would say it was the treasure that pit has been hiding all these years,” Silverwind concluded.

“I think we all had that worked out already,” Candle grumbled. “And that treasure is?”

“You know as much about it as I do,” Silverwind admitted.

“Well, I can’t tell where Arithan is anymore,” Oceanvine informed the two men. “Where do we go now?”

“The nearest decent library is in Merinne,” Silverwind replied after a moment. “I think it’s time to do a little renewed demonic research. We’ll also be in a good location to hear about where Kewlat may be operating and where we find him we should find Arithan.”

Ellisto

One

Because the winds were not favorable to hydroplaning, it took over two weeks to sail southward to Orent Island, which left Candle grumbling about the lack of speed, while Oceanvine repeatedly pointed out they were still making at least as good time as they might have on even the fastest ship. "You've just gotten spoiled," she told him.

The tropical city Merinne had changed only a little in the past eight years since their last visit. While the city had traditionally been constructed with buildings no taller than two or three stories and most homes were airy one-floor affairs, the business district now sported several much taller buildings of steel and concrete that reached for the sky with as many as a dozen floors and there was a partially constructed one that the mages later learned would have fifteen floors when finished.

"I wouldn't want to walk up all those stairs," Oceanvine commented.

"Neither would I," Candle agreed, "but I imagine they have lifts like the one in the Wurra Palace."

"Oh yes," Oceanvine agreed quietly. "I should have thought of that."

"I don't know why," Candle replied. "You've spent the last eight years in quiet, happy, little Renton where nothing ever changes, except maybe Jillanda's, uh, charms. That's what I love about that town."

"What? Jillanda's charms, sport?" Oceanvine asked archly.

"No, the fact that it doesn't change. While you've been enjoying life in the backwoods, however, things have been happening in the big cities. I'm kind of surprised Querna still looks the same, but then the buildings there were taller than in most cities to begin with. There are several new buildings like these in Randona's business district. When you're in a city and need more room the best direction is up. It allows more businesses to locate near one another, or so it's been explained to me."

"We need a place to stay," Silverwind told them practically.

"We could stay on the boat," Candle pointed out.

"For the next night or two," Silverwind replied, "I'd like a bed that doesn't rock with the waves."

"We can certainly afford a bungalow in a hostel like the beach house we had last time," Oceanvine commented.

"We can, but I had another idea that I think you'll like," Silverwind told her. "I sent word ahead right after we docked, paid a kid to run a message there and back while you were getting dressed."

"Where?" Oceanvine asked, then she spotted a compound of buildings even more uncharacteristic of Orentan architecture as she knew it than the new office buildings. They were built of pink granite and trimmed with blocks of clear smokey quartz. They were, however very typical of Granomish architecture

in the capital city of Querna .

Nearly a century earlier, after the Great War between the people of Granom and Bellinen, The Granomish king sent not only an ambassador to the Orentan Senate, but enough stone to build a respectably sized embassy compound in what at the time had been the latest fashion in Querna.

“Thank you, dear!” Oceanvine exclaimed excitedly. ”I had hoped to see Ksana while we were here, but actually staying with her and Zak... well, I never thought of the possibility.”

“I know. That’s why I did.”

The city of Merinne might have changed, but the Granomish embassy had not. Even the wallpaper in the entry chamber, although it had obviously been replaced, had the same pattern and color. They were cleared by the guards at the gate and entered the main embassy building where they were met by Oceanvine’s adopted sister, Princess Ksana of Querna, who before her marriage to Prince Zakhar had merely been Ksana of Northmarket, a former prostitute.

Ksana had changed quite a bit since Oceanvine had last seen her. Always thin for a Granomish woman, Ksana was still slimmer than most, although she had gained a fair amount of weight and looked healthier than Oceanvine remembered. She was putting on more weight at the moment but that was of a more temporary sort.

“Our third child,” she told them over tea a short time after they had been settled in their suite. “We’re hoping for a boy this time. We love our daughters, but I know Zak really wants a son. Uh, is there a way to determine which it will be by magic?”

“Probably,” Silverwind replied, “but I don’t know how it could be done or if anyone knows.”

“Too bad,” Ksana sighed. “We’ll have to wait another three months or so then. Oceanvine, what did you do to your arm?”

“It’s been a rough trip for me all around,” Oceanvine laughed, and went on to describe the circumstances in which she had first broken her leg and then later her clavicle. “It’s been about five weeks since the collar bone was broken,” she added. “Now that we’re back in civilization I ought to have someone look at it. I’m certainly tired of having to keep my arm in this sling.”

“Oh, by now you ought to be able to use it for light work at least, I would think,” Ksana told her. “Maybe more, I’m not certain about human healing times. I’ll make an appointment for you with the physician the embassy uses. I’m not sure I’d have had the patience to wear that splint and sling all these weeks.”

“Having to sleep sitting up is no joy either,” Oceanvine noted.

It was Candle who finally broached the subject of where they might find Arithan or Kerawlat. “So,” he began, “any other unusual troubles in the world?”

“There’s always something,” Ksana replied, “although you’ll really want to ask Zak. I had heard about the plague in the Merintal lands , of course, and news from home included the crop failure on Marga, but I don’t always hear about everything that’s going on, especially if it doesn’t affect the running of the embassy. And since Merinne is more of a home to me than Querna ever was, news from back home isn’t of as much interest to me as it is to Zak.”

Prince Zakhar, however, was not in Merinne at the moment. “He’s on a tour of Orent Island with Senator Kilianawa. He’s the current President of the Senate. They thought it would do a lot to further cement the warm relationship Bellinen and Granom have been enjoying this past decade. They’ve been gone a week now and ought to be back in a day or two.”

“It can wait that long, I would think,” Silverwind replied easily. “One of the reasons we came to Merinne was to make use of the University’s library.”

“And I plan to have a chat with the head of the Department of Magical Studies,” Oceanvine added. “The rough draft of my dissertation is still only about half done, but I figure it would be a good time to discuss whether it would be acceptable here.”

“Vine,” Silverwind interrupted, “You’ve never taught anyone above the apprentice level have you?”

“You know I haven’t, why?” Oceanvine asked.

“The University at Merinne requires all wizard candidates to have taught post-graduate classes for a minimum of three semesters as one of the requirements for a degree. If you want your wizard’s degree here, you’ll have to live in Merinne for at least a year and a half. The Universities at Querna and Randona don’t require teaching experience.”

“No, but all three universities require a certain amount of academic hours in class as a student or equivalent experience anyway. I was able to prove equivalency at the master’s level, but it’s unlikely I could do so at the wizard’s. Whatever school I attend, I’m going to have to be in attendance for a year or two anyway.”

“Besides,” Candle added, “even if we do eventually settle back in Renton, we’re going to have to rebuild the house and that is bound to take a fair amount of time. You know, maybe I should discuss my thesis while I’m here too. Oceanvine has written more of her dissertation than I have of my thesis, but the thesis won’t be as long. We’re likely to be ready around the same time. I’ll admit I was tempted to get my masters degree in Querna like you two did, but given what I’m planning for my wizard’s project, that might be better accepted in Querna than anywhere else.”

“I thought you were planning to use Methis’ library for your research,” Oceanvine commented.

“I am,” Candle replied. “She has books that don’t exist anywhere else on Maiyim anymore. Hmm, I’d better bring a lot of thaumagrophic paper with me when I go, though, I could have trouble if I cite a reference thought to have been lost.”

“Methis’ Library?” Ksana asked. “Where is that?”

“In Her home, of course,” Candle replied with a chuckle.

“We skipped over quite a lot, sister,” Oceanvine told her. “Along the way, we’ve had to meet with some of the Gods. Methis decided we needed a bit of additional guidance at one point, so she summoned us to her home and workshop on Quirnlia. I’m not sure why She felt Candle needed to learn how to make flint tools.”

“She just likes teaching,” Candle replied, “and since She doesn’t sleep and I couldn’t that night...” he trailed off with a shrug.

“Don’t be surprised if it comes in handy someday,” Silverwind advised him. “I’ve found that almost everything I’ve learned has come in handy at one time or another.”

“What, making stone tools?” Ksana asked, then started laughing.

“You never know,” Silverwind told her seriously.

“But Methis? She’s real? I mean, I know it bothers Zak when I doubt the existence of the Gods, but I’ve never seen any reason to believe in Them.”

“No, they really exist,” Oceanvine told her sister. “We’ve met Them, well the Younger Gods anyway, in person. Most people would never believe us. That’s why we didn’t mention Her at first.”

“And They aren’t like the way the priests describe Them,” Candle added. “At least not Those I’ve spoken to. Methis just seemed like a nice person who happened to be about Oceanvine’s age. If we hadn’t known who and what She was, we probably would have just thought of Her as a nice Granomish girl who happened to be living on her own.”

“Really?” Ksana asked. “No supernatural halo of light all around Her?”

“I think She would find that terribly inconvenient,” Candle replied in an unconscious imitation of Silverwind, “unless She was trying to find her way around on a moonless night.”

Two

Oceanvine stopped by the Merrine University Biology Department the next day to pay a social call on Wizard Compass with whom she and Silverwind had worked on their last visit. However on her way to his office, she noticed that Hyssop’s office door was open and, looking through the doorway, Oceanvine saw Hyssop sitting at her desk dressed in her customary drab tan robes.

“You’re back already?” Oceanvine asked.

“And you as well?” Hyssop countered. “Well, yes. With Xenlabit routed, the plague and possessions ended instantly, so Airblossom and I left the clean-up work to the professional healers. We got back last week. Good thing too, we both have classes to teach and poor Compass had to use graduate students to cover for us. They were doing as well as could be expected, but from what I can tell, they must have been reading the texts a paragraph ahead of the students they were teaching in my classes. Airblossom has only undergraduate classes this semester. Oceanvine I see you have your arm out of the sling.”

“I saw a physician this morning,” Oceanvine replied. “He told me to go easy on it for another two weeks or so, just to be careful, but that I didn’t need the splint or sling any more. It’s good to have my arm back.”

“You could have used it lightly for the last couple of weeks,” Hyssop told her.

“I didn’t know that at the time,” Oceanvine remarked.

“Sorry, I should have told you, but I didn’t realize you wouldn’t know. That’s probably why I’m in

Biology and not Medicine. I have a degree in physical medicine, but my specialty is general biology so I don't usually deal with patients."

"It's okay. I'm just so glad to be out of the splint that anything else doesn't matter," Oceanvine assured her. "However this talk of classes reminds me that I'm considering applying for my wizard's degree here. Just thinking ahead, of course."

"That's good thinking, though," Hyssop told her. "The dissertation you're working on is on wards, isn't it? That would either put you in Physics or Mechanical Magic, wouldn't it?"

"I'm tempted to go for General Magic actually," Oceanvine told her.

"That's doing it the hard way," Hyssop opined.

"Not necessarily. I need to be prepared to answer a much wider range of questions, but I've been a generalist since leaving the University at Randona. I think it would be most appropriate to my experience. What I don't have is teaching experience." Oceanvine repeated her earlier conversation on the subject.

"Well, you're right that you'll have to talk to the Dean of Magic to make sure he'll accept your dissertation topic, but if you attend wizard level classes here, there shouldn't be any trouble securing a teaching position, not for you at any rate."

"What do you mean?" Oceanvine asked.

"Dear, you're one of the most famous mages on Maiyim," Hyssop replied as though it should have been obvious.

"I am?"

"Of course you are! You may not like those books Silverwind's former wife keeps writing, but they have managed to make your name known in some of the most obscure corners of the world. With fame like that, the University would be crazy not to give you a job if only to be able to say you have taught here. That sort of thing is priceless to a school, especially since you haven't taught elsewhere. I mean all three universities can claim Silverwind as a faculty member emeritus..."

"And an alumnus," Oceanvine added. "Actually, in a way, that's why I'm applying here. Silverwind is the only mage with a degree from all three universities. I'll only be the second to do so. I still have a lot of work to do, but since I mean to finish my work on wards for this degree I need to know if Merinne University will accept it. Otherwise I need to look to Randona or Querna. I think Querna would definitely accept me as a wizard candidate. You should have seen the crowd I drew when I was a guest lecturer there."

"You're probably right. From what I've been hearing, the University has completely turned around on its policy toward female students. Oh, excuse me, I have a class in a few minutes. Why don't you meet me in the cafeteria in an hour and a quarter?"

Oceanvine agreed and after finding Wizard Compass' door locked, decided to find her way to the office of the Dean of Magic. There was no General Magic Department in the University at Merinne, but there was an approved and required curriculum for general magic students. The list of classes was spread out across most of the departments of the University, but Oceanvine felt she would be able to do well in all of them. She also thought she could pass the equivalency exams on many of them which would allow her

not to take classes in those subjects.

“What about this book?” Candle asked on their fifth return to the stacks.

He and Silverwind had made their way into the University Library and down to the small section on demonic studies around the same time that Oceanvine was chatting with Hyssop, but after two hours of research all they had discovered was that Kerawlat was the least well-known demon of the five. This was because he had been imprisoned on his island for nearly a millennium, so more modern mages had never had a chance to study him and many scholarly works of the ancient world had been lost over time.

“*Demons of Maiyim?*” Silverwind asked, reading the title. “Never heard of it. Sure, bring it along. None of the others have been much use. I think I’ll try this book on magic in the ancient world, it’s only one step above mythology, but it’s better than nothing. Why didn’t you think to look this stuff up in Methis’ library?”

“I did, but none of the books I read there said much about Kerawlat either. I didn’t think to ask Methis about it at the time.”

“She probably wouldn’t have answered anyway,” Silverwind commented. “If this is really a quest in the classic form, this is the sort of thing we need to find out for ourselves.”

“Uh, I’ve read several ancient and medieval epics,” Candle informed the wizard, “and in none of them is the hero refused an answer if the being asked knew the answer. I never found any in which the hero conducted his quest in a library either. Mostly they just ran off and killed whoever they were up against.”

“Many of them involved guidance from the Gods,” Silverwind pointed out.

“Sure, in dreams,” Candle retorted. “One of Them would come along and say, “Go forth and slay the dragon’s second cousin once removed,” and then fade out leaving the hero to figure out which dragon, whether said cousin was on the maternal or paternal side of his lineage and where the encounter was to take place. As I think on it, a lot of those heroes made a few mistakes along those lines. The actual finale was always a foregone conclusion; the business of getting there was the hard part.”

“And so far that’s how this adventure is turning out, isn’t it?” Silverwind pointed out.

“Except for the foregone conclusion part,” Candle shrugged. He was quiet for a few minutes after they returned to the table they were using while they both flipped through the books they had selected. “Well this is something,” he said at last.

“What did you find?” Silverwind asked.

“Kerawlat, the second youngest of Arithan’s children,” Candle read from the book, “can be distinguished from his brothers in that he alone looks unlike any of the intelligent peoples on Maiyim when in his natural form.’ It doesn’t seem to want to say what his natural form is however,” Candle added as an aside. “He is nearly as large and strong as Pohn but is a far more accomplished mage and nearly as clever as Arithan.’ It sounds like we’re going to have our hands full this time.”

“Maybe not,” Silverwind countered. “He was the first of the demons to be imprisoned, so he may not be as formidable as he sounds.”

“I hope not,” Candle replied, then continued reading. “‘Kerawlat is said to be especially talented with magic involving the animal kingdom.’ That’s it. The next paragraph goes on to talk about Gredac.”

“That’s it?” Silverwind asked, “out of the entire book?”

“According to the index,” Candle replied. “Most of the book seems to dwell on the philosophical implications of the existence of demons and speculation into just what Aritos intended by creating them.”

“A pity,” Silverwind commented. “Does it at least document the little it just told us?”

“Not so much as a footnote,” Candle replied. “It’s about as academically useful as one of Ysemay’s books. Too bad. So far most of my citations are personal experience. I brought some thaumagraphic paper with me though. Some of these books are worth copying a page or two out of, and I’d better make note of the titles of the others so I can find them again when I need them for the thesis.”

“I’m going to get a cup of coffee,” Silverwind told him. “Want to join me?”

“What time do you have?” Candle asked. Silverwind looked at his Granomish wristwatch before answering. “Better not,” Candle decided. “I have an appointment with the dean in a quarter of an hour. Just enough time to make those thaumagraphs and notes. I’ll see you back at the embassy.”

Candle hurried through the thaumagraphy, then because he felt pressed for time, he used one more piece of thaumagraphic paper and tried just imagining the notes he wanted on it. To his surprise it actually worked. It was the first time he had attempted to put an image on the paper that did not yet exist. “Hmm,” he muttered to himself as he gathered up all the papers, “I guess that stuff can’t be used as evidence in court.” Then he rushed off to keep his appointment.

A few minutes later he arrived, out of breath, at the dean’s office in the Administration Building. The building itself was a two-floor rambling affair with a lot of windows, most of which were open on this warm and dry day. He checked a board just inside the front door to find that the Dean of Magic kept his office on the second floor. He bolted up the stairs and then walked swiftly down a long hallway. He took a few deep breaths and finally opened the door.

“Maybe you ought to straighten your hair,” Oceanvine advised him as he entered.

“Oceanvine? What are you doing here?” Candle asked, unconsciously running his hand through his hair to flatten it out a little.

“Same thing you are, I imagine,” she replied.

“Oh, you made an appointment, too?”

“Appointment?” Oceanvine replied uncertainly. “No, I just came by in the hopes of talking to the dean. You made an appointment? Good idea, I should have thought of that.”

“Well, it’s the middle of the semester here,” Candle pointed out, “so I just assumed he’d be a busy man.”

"Point taken," Oceanvine admitted. "I was told I might have to wait an hour. That was half an hour ago, I guess that means after you?"

"You can go in with me if you like," Candle offered. "We're pretty much asking the same questions."

"Okay, thank you," she replied. "Oh you might be interested in this." She handed him the curriculum sheets she had been reading. "If you're planning a degree in general magic, these are your requirements."

Candle glanced at them. "It looks easy enough. I'll probably be able to pass the equivalency exams like you did in Querna."

"You have a fair shot at most of the subjects," Oceanvine agreed, "although I think you'll need to bone up on Orentan history. I will too," she added quickly when she noticed Candle getting ready to automatically deny it. "Applied mythology is a discipline you won't find elsewhere as well."

"True, but I think both of us are better prepared than most students on that. How many have actually met the Gods? And Silverwind's creation theory lessons should help there as well."

"Perhaps. I mean to pick up the standard texts on both subjects while we're here."

"Good idea," Candle commended her. "Oh, this is interesting. I'll have to teach at least two semesters at the apprentice or journeyman level? I like it. It should be fun."

"It could be a matter of getting some of your own back," Oceanvine warned him.

"I doubt it," Candle laughed. "Most magic students are too serious a lot too try to pull the pranks I did. Most of them aren't even likely to get into the sort of trouble you got into either. Their original masters pick them carefully. Troublemakers rarely make it beyond the first month of an apprenticeship. In your case you were so serious that you had a hair-trigger temper. You've actually mellowed out since I first met you, although I doubt many would notice the difference."

"Thank you so much," Oceanvine replied coldly.

"I meant it as a complement," he assured her. "In my case I had both you and Silverwind for examples, not to mention my life before I met you. Face it, most mages would never have accepted me as their student. I was a pickpocket and a budding thief. I didn't enjoy it, but it was the only way I knew to find enough money to eat. But aside from the pranks at University which were really more a matter of showing up some of my teachers, I've behaved myself ever since Silverwind apprenticed me."

"I'm sure," Oceanvine agreed. "Actually what got you in trouble is your sense of humor, but after spending years with Silverwind, you had to have a sense of humor. The problem is, most of your teachers didn't."

"I know that," Candle told her.

"Journeyman Candle?" the receptionist interrupted their discussion. "Dean Elmflower will see you now."

"Thank you," Candle told her. "Come on, Vine, we'll get double the time together."

"Oceanvine," she corrected him quietly.

Silverwind preferred the hospitals in Bellinen to anywhere else in the world. They were open to the outside air so the smell of disinfectant was not an over-powering odor and while rooms could be shaded and the light subdued when a patient could not tolerate bright light, the curtains were normally kept open and natural light was allowed to pour in. Flowers were encouraged both in the rooms and on the grounds. In all, they were much more cheerful places than in most parts of the world.

The patient Silverwind was visiting, however, was not normally a cheerful person, at least not while Silverwind was in the vicinity. Silverwind reminded himself to not give in to the temptation to tease.

Wizard Meadow was sleeping when Silverwind stepped into the room. The old Orente looked better than Silverwind expected when he had learned his colleague had been put in a full body cast. That was evidently old news now. The cast had been mostly removed, although his left arm and lower leg were still coated with plaster, and his right arm was in a sling.

Silverwind looked at Meadow for a moment and then sat down in a bedside chair, pulled a small book out of one pocket and started reading. A few minutes later, Meadow opened his eyes and saw Silverwind in the chair.

“Thank you for coming,” Meadow told him softly. “You know, just before this happened I was considering coming to Emmine to visit you.”

“You would have been welcome, of course,” Silverwind replied instantly, “but why?”

“It appears I have grown used to your warped sense of humor,” Meadow remarked and then started chuckling a bit. He stopped abruptly, however. “I need to watch out for that. It hurts if I laugh too hard. Too bad, really. It took me all my life to learn how, and now it appears I must refrain.”

“You’ll recover,” Silverwind assured him.

“In time,” Meadow agreed, “but I am an old elf and I no longer heal quickly.”

“You’re not that old,” Silverwind disagreed. “Serabawa was much older and he was still surfing right up until a few months before he died.”

“So he was,” Meadow nodded, “All right, so I am still a young cub, am I? Well, compared to Serabawa, maybe I am. I need to tell you something, however. The demons have escaped their imprisonment.”

“I know,” Silverwind replied simply.

“Ah. I should have known you would be aware.”

Silverwind told Meadow about the quest he was on with Oceanvine and Candle. When he was finished he added, “Tell me about what happened to you.”

“I was part of a wizard candidate’s final exam committee,” Meadow began. “Wateroak and Turnbuckle were with me. We went to Pohn Island for the test. The candidate, a young Orente named Hearthfire, lead

us all the way to the top of the mountain there. I pitied old Watroak; he had a lot of trouble climbing that mountain. Finally, we reached the spot Hearthfire wanted and performed the spell; you know which one. The results were strange. Pohn was present, but not bound. Do not ever cast that spell when a demon is on his island. It really annoys them.

“The next moment Pohn was there,” Meadow continued. “He erupted out of the mountain itself. We tried to fight but he was stronger than we were. I tried your trick with a lightning bolt, but it backfired and he threw it at me instead. When I came to, my left arm was broken and a rib or two as well. The others were all dead. There was nothing I could do for them. I could not even give them a decent burial for fear that my use of magic might attract Pohn – I could not have buried them otherwise with a broken arm.

“So I slowly made my way back down the mountain. From up there I could see the ship that was still waiting for me. It was not easy. I had no way to tape my ribs and I kept getting dizzy and falling down. I sprained my right wrist doing that and twisted my right ankle that way. Then I heard talking ahead of me. I quietly made my way closer and as I approached it was obvious that they were speaking some language I had never heard before. I peeked through some bushes and there they were – all five demons. They did not notice me, fortunately, and I did not dare try to move away. After an hour, they suddenly stopped talking and all five just dived into the ground.

“There was a terrible quake when that happened and I was thrown back against a tree. I do not remember it, but that was when I broke my leg. I passed out again and when I woke up I realized the demons had gone. I could not walk, but I tried levitating. I am not as good as you are at that and I only made matters worse for myself. I kept falling down. Eventually the men from the ship found me and brought me back to Merinne. The healers tell me I should not have survived.”

“So, you’re a tough old elf,” Silverwind told him. “I’ve always known that.”

Meadow smiled. “It appears you were correct this time. What language were they speaking? Do you have any idea?”

“None at all,” Silverwind replied. “Perhaps it was the original tongue of the Gods? I imagine Aritos must have taught them to speak the same way the other Gods taught us. Or perhaps it was something else. Does it matter?”

“It is just a little academic curiosity,” Meadow responded. “It probably was their original language, but do you really think it was the same as spoken by the Gods?”

“As spoken by the Gods?” Silverwind echoed. “No, it might be the same language technically, but my guess would be it is a simpler, somewhat corrupted version. I suppose you could always ask the Younger Gods about it. I’m not sure if the house we found Nildar and Wenni in is still there, but Methis assured us that Her home is always where we found it. She gave Candle a special invitation to return and use Her library.”

“The boy must have improved since I knew him,” Meadow commented.

“He grew up,” Silverwind shrugged. “We all do, or at least those of us it’s worth knowing grow up. However, keep in mind that Methis has a good sense of humor and a slightly mischievous streak in Her as well. She’s a mature adult, but there is still something of the innocent child in Her. Wenni, in comparison, is a bit more stiff and formal, but maybe that’s only when I’m around. She doesn’t like me very much, I’m afraid, probably for the same reason I grate on your nerves from time to time.”

“I, too, have grown up in a sense,” Meadow replied, “and have decided you are not such a bad fellow after all. Perhaps I should visit Methis when I finish healing.”

“Her interests are more mechanical than animal,” Silverwind warned him.

“What I desire to learn in this case has nothing to do with my specialty. Perhaps it has no particular purpose.”

“What do you want to know?” Silverwind asked.

“I am not really certain,” Meadow admitted, “but as I lie here, there is something nagging at my mind, begging to be let out.” He smiled then, a most uncharacteristic expression for him. “Maybe it is my sense of humor asking to be let free?”

“Perhaps. Tell you what, I’ll leave you the coordinates of both locations. I don’t guarantee you’ll find them even if they are there.”

“Of course not,” Meadow agreed. “If the Gods do not wish to be found, I am certain they can make it so I do not find them.”

“There is that, but also Nildar and Wenni told us they will be leaving this physical plane sometime soon, although they were not certain just when. I noticed that neither they nor Methis were packing just yet.”

“I’ll keep that in mind too, but what is ‘soon’ to a God? A century perhaps?”

“Or next week,” Silverwind countered. “I can’t say. So, I could probably scare up a deck of cards.” He held his hand out and a deck of playing cards appeared in it. “Care for a game?”

“Very well done,” Meadow told him, visibly impressed. “I doubt I could ever manage that.”

“Get ready to jump for cover, then,” Silverwind advised. “Both Candle and Oceanvine are very close to being able to duplicate what I just did.”

“Candle is a journeyman now?”

“Just graduated this spring, yes.”

“He will not be allowed to try it without supervision. Your wife, on the other hand, has always been less reckless, she will only attempt it at need.”

“You obviously never spoke to her professors in Randona,” Silverwind laughed.

“I have not forgotten her challenge to me in North Horalia, but I was being arrogant that day. I had it coming to me, but I also saw her at work there. She is most impressive and a very serious mage. I would trust her with that sort of power. You, on the other hand...” he trailed off and then grinned when Silverwind’s face fell.

Silverwind recovered quickly. “Not bad,” he told Meadow. “As a joke it’s a bit primitive, but not bad.”

“Actually, rather than cards, I could use a good book,” Meadow commented. “What was that you were reading?” Silverwind held the book up sheepishly. “Silverwind and Oceanvine in the Kanadu in Caper?”

Are those things really worth reading?"

"It depends on your situation," Silverwind replied. "I suppose if you're stuck in a hospital bed with nothing else to read, it can be quite entertaining. Still, if you want it, here. I've read enough of them to realize they all tell the same basic story."

"Thank you, I have been incredibly bored lately."

"Then here," Silverwind responded. "Take the cards too. They'll last longer."

Three

They stayed in Merinne for a full week and the time was well spent for Candle and Oceanvine. Both of them spent all their free time in the library, not that much of their time was free. They spent one full day each, taking entrance exams for the University at Merinne, then they both went to visit Wizard Meadow. Candle on discovering the Orentan wizard had enjoyed the book Silverwind gave him went back the next day with several others from the series.

"Are you sure you don't want something a bit deeper?" Candle asked.

"I have been working on a paper and have my notes and several texts," Meadow replied. "These will give me something to read when I do not feel like working."

"Okay, it's your choice, Or," Candle replied. "I suppose they aren't too bad, Methis reluctantly admitted she enjoys reading them. Of course, Methis reads absolutely everything, so that may not be a ringing endorsement."

Meadow smiled. "Thank you. These should hold me for another week or two. After that I hope to be able to move into a faculty house on campus."

"I thought you lived in Lann," Candle remarked.

"I moved back to Merinne two years ago, when the University offered me a teaching position. Lann was peaceful enough, but that becomes tiring in its own way after a while and the isolation meant I was unable to keep up with academic advancements. I sometimes wonder how Silverwind has managed to stay in that little town of his."

"Rentonis nice enough too," Candle replied, "but we aren't as isolated there as you probably were in Lann. Silverwind subscribes to a lot of magical and scientific journals and we were always doing research. I didn't realize how unusual that was until I got to University and discovered that I was far ahead of my classmates."

"Perhaps if I had two other mages working with me I might have stayed in Lann," Meadow admitted. "So where are you off to next?"

"Ellisto. Prince Zakhar, the Granomish ambassador, learned that there have been a series of earthquakes there recently and the sandwalkers have been attacking Ellistan settlements. It's not much to go on, but at the moment it's all we've got."

“It is probably enough. Good luck, Candle, and thank you for the books.”

They left Merinne the next morning with only Ksana to see them off. “Promise me you’ll stop back here when you’re done,” she called to Oceanvine.

“If I’m admitted to the University, we’ll be back by next semester at the latest,” Oceanvine called to her as Candle hoisted the jib. She refused to think of the danger they were all putting themselves in, although her mind kept returning to Wizard Meadow and his injuries. So far they had been very lucky. Meadow had been part of a party of three wizards and a man who would likely have earned his stone that day had he survived. That represented more magical knowledge than their small party did. She mentioned that to Silverwind an hour later as they passed the boundary buoy south of Orent.

“It’s not always knowledge, Vine,” he told her seriously. “For one thing Meadow and his team were taken by surprise, they really did not have the opportunity to plan or even to react. Also it’s a matter of what experience you have. With the exception of Meadow, none of those wizards had the experience in demonic activity that we have. And don’t sell your own abilities short. You’re probably already a wizard candidate yourself and Candle’s a master candidate.”

“We don’t know that,” she countered. “We may not have passed the entrance exams. The results won’t be known for a few days yet and we won’t know until we can return.”

“There is no doubt in my mind that both of you will be accepted, Vine. I know you too well. Both of you are too good to fail such a simple set of tests. Hah! It wouldn’t surprise me if Candle could pass the tests they gave you, in fact, and if he could it must have been a snap for you. Besides, those tests were for more than judging the suitability of your candidacy. Their main purpose is to give the examiners an idea of how many or few classes you will need to fill their requirements.”

“There are equivalency tests for that,” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Yes, but if the entrance test results are low, the usual result is just to assign you remedial courses. Trust me, you’re a shoe-in.”

They made good time on the voyage to Ellisto. The winds were favorable for hydroplaning so it was only four days from Merinne to the mouth of Sonatrie harbor. There was no traffic in the waters between the two ports, which worried Oceanvine. It was the only leg of their journey so far during which they did not see another craft, but Silverwind pointed out, “We’re moving too rapidly. There aren’t that many ships going in and out of Sonatrie so with only a four day trip, it’s possible no ships have left port for Bellinen since we left Merinne.”

The journey was not without incident, however. It was during their third day at sea while Silverwind was guiding Oceanvine and Candle through another difficult creation exercise that they heard the low-pitch shriek from overhead. Looking up they saw a large winged creature with a snakelike body and long, feathered wings.

“A dragon,” Candle identified the creature. “I forgot they lived around here.”

“I never realized they had feathers on their wings,” Oceanvine remarked. “Somehow I always imagined them as more batlike.”

“A lot of artists draw them that way,” Silverwind replied. “You can always tell when one hasn’t actually seen a dragon. They’re rare, however, even on Ellisto. They’re a bit thicker in the air in the Southern

Chain and some have been known to nest in the islands south of Rallena.”

The dragon circled them for a while and then, with another low scream, suddenly dived directly at the *Maiyim Bourne*. As it drew near, a great burst of flame erupted from its mouth and would have bathed them in fire had Oceanvine not managed to cast a ward over the boat in time. The dragon, however, did not turn back for another try and instead flew off to the south.

“Now that was very odd,” Silverwind said a few minutes later after the beast had vanished from sight. “Dragons are very reclusive usually. I’ve never heard of one attacking a boat before.”

“How does it produce the flame?” Candle asked.

“They breathe out methane,” Oceanvine informed him. “Well, actually breathe isn’t quite right, but it’s a waste gas that they can emit through glands in their mouths. Their tongues can strike sparks from their teeth, I forget how exactly, but that’s how the methane is ignited.”

“And how often do they breathe in instead of out?”

“Why do you think they’re so rare?” Silverwind asked.

Sonatrie harbor was a long and narrow estuary near the mouth of the Hemme River. There were a dozen ships docked at the larger wharfs and another five were anchored in the harbor, waiting for their turns at the docks. There were some smaller piers available, however, for small craft and Silverwind neatly piloted the *Maiyim Bourne* into a slip at one of them.

“Not that many ships?” Oceanvine asked skeptically, looking around as Silverwind weaved the boat through the harbor to her berth.

“More than I expected,” Silverwind admitted, “but evidently none have left recently for Bellinen. Either that or we passed them in the night.”

A deputy of the harbormaster met them at the dock before they had even finished stowing the jib. “Ahoy there!” he called. “First time in Ellisto?”

“First time sailing in for myself,” Silverwind replied. “I’ve been here a couple of times in the past.”

“Nice little boat you have here,” the deputy, whose name turned out to be Marcelle Coupere, commented, “but I’m not sure of the wisdom of sailing her on the outer seas.”

“She’s a deceptive craft,” Silverwind told him. “We’ve been through quite a lot on her and I’d rather be on this little boat in a storm than any ship I’ve ever sailed on.”

“If you say so,” Marcelle replied. “She is sweet, though. Wouldn’t mind having one just like her.” He opened a notebook he had been carrying and prepared to write. “What’s her name?”

“Maiyim Bourne,” Silverwind replied.

“You’re the captain, sir?”

Silverwind look at the others. Oceanvine shrugged and Candle nodded, adding, “You can be captain this time. Next time it’s my turn, though.”

“Your name, sir?” Marcelle asked.

“Silverwind.”

Marcelle looked up, a bit of surprise on his face. “Oh, yes. And this would be Master Oceanvine?”

“Yes,” Silverwind replied, “and Journeyman Candle.”

“Excellent,” Marcelle commented. “Excellent. Well, that’s all I need to know. Thank you.”

“Aren’t there any port fees to be paid?” Silverwind asked.

“Not for you, Wizard, I’m sure.” With that Marcelle rushed off, leaving the three mages staring at each other.

“Well, that was different,” Silverwind commented.

“I’ll say,” Candle agreed. “He didn’t even ask for your autograph.”

“You mean he didn’t have me sign the boat into port?” Silverwind asked pointedly.

“Yes, that too. I’ve seen the reactions when harbor authorities greet us as we enter their ports and they’re usually overwhelmed at meeting you, but this is the first time I’ve seen one refuse the docking fees.”

“That was unusual,” Oceanvine agreed. “No matter how amazed they are to meet you, they never forget to collect their fees.”

“You’re right, but I’m not going to go rushing off to force him to take a few coins. Let’s get ready for the trip inland.”

“What’s the weather like inland this time of year?” Candle asked.

“It’s early autumn and it’s about the same as in Renton,” Silverwind replied. “It’s likely to be warm most of the time, but we could get some cold nights and even a day or more of cold and rainy weather. If we need to trek out on to the Great Desert, we’ll experience some very cold evenings, I think. Best to bring clothing for most conditions.”

“Um, last I checked, the boat doesn’t supply us with luggage. How do you propose we carry all that stuff?” Candle inquired.

“Oh. I guess we ought to go out and buy some packs,” Silverwind remarked.

“Packs?” Oceanvine asked.

“We may have to rough it,” Silverwind replied.

“We can hire a wagon or a cabriolet, I’m sure,” Oceanvine retorted. Silverwind thought about that and eventually nodded. Together they left the boat and started down the long pier. They were almost to the end of the wooden structure when they found their way blocked by a welcoming committee.

“Welcome, Wizard Silverwind, Master Oceanvine and, uh, Journeyman,,,” began the man in front. He was a tall human, wearing a formal-looking uniform with a great green sash and enough medals to cause a small boat to founder. His hat, however, was a tall, silk stovepipe that would have looked incongruous if several other men in the party were not similarly attired.

“Candle,” the journeyman supplied sourly. “If I ever run into your ex-wife again, Silverwind, I’m going to have to make sure she puts me on one of those books. I can say, ‘What is it, Silverwind?’ repeatedly as well as Vine can.”

“Oceanvine!” she corrected him instantly.

“Journeyman Candle, welcome,” the spokesman continued. “I am so pleased you were able to arrive so quickly.”

“My pleasure, I guess,” Silverwind replied, nonplussed.

“You are answering our request for help, are you not?”

“Uh, sure,” Silverwind replied immediately. “Of course. Why else would we be here?” He gave Oceanvine and Candle a meaningful glance which they correctly interpreted as a cue to play along.

“Well, I must say that you responded in record time. We only sent the request for help last week.”

“We were in Merinne at the time,” Silverwind told him.

“That’s still very good time.”

“Our boat is faster than most,” Silverwind replied.

“Yes? Ah, I see the unusual one at the end of the pier? Very nice.”

“Better ward it good,” Candle whispered to Oceanvine. She responded by rolling her eyes.

“Permit me to introduce myself and my colleagues,” the spokesman continued. “I am Lord Morell Rotinere, President of the Council of Lords.”

“On second thought,” Candle continued, “Maybe we both should ward it.” Oceanvine had to put her hand in front of her mouth to hide the fact she couldn’t keep a straight face.

“These are Lords Kapat, Hermiste, Jondrel, Wenissin, and Trefanui,” Lord Rotinere continued.

“There will be a test in the morning,” Oceanvine whispered back to Candle. He started coughing to disguise his laughter. Silverwind turned around to glare at both of them.

“There are others on the Council of Lords, of course, but we were having our morning coffee together when we got word you were here, don’t you know?”

“So, my lord,” Silverwind hastened to bring them back to the subject. “I imagine the situation must have developed since last week. How does it stand at the moment?”

“More incidents only,” Lord Rotinere replied. “The sandwalkers continue to plague the outer settlements and dragons are still attacking outlying farmsteads all along the frontier.”

“Is there any center of that activity?” Silverwind asked. “Someplace we should go as most likely to find marauding sandwalkers?”

“No, any of the settlements along the edge of the Great Desert are as likely as the rest.”

“All right let us get some supplies together and find a wagon to hire and we’ll head out first thing in the morning?”

“A wagon, sir?” Lord Rotinere asked. “Wouldn’t that be rather slow traveling? I hope you’ll allow me to loan you my horseless cabriolet. I got it from Granom just a few months ago. It will get you there in a fraction of the time.”

“That is very kind of you, but I don’t know how to drive such a contraption. None of us do,” Silverwind replied.

“Oh, there’s nothing to it,” Lord Rotinere shrugged. “I’ll show you how and you’ll be an expert by the time you reach the frontier.”

“Well, thank you very much, my lord,” Silverwind said at last.

“Think nothing of it, my lord wizard,” Lord Rotinere replied pompously. “It’s the very least I can do to help you. After all you are here to help us. Where will you be staying tonight? You are welcome to stay with me.”

“That is very kind of you, my lord. But we still have some packing to do and ought to stay on the boat tonight.”

“Of course,” Lord Rotinere replied. “Very reasonable. I shall bring the cabriolet around tomorrow morning after breakfast. Once again, thank you for coming.” All the lords made a show of shaking the hands of the three mages before leaving the dock area.

“I sure hope the problem they want us to take care of is the same as the one we’re here to handle,” Candle commented when they were alone once more.

“Sounded like it was,” Oceanvine replied.

“Let’s go buy that luggage,” Silverwind suggested. “Suddenly it sounds like we’re being hurried out of town.”

Four

They spent the afternoon packing, mostly debating over just what sort of clothing they would need in the mountains of Ellisto. Candle finally settled all arguments by telling Silverwind and Oceanvine to let the closets decide for them. Sure enough, when they opened the closets, they each found sets of clothing ranging from light silk to heavy wool, but matched in color schemes so they could mix them or wear them in layers if need be.

Lord Rotinere spent only about fifteen minutes showing them how to start and drive his vehicle. Candle kept his mouth shut, but he soon realized that he had learned most of what Lord Rotinere told them in Querna. This model was different from the ones they had seen in Querna, but only in that it was steered using a wheel instead of a stick. However the president of the Council of Lords was correct in that they would all be expert drivers by the end of their trip.

They traveled on the road that followed the River Hemme to its headwaters and then went beyond to the top of long mountainous ridge before heading back down hill toward the Great Desert of Ellisto. To their surprise, there were establishments at which they could purchase fuel in every town they passed through along the way. Most of them were the local general stores with signs that said ‘Petrol Here.’

“The lords must drive out this way often enough to support the business,” Candle noted.

“Luckily for us, Silverwind replied. “We’re going to need to stop in the next town.”

“Just as well,” Candle laughed. “I’m getting hungry.”

As they reached the foothills at the base of the west side of the mountains the road they were on ended at an intersection with another road that ran roughly north and south. Silverwind decided to turn south and they found the town of Phinime by late afternoon.

Phinime was larger than the towns they had driven through earlier, but on the way in they saw several houses that have been destroyed, so they knew something had been happening there. They found an inn and checked in for the night. Oceanvine chose to take a nap before dinner, but Candle and Silverwind were more interested in talking to the locals.

By the time Oceanvine rejoined them they had heard a dozen different and conflicting stories as the local barflies competed with each other to see who could tell the most outrageous story. They were fairly certain that somewhere in all the lies, there was a grain of truth, but discerning just what that was would take some doing.

“Find out anything interesting?” Oceanvine asked them.

“I found out they make a passable pilsner,” Silverwind replied.

“I learned the Ellisto National Liars Club is meeting here this week,” Candle added.

“We can always try a different town tomorrow morning,” Oceanvine told them consolingly.

They were midway through dinner when a tall man walked in. He spoke to some of the locals who pointed at the mages, after which he walked over to their table. “Good even,” he greeted them warmly. He was not only tall, but powerfully built like a Granom although his facial features were moderate like a human’s and with skin that was dark for a human but light for an Orente. His hair was black and his eyes were green and he carried himself with supreme self-confidence.

“Good evening,” Silverwind replied.

“I understand you have been asking about the dragons and the sandwalkers,” he continued.

“We have,” Silverwind nodded. “Do you have any exciting or diverting tales to tell us too?”

“Not of my own, no, but as it happens, I made a fairly extensive study of dragons and sandwalkers some years back, and have been concerned with their recent behavior. Sorry, haven’t introduced myself, have I? Artifice.” An obvious mage name. He held his hand out to Silverwind.

“Silverwind,” he replied, taking the offered hand.

“Really?” Artifice asked. “And here I am without my autograph book. So this must be Oceanvine. The honor is mine,” he told Oceanvine as they shook hands.

“And this is Journeyman Candle,” Oceanvine introduced the younger man.

“Pleased to meet you Candle. I believe I may have heard of you.”

“Really?” Candle asked, unaware he was echoing Artifice’s earlier question.

“Yes indeed. If you listen very hard I believe you can hear Dean Moonrise’s teeth still grinding away.” Artifice chuckled at his own joke. “Seriously though, I believe he was most impressed by you even if you did cause his few remaining brown hairs to turn gray.”

“Do me a favor and don’t mention that in Merinne until I find out whether they’ve accepted me as a student,” Candle requested.

“I promise,” Artifice laughed. “Anyway, would you mind if I joined your expedition. I really do know quite a bit about the sandwalkers.”

“How about demons?” Silverwind asked.

“What about them?” Artifice returned.

“We’re likely to be facing one or more demons. Do you have any idea of what that might entail?”

“Well, assuming demons actually exist, they are reputed to be incredibly powerful magically and physically. They are immortal and supposedly indestructible; at least they cannot be destroyed by normal forces.”

“You know of a way to destroy a demon?” Oceanvine asked.

“I imagine the Gods could destroy one if They took it in their minds to do so, don’t you?” Artifice countered.

“I suppose They could,” Oceanvine agreed.

“Why are you volunteering to help us?” Candle asked suspiciously.

“I have heard it said that to know something well, is to fall in love with it. I wouldn’t quite say I love sandwalkers and dragons, but I do respect them. They are magnificent beasts and I find I am somewhat distressed to learn that something is causing them to abandon their normal habits. Attacking human settlements on Ellisto will only lead to their eventual extinction.”

“Human settlements?” Silverwind asked. “Ellistans are not exclusively human.”

“There are some Orenta and even a few Granomen who are Ellistan citizens,” Artifice agreed, “but seventy-five percent of the population is human and in the frontier settlements the percentage of humans is even higher. They are essentially human settlements.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Silverwind shrugged. “Do you realize, however, how dangerous a situation you’re letting yourself in for?”

“I believe I do, sir,” Artifice replied seriously. “I’ve read most of the books on demons; *The Five Demons and Their Properties*, Quadrants’ major work *Aritos’ Children*, and *An Analysis of Evil* by Wanalawa of Tins to name just a few.”

“I haven’t even heard of that last one,” Silverwind admitted.

“It’s a rather old work. I found it some years back in a small bookshop in Midon. The bookseller didn’t know what he had; just picked it up with a box of other old books. Can’t say I was looking for books on demons. I just stumbled on it and it took my fancy.”

“You’ve read more on them than most folks have,” Silverwind commented.

“I like reading,” Artifice replied easily. “I’ll read anything, even those penny-dreadful novels about you.”

“You and Methis,” Candle commented quietly.

“Well, if you’re certain you can handle it, we’ll be glad for the extra help,” Silverwind said at last. “Maybe we had better tell you what we’ve been up against so far.” He proceeded to bring Artifice up to date.

Listening to the account, Candle thought Silverwind was over-emphasizing the dangers they had already encountered. Surely it hadn’t been as bad as all that, and they had had a lot of fun along the way as well, hadn’t they. Still there was nothing in the tale Silverwind told that was wrong. The demons had been powerful and only the knowledge that they could harness the power that was latent in their mage stones had defeated the first three demons. Still, looking back on what had happened it didn’t seem quite as horrendous as the picture Silverwind was painting.

Oceanvine had similar thoughts, but in her case she worried that she might be growing blasé about the dangerous situations. The “path of wisdom” as Airblossom might have called it, does not normally involve rushing headlong to locations where demons are known to be. And yet, how could any of them do less?

Artifice made a show of considering everything Silverwind told him. When Silverwind finished he was quiet and sipped at his beer for a few minutes. “You live an exciting life, Silverwind,” he said at last. “Still if there truly are demons abroad, I would think it is the duty of anyone with the ability to stand up and face them. Don’t you agree?”

“If I didn’t,” Silverwind replied, “I wouldn’t be here.”

“Of course,” Artifice nodded. “Well, then count me in. It will be an honor to join you.”

They drove out to the edge of the desert the next morning, looking for fresh signs of sandwalkers. The Great Desert of Ellisto was a vast expanse of dark red sand and rocks. Here and there they could see a few cacti and other bits of scrub and several hundred yards away there was a large crescent-shaped dune, that was slowly making it's way to the northeast.

"Those dunes don't move very fast," Artifice commented, "but in a year or two that pile of sand there will have been blown far enough to become part of one of the foothills."

"You'd think the desert would run out of sand after a while," Candle remarked.

"Someday perhaps it will," Artifice replied, "but for now there is enough weathering sandstone in the deeper desert to keep producing these red dunes for thousands of years to come."

"Why is it red?" Oceanvine asked.

"For the same reason rust is red," Artifice told her. "There's a lot of iron in the rocks that dust is coming from. The color gets deeper and darker as you approach the exposed sandstone, but it's more off-white to the south and east of the outcrops."

"And sandwalkers can actually live out there?" Candle asked. "It doesn't look like there's enough for them to eat."

"They don't actually live in the desert," Artifice explained. "Not all the time, anyway. The color of their skin is the perfect camouflage with that sand, so they tend to hide in wait against the sand along the edges of the desert and attack unsuspecting prey."

"Aren't they rather large?"

"They average fifteen feet tall at the shoulder," Artifice replied.

"Hard to believe something that large can hide just by standing against some sand," Candle opined.

"Well, the majority of their diet is gained via scavenging. They'll often eat farm animals that stray out into the desert and they have a taste for the deer and rhinoceros that wander around the grasslands this side of the mountains."

"What about the dragons?" Candle asked.

"They're omnivorous. They'll browse on tender leaves when they can find them, but they'll also attack any birds and beasts they can catch. Fish too, if they have a chance. It's a good thing there are natural limitations to their population sizes or they would be much more common menaces than they are. However both sandwalkers and dragons are slow growing and the sandwalkers cannot really thrive away from this marginal environment. The dragons also represent a small population and they prefer cooler climates, so there are only a few here on Ellisto."

"I don't see any sandwalkers or dragons at the moment," Silverwind observed.

"No, I don't think there are any around here," Artifice agreed. "The last report from this area was a week ago. They could be one hundred miles away by now. However, since I traveled down from the north, my guess is that we'll find at least one sandwalker to the south of here."

They got back into the cabriolet and traveled south along the road for the next two hours, passing through towns which had experienced varying degrees of destruction. They stopped to ask about the sandwalkers that had attacked, but most of the townsfolk took the attitude that the only good sandwalker would be one served up with a savory mustard and pepper sauce.

“Are they really that good to eat?” Candle asked Artifice once they were headed south again.

“Sure, kid, tastes like chicken,” Artifice laughed. “No, not really, or rather I wouldn’t know for certain. Sandwalkers are carnivores and we don’t generally enjoy the meat of carnivores. Too tough for starters and since they are also scavengers, I imagine the taste would be rather gamey as well.”

“So all that talk about eating them was just talk? What about the nobles who hunt the sandwalkers?” Candle pressed.

“They hunt them because they are the largest land predators on Maiyim. That makes them dangerous and the hunters love facing danger, at least the ones who go after sandwalkers do. Hunters who go after deer or other edible creatures have a different attitude, of course.”

“I have heard,” Silverwind remarked, “that some of the hunters will eat a token piece of sandwalker meat after a kill. It’s a ritual among them and since there aren’t many sandwalkers left, it is not a ritual they can conduct very often.”

“All too often, though, if you ask me,” Oceanvine countered. “It’s sad to have to say, but I think the sandwalkers will be extinct within a few decades. Back when I was still an undergraduate a census of their population reported that there were less than two hundred left. I imagine there are even less now.”

“Actually I think there are roughly twice that at the moment, but that is still a small population,” Artifice replied. “But there were about one thousand of them twenty years ago.”

“Not two hundred?” Oceanvine asked. “But according to One Maiyim...”

“One Maiyim? Don’t go listening to their propaganda,” Artifice advised. “not on ecological matters anyway. They have always overstated the problems. The One Maiyim movement takes too short-sighted a viewpoint, if you ask me. They want to cure symptoms without looking at the causes or the long term results of their so-called cures. Besides they are more into politics these days anyway, pushing their anti-magic agenda.”

“Told you so,” Candle added. “It’s not the same group you and Silverwind were part of.”

“I still have a hard time believing they are anti-magic,” Oceanvine commented sadly.

“Believe it,” both Artifice and Candle told her.

Artifice continued, “I ran into the current leaders of the movement a few months ago here on Ellisto. Not particularly nice people. Frankly I don’t think they care a wit about ecology or interspecies cooperation, just gaining power. If you ask me, you ought to keep an eye on them, because they were trying to foment a rebellion here.”

“They what?” Oceanvine asked incredulously. “But war and revolution is so counter to the whole One Maiyim ideology.”

“Not anymore,” Candle told her. “They’ve been organizing protest marches in Randona in favor of anti-magic legislation while also running candidates for the House of Commons. Their main platform, however, aside from trying to outlaw magic, is the abolishment of the House of Lords and the monarchy as well.”

“And this is gaining popularity?” Oceanvine asked.

“Among the less well-off, very much so. It’s always easy to blame someone else for your problems,” Candle pointed out.

“That’s just taking the movement too far and down the wrong road,” Oceanvine said angrily. “When this is over, we’ll have to take a look at what’s been going on since I graduated.”

“We may already be committed to a year or two in Merinne,” Candle pointed out.

“One Maiyim always used to have a presence there too. That’s where we’ll start,” Oceanvine told him decisively.

“We?” Candle asked.

“Are you going to refuse to help?” Oceanvine demanded. Silverwind chuckled.

“Well, no,” Candle replied. “You know I wouldn’t, but it might have been nice if you had asked first.”

The conversation might have continued, but at that point they spotted a group of five sandwalkers. The creatures were dark red and scaly reptiles. As Artifice had described them, most were about fifteen feet tall, although one of the beasts stood at only ten feet. They were bipedal, having massive hind legs, but had somewhat smaller forelegs with claws that could be used for grasping. Their most effective weapons, however, were their mouths filled with dozens of serrated teeth. They were fully capable of biting a man in half, given the opportunity. When the mages had first sighted the sandwalkers, they were attacking a small farmhouse and had pulled down one wall, but when they heard the approaching cabriolet, they stopped tearing the house apart and started heading toward the vehicle.

“Do they often hunt in packs like that?” Silverwind asked.

“It’s completely unheard of,” Artifice replied. “In their mating season a pair may occasionally hunt together, but they never form hunting packs.”

“Evidently we have an exception here,” Silverwind commented.

Candle, however, was already ahead of the others and was examining the approaching creatures. “They’re being controlled,” he reported. “It looks like the Hook, sort of.”

“Could be,” Oceanvine agreed, “but I think they’re a bit too close to worry about that just now. First we need to protect ourselves.” So saying she cast a warding spell that formed a wall between the sandwalkers and the cabriolet.

“Going to need more than that, Vine” Silverwind told her. “It won’t be long before they realize they can just walk around the wall.”

“Well maybe you should turn this thing around dear and give us a bit of distance so we can consider our options,” Oceanvine suggested tartly.

Silverwind did so, just as the sandwalkers found the edge of Oceanvine’s warding wall. As he drove off they all started running after the vehicle. “You know this cabriolet is a nice way to get around,” Silverwind commented to the others, “but I don’t think Lord Rotinere would appreciate it if we fed it to a sandwalker and I’m a bit busy at the moment to try casting any spell.”

“Now that’s a first,” Candle commented.

He started to consider what to do, but Artifice beat him to it. The ground shook and a small section of the road behind them suddenly rose up several feet, causing the two lead sandwalkers to stumble. This, in turn, caused the other beasts to run into the leaders, causing a massive pile-up of flesh. The cabriolet sped away, but in the distance, they could see the sandwalkers get back up and start running after them again.

“Better, pull over, Silverwind,” Artifice advised. “We have enough distance now and I think this is going to take all of us.”

They got out of the vehicle and Oceanvine called, “Candle, join with me. I’ll need your help with this.”

Candle was curious as to what she had in mind but knew enough not to waste time asking. They joined hands and he immediately felt her tapping into his own store of power to form a powerful ward. Instead of the simple curtain, she had set up previously; this one was a large half circle, wide enough to contain all the sandwalkers. They slammed into the invisible ward, driving it along with Oceanvine and Candle back several feet. The ward faltered briefly as they absorbed the shock and Oceanvine lost concentration, but Candle applied his own control and managed to keep it intact. A moment later Oceanvine rejoined him and reshaped the ward to make it a closed cage-like structure.

“There,” she grunted. “Now you can study them.” The sandwalkers didn’t take captivity well, however, and they started slamming at the invisible wall with their massive heads. “Better hurry, though,” Oceanvine added. “I don’t know how long we can hold them.”

Silverwind and Artifice both sat down on the ground, closed their eyes and began their analysis of the spell that controlled the great beasts. “Candle was right,” Silverwind noted. “It does look a lot like the Hook.”

“The Hook?” Artifice asked, puzzled.

“It’s a particularly nasty enslavement spell,” Silverwind explained. “I’ll tell you more later. The real question is how similar this really is. If it is too close, we’ll kill the sandwalkers when we cut those strings binding them.”

“The control seems somewhat superficial to me for an enslavement charm,” Artifice noted.

“Hmm,” Silverwind muttered. “You’re right, this spell for all its resemblance is not as deeply complex as the Hook is. It is related, however. See how it is attached to the beasts’ brains.”

“Yes,” Artifice agreed. “I believe it is attached to the motor-control centers.”

“Really? I wasn’t aware anyone had established what part of the brain did that.”

“Uh, yeah,” Artifice replied uncertainly. “It’s very recent stuff. Heard about it on my last trip to Randona.”

“Really?” Silverwind asked, then shrugged it off. “Well, that was never one of my specialties. Too many other fields to study. Anyway, the real Hook has so many attachments to the brain that it practically looks like a thick blanket totally encasing it.”

“The sandwalkers are not particularly smart. “It wouldn’t take as much to control them as it would you or me,” Artifice commented.

“It’s a bit more complex than another similar spell we encountered in the Merinta Islands,” Silverwind noted, “but I think it would be safe to cut the strings.”

“Start with one,” Artifice recommended.

Silverwind did and the creature immediately stopped trying to batter down the ward that encased it. Instead it looked around in confusion. While it was doing that, Silverwind released the other four beasts as well. “So now what?” he asked as the creatures started bumping angrily into each other. It looked like it was only a matter of time before they started attacking each other.

Artifice cast a tranquilizing spell that put the sandwalkers to sleep. “There,” he said at last. “Oceanvine, you can drop your ward now. They only fight each other when they are especially hungry. Hold on a minim.” He concentrated and levitated each of the sandwalkers until they were a hundred feet or better from each other. “Whew!” he sighed when done. “That takes a lot out of one, doesn’t it. Anyway, now when they wake up they’ll probably just go their own ways.”

“We need to track down whoever was controlling them,” Candle suggested. “Maybe you should have held on to one of those strings.”

“There will be others,” Silverwind shrugged. “Whoever it was, he’s off to the north-northeast. Let’s head in that direction.”

“Just a moment,” Artifice told them. He turned around and a moment later the block he had lifted from the road’s surface to trip up the sandwalkers, replaced itself, healing the road. “Okay, I’m ready.”

“Candle,” Silverwind suggested, “why don’t you drive for a while. I felt a bit defenseless there while driving.”

“It’s about time I had a turn anyhow,” Candle replied enthusiastically.

“Now we’re in trouble,” Oceanvine muttered.

Five

“We’re being watched,” Oceanvine noted an hour later. There’s a dragon keeping pace with us and I see another spell string on it.”

Candle resisted the temptation to turn around and look. “Can those strings be used for two-way

communications?”

“Communications?” Artifice echoed. “Dragons aren’t all that smart. They certainly would not make great conversationalists.”

“Never thought otherwise,” Candle told him. “What I had in mind was the concept of who ever is on the other end of that string seeing what that dragon is seeing. I can’t think of a way to do it off the top of my head, but I can’t think of any reason why it shouldn’t be possible either. It would be a rather effective way to spy on anyone from a distance.”

“It would at that,” Silverwind agreed, “and I can think of a way it might work. Hold on.” He examined the spell on the dragon and found connections just behind its eyes. He wasn’t certain if that was how one would go about doing what Candle suggested, but it was close enough to suggest the probability. “I think you may be right, Candle,” he remarked. “And I think I’ll take a page out of your book.” He reached up to the string with his mind and as Candle had done to Xenlabit, he sent a large surge of mystic energy down the string toward whoever was at the other end. Then he cut the end of the string attached to the dragon, which quickly banked to the right and flew back to the south. At the same time a visible red light could be seen headed due north.

“Maybe I should pull over,” Candle suggested, raising the brake lever to slow the cabriolet down. “If that works, we’re going to have company soon enough.”

They got out and walked a distance from the vehicle, then sat down in a ring. Oceanvine cast a protective ward over and around them as they waited. It took several minutes but suddenly there was a flash of light to the north followed by a mild tremor and a strong windstorm. They waited another half hour, but nothing else happened.

“A bit of a disappointment, I would say,” Artifice commented as they returned to the cabriolet. “It’s a shame too. I’d have guessed it would have driven whoever was on the other end into an unthinking rage. I wonder what happened.”

“It wasn’t the first time we tried it,” Silverwind explained. “Last time was a few weeks ago in Merinta and it worked on Xenlabit just the way you say. He was in league with Arithan, but Arithan got away. If I’m right, he’s working in concert with Kerawlat here and if anyone could have known what I was trying to do and managed to restrain Kerawlat it would be Arithan.”

“Ah. That’s the old superstition that you can never defeat a demon the same way twice?” Artifice asked.

“It’s one possible explanation. I’ve faced Arithan twice now,” Silverwind started.

“More than that,” Candle corrected him. “Don’t forget what happened in Northerton and on Marga and Kif.”

“I haven’t,” Silverwind assured him, “but I’m not sure I was really facing Arithan in those encounters. We defeated Pohn, Gredac and Xenlabit far too easily.”

“Gee, thanks!” Candle replied.

“Oh come on. You were there the first time we faced Pohn and when we defeated Arithan in Rjalkatyp eight years ago. Compared to those battles these last few have been walks in the park. We actually saw Arithan drain off power from Xenlabit just before he cut and ran. I suspect we just didn’t notice him

doing the same thing to Pohn and Gredac.”

“Why would he do that?” Oceanvine asked.

“Why does he do anything?” Candle countered.

“No,” Silverwind disagreed. “You’re implying he’s irrational. Arithan is arrogant and he is evil, but he is not irrational. However he also does not seek to achieve his goals in any straight forward manner. He prefers to use others as his tools and will only fight directly in what he imagines as a moment of triumph or when cornered.”

“So whatever the other demons are up to, he has an agenda all his own?” Candle asked.

“That’s my guess.”

“Yes, that sounds like the accounts I’ve read,” Artifice agreed.

“I thought you didn’t believe in demons,” Silverwind commented.

“Let’s just say I’m keeping an open mind,” Artifice shrugged. “In any case the experts all agree that Arithan is the cleverest of the demons. If everything you tell me is true, and I’ve no reason to think it isn’t, then it’s clear that Arithan is using his brothers to gain power for purposes of his own. I seriously doubt they know what he’s doing, for that matter. He is obviously setting them all up for a fall so that he can gain enough power to do whatever it is he’s trying to do.”

“I think he’s trying to get so powerful the Gods can never imprison him again,” Candle opined.

“Quite likely, but They aren’t going to imprison him again, remember?” Oceanvine pointed out.

“Yeah, but he probably doesn’t know that. And if he manages to gain that much strength, I think even the Gods are going to have trouble with him,” Candle speculated.

“They might indeed,” Artifice commented thoughtfully.

Candle continued driving northward. They passed Phinime where they had stayed the night before and through two more towns before nightfall. They stopped for the night but were up just after dawn the next morning and were driving again before the sun had been up for even an hour.

As they drove, they passed beyond the cluster of settlements and into a wilder area. They saw herds of various deer, some large wild cattle-like beasts that none of them knew the name of, a solitary rhinoceros and a small family group of camelopards – long-necked leaf-eaters that were tan with brown spots, but really bore only a passing resemblance to leopard-spotted camels that the early explorers of Ellisto had taken them for.

Stopping around noon for lunch in a local inn, they asked some of the locals about the recent attacks. None of them had seen the marauding beasts in two weeks, but before the mages had finished eating someone came in with news of attacks on a nearby mountain town named Alisé.

“Where is this Alisé?” Silverwind asked the breathless man who had broken the news.

“About thirty miles to the northeast,” the man replied. When Silverwind asked for directions he

continued, "Take the road north out of town. There will be an intersection after five miles. Turn right on to Alisé Road and it will lead you straight there."

"Thanks," Silverwind replied hastily. He took one last sip of coffee, then told the others, "Let's go!"

A few minutes later, with Candle at the wheel once more, they were speeding north out of town.

"Going a little fast, aren't you?" Oceanvine noted. "I thought the speed limit was only twenty miles per hour."

"We're in a hurry," Candle replied. "Besides, do you see anyone enforcing that limit? What's wrong, too fast for you?"

"It is a bit alarming," Oceanvine noted. "Do you have any idea how fast we're going?"

"Sure," Candle nodded. "If the little meter here is even close to accurate, we're going about thirty miles per hour. Doesn't seem fast enough to me at the moment."

"It's the fastest either of us has ever moved," Oceanvine pointed out.

"Except for that time I was translocated," Candle retorted, "but I wasn't aware of motion at the time. I wasn't aware of much of anything until I woke up. Maybe you would be more comfortable if you were the one driving?"

"Possibly," Oceanvine agreed. "At least I would be in control."

"Uh huh!" Candle grunted with a half-laugh. "I'm going to have to get one of these horseless cabriolets. They're fun and pretty darned useful, and what was that word Prince Ksaveras used? Oh yeah, they're bully!"

"They aren't cheap," Oceanvine pointed out.

"I have a bottomless bag filled with gold coins," Candle shrugged.

"I don't think Nildar and Wenni would approve of you using it to buy toys."

"Toys?" Candle protested.

"Well it certainly isn't a necessity," Oceanvine told him. "You would have to pay for carriage house space and fuel and maintenance as well, I imagine. So, it wouldn't be a one-time expense."

"Still, you have to admit these are fun," Candle pressed.

"Not the way you drive!" Oceanvine retorted as they hit a small bump. Candle slowed down a little after that. An hour later, however, they were in Alisé.

Alisé was a larger town than most of the Ellistan settlements they had seen since leaving Sonatrie. The buildings were all wood-framed affairs with slate roofing tiles. The main structural timbers, visible on the outer walls had been painted black, but between them the walls have been made impermeable to the weather with a white plaster of some sort, making the entire town a study of black and white, except on the roofs where patterns were formed using various colors of slate, mostly gray and blue but some roofs

had green or brown tiles as well.

As they approached Alisé, it was obvious there were several fires still burning, but they were on the far side of the town. At Silverwind's instruction Candle kept driving directly toward the fires.

"What about the cabriolet?" he asked.

"I'll buy Lord Rotinere a new one if anything happens to it," Silverwind assured him.

As they drew closer they found a group of four sandwalkers intent on pulling a barn apart. Dairy cows inside were in a panic, but were helpless against the giant reptiles. There was a dragon nearby perched on a chimney.

"Very unusual," Artifice noted. "Dragons never work in concert with sandwalkers and sandwalkers are almost never seen this far into the mountains."

"We already know they are being controlled," Silverwind reminded him.

"Of course," Artifice agreed readily, "but he isn't even trying to be subtle. I don't think Arithan had much to do with planning this. It's not his style."

"No, probably not," Silverwind nodded, "but I doubt he has helped much in the planning of what the other demons were trying to accomplish. He was just there to exploit any chance to grab more power. That does give me an idea, however. You three, get ready to start herding those sandwalkers out of town as soon as I release them from Kerawlat's spell." They nodded and Silverwind cut the strings. Then he turned toward the dragon and was not surprised to find it was watching him closely.

He drew a deep breath to help relax, then before he could reconsider his plan, he reach out with his mind and grabbed hold of the string attached to the dragon. He cut the string, releasing the dragon, but held on to the string and quickly modified the spell in several ways.. The dragon instantly shrieked and flew away. Suddenly, Silverwind's modifications took hold and energy started flowing freely from the source of the string. Silverwind briefly considered trying to absorb that energy, but quickly shelved the idea. Instead he attached the string to the chimney and allowed the energy to flow out of the end of the string which was pointed toward the sky.

What resulted looked like a fountain of fireworks that flared upward for hundreds of feet. Unlike fireworks, however, there were no sparks that fell back downward. Silverwind considered the results and commented, "Now that ought to get us some results."

"What was that?" Candle asked.

"What? Oh just talking to myself," Silverwind replied. "Where's Oceanvine and Artifice?"

"They're herding the sandwalkers away, like you told them to. I would have gone too, but they didn't need me and I thought it might be a good idea to watch your back while you were working."

"Thank you."

"Nice light show, by the way. Did you think to put a tracer spell on Kerawlat? He'll eventually figure out he's been had and cut the string at his end."

“He will,” Silverwind agreed, “but in the meantime I’m draining as much of his power as I can. And, yes, I did stick a tracer on him. He’s headed this way. He should be here in a half hour or less, in fact.”

“Any ideas on his weaknesses?”

“I’ve a few ideas. We know any weaknesses are related to his strengths,” Silverwind reminded him.

“He has an affinity for animals,” Candle remarked, “but I’m not sure what a related weakness might be.”

“It could be similar to Gredac’s weakness,” Silverwind speculated.

“Gredac was using his own version of the Bond of Aritos to produce a massive plant disease. We threw curing spells at him. But Kerawlat has been controlling the animals, and I haven’t seen his version of the Bond.”

“We might be able to extrapolate its properties, however, from what we have seen of the others,” Silverwind suggested.

“Hmm, interesting,” Candle commented, lost in the idea. “Pohn’s version was built on brute force, but it had none of the subtlety you’ve warned me about. The lines were simple and while you couldn’t tell what it was programmed to do just by looking at it – you can’t with any of them, really – the lines were simpler and smoother than on any other version of the Bond. The energy flowed along those lines in a simple linear manner.

“Arithan’s, in contrast, is utterly ornate,” he continued. “The power swirls around in his and changes direction seemingly at random. It sort of reminded me of Oceanvine’s special wards but less chaotic. It seems more complex in other ways also, though it has been built of many layers or fibers. It is hard to tell because his Bonds are always full of traps and it didn’t pay to look at one too closely.

“Gredac’s Bond looked like it was made of vines or tendrils or some other form of plant matter. They varied a bit, but the plant theme was always there. His Bonds had a grain to them and they also seemed to carry a disease, although that might have been because that’s what he was using them for. No, wait, that can’t be right. Xenlabit’s Bond carried a disease too, but it looked more like it was made of water and water was his basic strength. I weakened him by drying him out.

“Now, Kerawlat’s strength is related in some way to the animal kingdom. I can imagine a number of ways that might manifest in his version of the Bond. It could appear to be made of flesh and bones, or perhaps blood vessels or nerves. Alternatively it could seem furry or have feathers, but if I have to make a wild guess, I think we would find it has a look or feel of scales in some way.”

“Scales?” Silverwind prompted him.

“Yeah. He seems to have a liking for reptiles; the sandwalkers and dragons. They aren’t the only creature around here that could be dangerous, after all. Those camelopards are large mammals and if driven in a stampede could do a lot of damage. I wouldn’t want to be in the way of those wild cattle-like things either and while we have yet to encounter a rhinoceros, I know they can be pretty nasty too. Yet he chose to work only with the sandwalkers and dragons. The sandwalkers are the largest predators anywhere on Maiyim, of course, but they have a low population. Dragons are rare too, for that matter, and yet he chose to use both, and as far as we know, nothing else. If that doesn’t indicate an affinity, I don’t know what does.”

“Well reasoned, Candle,” Artifice commended him. Artifice and Oceanvine had returned while Candle was reasoning that out, but had kept quiet so they would not break his chain of thought. “I think you are right. Kerawlat does feel more in common with reptiles than other creatures, although his strengths are reputed to extend to all animals.”

“All right,” Candle continued, “so if he has reptilian traits, maybe he has reptilian weaknesses? Cold might slow him way down. Fire wouldn’t do him much good either.”

“Cold would slow him down, but would it stop him?” Oceanvine asked.

“Cool him off enough and he’ll go to sleep,” Candle replied.

“You’re right on that count,” Artifice agreed, “but you’re forgetting something very basic.” He didn’t have a chance to explain, however, for at that moment a great draconic roar could be heard from overhead. When they looked up, however, the noise wasn’t coming from a dragon.

“I don’t believe that thing is actually flying,” Candle commented. High overhead was a winged figure that even at this distance looked incredibly huge. It was dropping rapidly, however and as it approached they could see that it was roughly humanoid in shape although not appearance. The Demon Kerawlat had red, scaly skin, similar to that of the sandwalkers and huge feathered wings much the same as those of the dragons. In spite of the size of those wings, however, they did not appear to be large enough to support his mass. If he had been standing on the ground he would have been twenty feet tall and massively muscular with claw-like hands, great carnivorous fangs and yellow eyes.

“I’m certain he’s supplementing the lift of those wings with levitation,” Artifice commented.

“Oh yeah,” Candle agreed. “That would work.”

Kerawlat opened his mouth and with a great scream, belched fire toward the four mages. The great tongue of flame reached down but soon splattered against Oceanvine’s protective dome ward. With another scream, the demon dived straight down at them, only to be intercepted by twin refrigeration spells cast by Silverwind and Candle. Those spells were more than the mere cooling spells they used around the house to keep their food fresh. Instead they drained enough heat from the demon to drop his temperature to near freezing. In a mortal it would have been a killing blow, but the demon was more resilient than that and was only stunned. Kerawlat fell just short of them with a jarring thud.

The mages all lost their balance, but Artifice recovered first, using telekinesis to slam the demon against a stone wall roughly one hundred feet away. They were just getting back to their feet when a fissure in the ground between them and Kerawlat opened and Arithan suddenly erupted out of it, spraying everyone with clods of dirt. Kerawlat had been clothed only in his own skin, but Arithan, as he customarily did, wore an antiquated tunic and trousers. In his hand was the golden rod he had found on Snake Island. He tucked it quickly in his belt, but not quickly enough to keep the mages from being able to react.

Candle hit Arithan with another massive refrigeration spell while Oceanvine set up a ward she hoped would shield them from Arithan’s usual mental attacks. Silverwind tried another tactic and once more modified the spell that was slowly draining Kerawlat of power and attached it to Arithan as well. The bursts of light from the end of the string grew far more intense, emerging far brighter and in a vast array of color.

Arithan brushed off the freezing spell Candle had thrown at him. It had no effect except to disrupt the illusion he had been using to once again disguise the pink and green spotted skin he had been stuck with

since Candle had modified the original curse Silverwind had cast on the demon eight years earlier.

“What the hell?” Artifice muttered, seeing the demon’s altered appearance, but none of the others noticed, being too busy preparing their next shots.

“Candle!” Arithan growled and started to form a ball of fire in his hand. Candle quickly countered, however, by throwing Arithan’s own nightmare spell at him. This time it wasn’t the trick he had linked to the skin color illusion charm, but the real thing. Arithan’s hands went to his head and he sunk to the earth screaming.

While this had been happening, Kerawlat had gotten back to his feet, smoke literally streaming out of his nostrils. With a deep growl he charged toward the mages, a great tongue of fire preceding him. Oceanvine cast a different sort of ward at him this time, it was small and spherical and she shot it at his head as hard and fast as she could. Once more he was bowled over and as he went down the others tried various spells.

It was Oceanvine who happened on a spell that would exploit Kerawlat’s weaknesses. She enveloped him in an impermeable ward with only a little space left inside for air. Kerawlat breathed heavily a few times and then started panting for breath. Unable to find fresh air, he began to panic, clawing at the ward impotently. However the ward had also finally cut him off from the string of the spell that was depleting him of strength, although that was not immediately apparent.

Arithan had been incapacitated, but it took him less than a minute to shake off the curse when he realized it was the same one he had used so often. That done he got back to his feet and once more growled, “Candle!”

Candle looked at him, “Something on your mind, Bosco?”

“You are not as clever as you think,” Arithan told him grimly. A moment later, Arithan’s skin returned to its normal color and this time Candle realized it was not an illusion. He also saw that Arithan had released himself from the spell that had been draining his power.

“Oops,” Candle said softly.

“Oops, indeed,” Arithan replied. He pointed his arm at Candle and a lightning bolt flashed out and would have struck the journeyman dead had Oceanvine not cast a protective ward between them. Arithan snarled and reached his hands through the ward and ripped Oceanvine’s construct in half. Through the hole he had caused, he cast his nightmare spell on both of them.

Silverwind had telekinetically lifted a nearby boulder and was about to drop it on Arithan when Kerawlat roared and tore his way out of the ward that Oceanvine had bound him up in. He took a great breath and breathed out fire once more. Silverwind dropped the boulder on Kerawlat instead.

Oceanvine was rocked by the nightmares, but Candle was only bothered by them briefly before shaking them off completely. “You’ll have to do better than that, bosco!” Candle snapped defiantly at the demon. Then without warning he caused three large rocks to fly at the demon’s head. Arithan fended off two of them, but not the third. With his concentration broken, Oceanvine was released from the nightmare curse.

She snarled wordlessly at the stunned Arithan and encased him in fire hot enough to vaporize rock. The heat was scorching even ten feet away and Candle hastily erected a ward to shield them from the blast of heat. Arithan fell to the ground, but before Oceanvine could continue the assault, Kerawlat’s roar split the

air.

Silverwind's boulder had smashed down on the reptilian demon, but he had reached up at the last moment and deflected it. As it passed it grazed his shoulder, however, and left a nasty gash out of which dark red blood was flowing freely. That gave Oceanvine an idea. She concentrated for a moment and then created a new spell. It was similar to what Silverwind had turned Kerawlat's controlling spell into, but instead of draining the demon slowly, this one worked at a faster rate of speed. As she watched, Kerawlat's wings shrunk and quickly disappeared and his red skin lightened up a good deal and became smooth.

However, in her haste to deplete Kerawlat, she forgot Arithan. Candle and Silverwind were facing him now. Silverwind alternated freezing and fire spells while trying to think of something more devastating and Candle, kept pelting Arithan with large rocks. In desperation, Arithan lashed out with an omni-directional telekentic spell. It threw all the mages back a dozen feet, knocking them painfully to the ground. Then Arithan turned toward Candle and Silverwind with murder in his eye. Before he could do anything, however, Artifice stepped in and drained his power the same way Oceanvine had done to Kerawlat. However, Artifice's spell was even more powerful than Oceanvine's had been. And whatever spell Arithan was about to cast died quickly within him.

Arithan looked at Artifice as if for the first time and croaked, "Father! How could you?"

"I am sorry, my son," Artifice told him sadly, "but this truly must be."

Artifice held on to his spell while Silverwind pulled his wizard's magestone out of his pocket. He concentrated on the power of the stone and linked it to Artifice's spell. With an enormously loud cracking noise the stone broke and the power was released.

Suddenly Arithan screamed and with a last hidden reserve of power broke free of Artifice's spell, reached down and pulled the golden rod out of his belt. It glowed brightly and then Arithan dived directly into the earth and disappeared. Behind where he had been Kerawlat was barely managing to stay on his feet and then seemed to just fall into the earth and disappear.

The Five Demons

One

"Arithan called you 'Father,'" Candle accused Artifice.

"You noticed that, did you?" Artifice replied. "It's true. I'm sure you've heard of me by my real name."

"Aritos," Candle said flatly.

"Yes, Candle. I am Aritos. Silverwind, you knew didn't you?" Aritos asked.

"I knew You were too good a mage to be just a master, not without my having heard of you, but I can't say I knew who You really were," Silverwind replied easily.

“I could have only recently become a master,” Aritos replied a bit defensively.

“I would have met You in Randona,” Candle told him. “I knew all the master and wizard candidates there, at least to recognize on sight. I assumed You’d been a master for years and just never bothered to earn a wizard’s degree.”

“Oceanvine?” Aritos asked. “Surely you knew?” Oceanvine was staring at Him, an expression of mild horror on her face. “Oh dear. I guess you didn’t. What’s wrong?”

“Vine grew up on Kern,” Silverwind explained. “It’s a fairly pleasant island, but a bit insular. Her early religious training didn’t exactly paint You in a flattering light.”

“Oh that,” Aritos shook his head sadly. “It doesn’t seem to bother the two of you.”

“I’ve been through enough that any early teachings have been moderated by experience,” Silverwind replied.

“I never had much religious training,” Candle added.

“I see,” Aritos nodded. “Look, all those stories about me. There’s not a whole lot of truth to them. I won’t say they’re completely untrue, but the priests have pretty much used me as the ultimate bad example and heaped all the wrongs of the world on my shoulders.”

“Believe it or not,” Silverwind told him, “I know how You feel. It’s not unlike all those novels my former wife writes.”

“It’s exactly like that,” Aritos agreed, “except that those novels paint you as the ultimate hero whereas I am the ultimate villain.”

“Why haven’t You done something to change that in all this time?” Candle asked.

“My brothers and sisters convinced me that the people of Maiyim needed such a character in their theologies. ‘An invaluable social outlet’ is what Emtos called it.” Aritos smiled a bit as he recalled that. “As I remember, both Emmine and Merinne rolled their eyes when he said it. Anyway, it was apparent that a devil figure was one that was needed and I had already made enough arrogant mistakes early on to fill the bill. I sort of got self-elected.”

“Such an honor,” Candle chuckled.

“Just remember the object lesson inherent in my story, Candle,” Aritos told him seriously. “Never mind good intentions. Arrogance is one of the major paving materials on the road to Hell. Oceanvine? At least speak to me, please.”

“You’re Aritos,” she said as though she really did not believe what she was saying.

“Right,” he agreed. “I really am Aritos. I’m the evil god, the mad god, the destroyer, the eater of lost souls; He who is never called. Have I left anything out?”

Oceanvine looked at him a moment, then smiled. “You left out ‘The very naughty boy who must perpetually go to bed without ice cream.’”

Aritos laughed a warm, lively laugh. "I never heard that one."

"I just made it up," she admitted.

"Too bad," he replied. "It might help my image. I don't suppose you could spread that one about?"

"Only if it is true," Oceanvine told him in mock seriousness.

"No, I can get as much ice cream as I want," Aritos told her. "Still, I hope you will see me as the person I am and not as the evil caricature I have been made out to be."

"I'll try," she promised.

"What was that golden rod Arithan used?" Candle asked. "We know he excavated it from the so-called treasure pit of Snake Island but..."

"It doesn't have a name," Aritos replied seriously. "At least none I ever heard of. It's an ancient artifact that unfortunately I made a very long time ago back when I thought all my children still had some redeemable features." That last was said with great bitterness.

"We all make mistakes," Silverwind told him gently.

"True, but I'm a god, or I was, and when I make a mistake it's the sort that can destroy the world."

"You haven't destroyed Maiyim yet," Candle pointed out. Aritos turned to look at him, but Candle could not figure out what was going on in the God's mind. Then something clicked in his mind. "What do you mean, 'was?'"

"Excuse me?"

"You said 'I'm a God, or I was.' What do You mean by 'was?' Are You or are You not a god?" Candle pressed.

"I was and will be again," Aritos replied. "I have been stripped of my divinity until Arithan has been finally dealt with. You already know what is intended, you were there at the council of the Gods. It wasn't just a dream you all shared."

"We were there," Oceanvine confirmed. "We couldn't see your face at the time, however."

"I knew that eventually I would have to work with you three," Aritos explained. "I hoped that if you got to know me first it would soften the blow when you learned who I really am."

"It wouldn't have mattered to Silverwind," Oceanvine replied, "and possible not to Candle either. Silverwind has been telling us for years that you probably were not the epitome of evil legend paints you as."

Aritos turned to look at Silverwind. "You remember Riverstone?" Silverwind asked him.

"That was years ago. I met him in a pub on Sahren. I never did ask him what he was doing there, but that was fair since he didn't pry into what I was up to either. We had a few drinks together that night then I didn't see him until two years later when we happened to bump into each other on a back street in

Miden. I never did find out how he knew who I was, but we had dinner together on that second meeting and sometime before the dessert he started asking questions about the creation of Midbar and what We had done wrong. I think I was halfway through the explanation that we hadn't done anything wrong, but that Midbar was essential to creating life as we know it on Maiyim, before I realized what I was doing. We spent a few days together and I answered a lot of his questions. I don't think he was very happy with my answers. They weren't anything like what he expected."

"I ran into him a year or two later," Silverwind mentioned. "He told me about meeting you."

"Evidently it made an impression," Aritos commented.

"It reminded me to keep an open mind," Silverwind replied.

"You know we really ought to figure out where Kerawlat and Arithan went," Candle cut in and then reminded Aritos, "and you can answer my question about that rod."

"Oh right," Aritos said as they headed back to the cabriolet. He waited until they were moving then started to explain. "It was a gift I made for my children. It can be used to create mystic pathways through Maiyim that they can travel. That was its primary purpose anyway."

"Is that how those paths were formed?" Candle asked.

"It was, yes," Aritos replied. "That is until I took the staff back and buried it on the isle you now call Snake Island. I thought that pit I devised would keep anyone from finding it again, though."

"It almost worked," Silverwind told him. "Hundreds of humans, Orenta and Granomen have tried unsuccessfully to dig up the treasure of the pit."

"Much good would it have done them," Aritos commented. "It's not a magic wand to be waved about. None but the most accomplished mage could ever learn even the most basic abilities of the staff."

"Staff?" Candle asked. "It was only two feet long. Why call it a staff?"

"It is as long as you might want it to be. When I created it, it was the size of an old wizard's staff."

"Any idea of where Kerawlat and Arithan went from here?" Candle asked. "The tracer spell on Kerawlat was broken the moment he entered Arithan's path."

"I'm not surprised," Arithan told him. "Traveling one of those paths would cure the common cold."

"Really?" Candle asked interestedly.

"Well, it would if my children could catch a cold in the first place," Arithan replied. "Coronaviruses don't affect them."

"What's a corona virus?" Candle asked.

"Hmm? Oh sorry. You know what germs are?" Aritos asked. Candle nodded. "They're a type of germ, but one so small your healers haven't discovered them yet. Don't worry, though they will soon, I'm certain. However, the destinations of both Arithan and Kerawlat should be obvious. We managed to deplete their energies pretty darned thoroughly, they're headed back to their own islands. They're the

only places my children can recharge.”

“How long does it take them to recharge?” Silverwind asked.

“That depends on how weak they are. We won’t need to worry about Kerawlat in any case. Nidar and Wenni are on his island right now waiting for him. They will renew his imprisonment, but we do need to get to Arithan’s island before he can fully recharge and leave for somewhere else. He’ll be back to his full strength in three weeks at the outside.”

“Why aren’t the other Gods waiting for him” Candle asked.

“We weren’t expecting you to be able to defeat both Arithan and Kerawlat at once. In a sense you did a little too well. We were more worried that Arithan would release another of his brothers when Kerawlat failed here. The others have been on their islands long enough to be at full strength even if they have been imprisoned. So to make sure Arithan could not do that They have been stationing Themselves on each of the Five Demons, well, the first four of them anyway, in pairs. Emtos and Emmine are on Pohn, Gran and Querna on Gredac, Bellinen and Merinne on Xenlabit and Nildar and Wenni on Kerawlat. That leaves only Methis, but She was not supposed to be on station yet, She had other responsibilities that my brothers and sisters agreed should be seen to. So you see, Arithan is free to recharge and go off again.”

“Why are They working in pairs?” Candle asked. “Don’t Gods have more than enough power to defeat a demon?”

“If Arithan were to meet them head-on, of course,” Aritos replied. “But he’s a slippery one and perhaps a bit too clever. I put a lot of myself into him when I created him, too much in fact. He wouldn’t try to match them power for power, he would use finesse and agility. Even that wouldn’t work on two gods who were in concert, however. You’ve noted that you and Oceanvine can do so much more together when acting as one than either of you can do alone? Well, We have far more experience at that. The difference in both power and quality of magic is exponential. Mortal mages are just starting to discover what they can do together, really. However, my siblings gravely underestimated you three. You work together more closely than any other team of mages I’ve ever encountered and your use of the mage stone is a prime example of that understanding of teamwork.”

“Of course!” Candle exclaimed. “Those stones can only be made by three wizards working together.”

“I imagine I could make one on my own, or I could while I was divine,” Aritos commented, “but yes, you can approach and maybe even surpass the strength of the Gods by working together.”

Two

They arrived back in Sonatrie the next morning and Candle returned Lord Rotinere’s cabriolet while the others prepared to cast off from the pier.

“But we were hoping you could stay a bit longer,” Lord Rotinere told Candle when he explained they would be leaving Ellisto momentarily. “We were planning a festival in your honor and...”

“I’m sorry, my lord,” Candle replied seriously, “but our task is not yet complete and if we don’t rush off all we have done so far could well be undone.” As he said it, Candle thought perhaps he was overstating the case, but on reflection as he returned to the *Maiyim Bourne* he decided that he had been telling the

absolute truth.

With Candle at the helm, the *Maiyim Bourne* felt as though she could not wait to be back at sea and was straining to rise up on her foils before they had even cleared the harbor. Once they were beyond the outer jetty, however, the wind was even more favorable and they were hydroplaning immediately as soon as they had set their course for the Five Demons.

“An amazing boat,” Aritos commented once they were under way. “I wonder where Nildar got the idea for a flying boat.”

“Actually, there more than a few things I’ve been wondering that you can answer.”

“Such as?”

“Well, you say you were stripped of your divinity. What’s that mean?”

“Oh. For the moment I am not immortal, nor am I indestructible. I can be killed as easily as you can,” Aritos replied.

“Doesn’t that bother you?”

“Of course, but I’m not about to let the thought overwhelm me. If I did, I wouldn’t be able to accomplish anything that needs doing, would I?” Aritos pointed out.

“What’s it feel like? Immortality, I mean?” Candle asked curiously.

“The same as not being immortal. It’s just that as an immortal I could count on staying young and healthy forever. I suppose if I were to live as a mortal long enough I would start to experience various infirmities that come with age, but so far any difference is strictly up here.” He tapped his head.

“But you’re not powerless,” Candle pointed out. “I’ve felt you using magic.”

“No, I’m not powerless,” Aritos agreed. “I haven’t forgotten how to use magic. Think of me as just another wizard, but one with thousands of millions of years experience. I even know how to make myself immortal again.”

“Then why...?”

“I am honor bound to complete this job as a mortal,” Aritos told him. “After that I may do as I wish.”

Then Candle changed the subject. “The demons, your children as you call them. They are all completely different. Are they all different species or just one with a wide variety of morphological differences?”

“I’m not entirely certain,” Aritos admitted. “It was my intention that they all be interfertile, but as they are all male, I’ll never know for sure.”

“Why are they all male? Was that to keep them from breeding and taking over the world by destroying all the other people?”

“No, not at all. They are all male because I am male. I created them by myself. I didn’t know at the time that I would need a divine partner to create females as well. That’s the way it works, you see. Two

genders to create two genders. There was another much greater deficiency that came out because I had no partner. I never intended that my children should seek to dominate or destroy the world; I merely tried to correct what I saw as weaknesses in humans, Orenta and Granomen. It didn't work out that way though."

"Why not?" Candle asked.

"They were born without souls. That's what was missing. Without a soul, they have no compassion, can feel no sympathy for others. So instead of creating perfect beings, I created monsters. That's why I stopped after five of them. It took that long to realize no matter what I tried they would be soulless. Instead I tried to raise them to be models of good behavior and while they were still young they would behave while I could see them, but for a long time I was blind to what they were doing whenever they were out of my sight."

"What were they doing?" Candle asked.

"It's better if we do not talk of that, but you've seen some of what my children are capable of. Whatever you can imagine that is evil, they did it and more. I tried to make them good people, oh how I tried! In the end my efforts were wasted. I had failed in their creation, I failed as their father and I failed to completely correct the damage I had done. Finally my brothers and sisters came to me. My children had caused too much trouble and my siblings wanted them destroyed. I know my children to be evil, but even so I could not willingly watch them die so I pleaded for them and my siblings finally agreed that eternal imprisonment would be sufficient to protect the rest of Maiyim from them.

"The means and locations of imprisonment were obvious," Aritos continued. "The creation of intelligent life is an arduous task and it can only be accomplished in a round-about manner. The creation of life is always accompanied by the creation of land on which it can live."

"Always?" Candle asked. "What if the life is aquatic in nature?"

"A good question," Aritos replied. "I spoke with less accuracy than I should have. I was thinking of the peoples of Maiyim. But as it happens, an environment suitable for whatever sort of life is created, is also created at the same time. If that life is aquatic then an aquatic environment is created. In many cases that environment may simply have been added to another similar environment, making it larger. So the islands of Bellinen formed as the people and animals of Bellinen were created and so on. Well, the original islands have grown and shrunk with the geological forces of the world since then. This isn't how Maiyim looked in the ancient past. The average island was much smaller back then.

"When I created my children, a new island for each one was also created," Aritos told Candle. "There's another interesting thing that happens when intelligent life is created. You get another living being that is immortal. This is how the younger Gods were created. But if you set out to create life that is immortal you get a mortal creature as well, but the creature dies almost immediately, because you put all your creative energies into the immortal child."

Candle continued to ask questions of Aritos all the way to Arithan's island. Often he took notes while they talked. One night Candle started laughing for no apparent reason. When Aritos asked what was the joke, Candle replied, "I'm planning to use this material for my masters thesis. For that matter the information you have given me on creation theory will be useful in my wizard dissertation too. But I'm just wondering what my thesis committee will say when I document what you've told me in a footnote that reads, 'Aritos – personal conversations.' You have to admit, it's going to make them sit up and take notice, but getting them to believe I've actually spoken to you is going to be a challenge. I don't suppose

I could sort of summon you to my thesis defense?"

"No, I don't think so," Aritos told him after he stopped laughing, "but perhaps I can visit with your advisor when you have one."

"I'd appreciate that," Candle told him.

"It's the least I can do," Aritos told him. "Truth is truth in spite of the source. I should not let these truths be discounted merely because your professors refuse to believe you've met me."

They passed a large iceberg as they drew within sight of the Island of Xenlabit, the first of the Five Demons on their course to Arithan.

"That's unusual," Silverwind commented. "It's late summer. I wouldn't have expected to see bergs this far north."

"Perhaps it was a colder than normal summer," Oceanvine speculated. "And we are very close to the polar ice cap."

"Maybe it was an even larger mountain of ice originally," Candle added.

"I'm surprised it is still so big," Silverwind told him. "That ice is very rotten - lots of melt holes running through it. It must have been very lucky. On its way north a minor storm would have knocked it apart into a bunch of much smaller pieces. Well, we'll see more bergs before we're done. Arithan's Island is the southern most of the group and I've been told the sea has been known to freeze solid between the demons in the dead of winter."

"Are all the demons' islands as large as that one?" Candle asked.

"Roughly, yes," Silverwind replied. "Why do you ask?"

"I was expecting something much smaller."

"You've seen the charts, Candle," Oceanvine pointed out. "Arithan's island is about thirty miles long and twenty-five across."

"That's a pretty big island," Candle replied. "It leaves a lot of room for him to hide, doesn't it?"

"Finding him isn't going to be our biggest problem," Aritos told him, climbing up from the cabin. "Finding him before he's ready to find us, however, is going to be much more difficult. But there are ways. I know Silverwind here knows at least one of them."

"How do you know that?" Candle asked.

"Because he's a wizard. You already know what the final exam for a wizard is, don't you?"

"Oh, of course," Candle smiled, "To be able to detect the presence of a demon on his own island. Why

couldn't we have done that elsewhere?"

Silverwind and Aritos simultaneously turned to look at each other. "Because none of us thought of that," Silverwind said at last. "The trick won't work across stretches of ocean so it really wouldn't have worked in Merinta, but yes it might have come in handy elsewhere."

"It would only have been of limited usefulness," Aritos disagreed. Those spells work much better here because my children have a special affinity for their islands. Elsewhere your results would have been far less specific, only determining if the demon was on the same island as you, which most of the time I gather you already knew.

"As it is, the spells will, at best, only give you an approximate direction to go to it, and if Arithan is paying attention he'll know we're there and looking for him. Still it cannot be helped. We have to know where he is, but there's always a chance he'll be sleeping. If we don't cast the spell too often, maybe we can take him by surprise." Aritos didn't sound very sure of that, however.

Island Arithan had never been easy to approach. There were no natural harbors and the storm-blasted rocky beaches did not lend themselves to easy landings. All the Five Demons were volcanic and smooth, fluid lava was freely flowing out of the main volcano on Arithan's island as they approached. The fresh lava flows and tubes still full of molten rock covered several sites that previously might have been acceptable landing spots.

"Has anyone ever landed here?" Candle asked.

"From time to time," Silverwind told him. "Wizard Waterwheel was tested here about twenty-five years ago or so, but wherever he landed I haven't found it. I've known of two other wizard test expeditions that gave up trying to land here and went to one of the other islands. We don't have that option however."

"If we keep sailing around the island, however, Arithan is likely to spot us," Candle pointed out. "He probably knows we're coming but there's no need to give him a chance to attack us before we even land."

"True enough," Silverwind agreed. "We'll have to land somewhere, I suppose we'll have to make our own landing site. Here, take the wheel and just hold this course for a bit." Candle did so and Silverwind concentrated on the rocky shoreline. They were just passing an active lava flow but from what he could see, that would be the last one until they rounded the southern end of the island. Then a few minutes later he spotted a likely spot just ahead. He probed the area with his mind and found the area just off shore filled with large and treacherous rocks, so he started moving them around. It took far less effort than it would have had the boulders been on shore. By the time the *Maiyim Bourne* had reached the area he had cleared a narrow channel through which they could approach the shore.

Aritos came up on deck and saw what Silverwind was doing. "Very good," he commended the wizard. "Most mages would have been far clumsier and set off small tremors that might have alerted Arithan, but we're going to need somewhere to dock. The water here is too cold to wade in." That said, Aritos looked at the shore at the end of the channel and rocks there started moving as though they had the will to do so on their own. Gradually they piled themselves up into a wide wharf-like platform, which had one vertical edge against which they could secure the boat. The other edges were sloped and Aritos explained, "I figured we only needed enough space to dock this one boat so it was okay to leave them looking more pile-like." They struck the sails and Candle piloted the boat in.

The top of Aritos' makeshift wharf was not completely flat and many of the rocks tilted treacherously, but Oceanvine, spotting a stretch of sand just above the rocky shoreline, telekinetically moved enough of that sand to fill in the gaps between the rocks and give them a smoother surface to walk on. "It's still not very good, she admitted, but at least we won't break anything just getting on solid land. Now which way do we go?"

"We'll need to get off the beach," Silverwind replied. "You need to be on solid land to work the spell and sand tends to diffuse any results you get."

"Not if it's wet enough," Aritos told him.

"Really?"

"Yes, dry sand has a lot of air between the grains, and actually it's the air that diffuses your readings. It's not dense enough, but water is denser so if the sand is wet you can use the spell. That's why you can use the spell on soil, although if the soil was dry and broken up you would have similar problems. There is another case in which we could have trouble, and that would be if Arithan is standing on sand or a similarly broken surface."

"Good point," Silverwind agreed. "That is not normally a consideration during a wizard's exam since if the subject is imprisoned here already you don't need to worry about where he is standing. Still in a hundred feet or so we'll hopefully know for certain if he is here."

They left the makeshift wharf and continued inland, forcing their way through the growth of scrub oaks and pine. There were no real trees on the island as far as they had seen so far, but there was plenty of vegetation where the lava flows had not scoured the landscape. Most of that vegetation, however, was made up of sparse patches of the brush-like scrub and grass that barely held what soil there was in place.

"This should be far enough," Silverwind said once they were off the beach. "Vine, would you like to do the honors?"

"How is it done?" she asked.

"Each wizard must figure that out for him or herself," Silverwind told her. "Just think about how you would go about checking to see if someone was nearby."

"Sounds easy enough," Candle said instantly, but backed down from trying it himself when Oceanvine glared at him.

Oceanvine thought about it a moment, trying to figure out what Candle had seen as obvious. In the years she had known him, she had often found his easy grasp of magic frustrating. She was, she knew, a highly talented mage in her own right, but Candle took that to an entirely different level. It was all right for Silverwind to be that way, but for Candle to have no problems with aspects of the field that stumped her was not to be tolerated. In all, however, she had to admit that her quiet competition with Candle had done more to advance her own mastery than any amount of study or coursework she had done while at University.

Then for some unknowable reason she thought of echoes and how Aritos had pointed out that it was possible that Arithan would know they were on the island and searching for him. She sent out a mental pulse and waited for it to echo back to her. She was immediately inundated with returning information. It was too much as she tried to absorb every minute detail of the island and everything on it.

Taking a deep breath, she tried again, looking only for intelligent life. That was much more manageable. She detected Silverwind, Aritos and Candle and instantly filtered them out. There was another being on the island as well, much further away to the northwest. She detected a touch of nightmare to him, a flavor that reminded her of her brief encounter with Arithan's curse on the Isle of Fire. Silverwind had always said she put too much of herself into new spells and she had this time as well. However, Arithan was a long way away and his curse was not directed at her in any case. As far as she could tell he was not aware of their presence yet. She thought about probing a bit more, but instead decided not to give their position away.

"We'd better pack up some provisions," Silverwind suggested after Oceanvine reported what she had learned. "It sounds like we're in for a bit of a hike. We could attack from here, but I'd like to get a bit closer before we do. We will have a better chance of getting Arithan to commit himself to a fight that way. From here, I'm more worried he might just use that magic wand of his to create a new pathway away from here."

"It would be best if we can get it away from him," Aritos pointed out. "If I can see it, I can get it, but that will involve getting very close to my son, indeed."

It took an hour to decide on just what to take with them. Candle found a pair of small tents in his closet that he knew had not been there before. That miracle no longer amazed him. He had seen it too many times before, but the fact that he could take it for granted was worrisome, he thought. Finally they were on their way deep into the interior of the island.

"Too bad we can't just move the boat," Candle commented.

"Now that we're here, I wouldn't want to take that risk," Silverwind told him. "We were far too vulnerable as we made our approach. There are dangers here as well, but capsizing in frigid water is not one of them."

After another two hours they decided to check on Arithan's position again. "We're going to have to stop for a rest soon," Silverwind pointed out. "It will be too dark to travel for a few hours at any rate and I'd hate to have him sneak up on us."

"Candle, you seemed to think it was so easy," Aritos noted. "Why don't you try it this time?"

Candle's method was not exactly like Oceanvine's. Instead of sending out a broad mental pulse, he extended a much narrower band, which he designed to detect Arithan and he let it sweep the island around him.

"That way," he reported, pointing north, "And I don't think we'll be sleeping tonight, not until very late, if we're lucky. He's only a few miles away. Too close for my comfort anyway."

"We fought him at night in Rjalkatyp," Oceanvine pointed out confidently. "He doesn't have any special powers at night."

"Rjalkatyp has gas lamps lighting the streets," Candle countered. "Even in the darkest night during an eruption we could at least see where we were going. And the moon won't be up until an hour before sunrise."

"Don't worry," Aritos told him. "I'll fix it so we can see where we are going."

“Won’t that kind of give our position away?” Candle asked.

“Trust me,” Aritos told him.

“You’ve been hanging around Silverwind too long,” Candle told him sourly.

Three

They continued on. Their path brought them down into a valley in which the scrub was thicker than most places on the island. Unlike Pohn Island, there were no animals living on Arithan aside from the occasionally passing seal, auk or other aquatic beast or bird, so there were no paths through the growth and the valley was wide enough that it was possible Arithan could be hidden among the scrub.

“Forcing our way through that is going to be close to impossible,” Oceanvine noted.

“Just need a machete,” Silverwind pointed out as one materialized in his hand.

“Two will be even better,” Aritos commented and another appeared in his hand. Together Silverwind and Aritos started hacking their way through the brush, but a minute later Aritos started laughing. “This is silly,” he chuckled. “Hold on a minute.” A moment later, several bushes simply disappeared.

“Dematerialization?” Candle asked.

“No, finding a safe place to send the resulting energy would be difficult in my current state, I’m merely translocating it,” Aritos explained.

“And that is easier?” Candle asked, incredulously.

“No, just safer. Dematerialization of matter means turning it all into energy. Energy expresses itself in many ways; most of them are fairly lethal to anything in the immediate area especially in the quantities that you would have with this much matter suddenly flashing into energy, so the only safe way to handle it would be to send it somewhere else. As a God I could do that fairly easily, but as a highly talented mortal I do have my limits. So there’s a lot of brush piling up about a mile off to the east.”

The sun set while they were still making their way through the valley and Aritos made good on his promise to provide light. Thousands of small, floating lights appeared overhead, covering the entire valley and beyond. “There, let him pinpoint where we are now,” Aritos commented. The ground shook a moment later.

“Pinpointing us may be difficult,” Candle noted, “but he’s not in any doubt that we’re here now.”

“I doubt we were ever going to sneak up on him anyway,” Silverwind commented as the ground shook and rumbled once more. “Let’s just hurry along, he’s only a mile off to the north.”

A minute later they reached the edge of the scrubby area they had been traversing and reached a broad expanse of lava flows. The terrain was rocky and uneven and while the basalt at the edge of the area was cool, they could see places where molten lava was sending up small columns of steam and other fumes.

“This is not good,” Aritos commented. “Those fumes are probably poisonous and are almost definitely corrosive. The cooled lava will have very thin shells in places as well. Arithan might be able to withstand those conditions for a while, but none of us can.”

“We’ll just have to turn the volcano off then,” Candle replied.

“And how do you intend to do that?” Aritos asked, amused.

“Silverwind did it on the Isle of Fire.”

“Actually, I did not,” Silverwind admitted. “What I did was to close Arithan’s mystic pathway. The redirection of the magma to a new vent off the coast of the Isle was only a side effect. I could not have just turned it off.”

“The only other vents in this archipelago are on the other islands,” Aritos pointed out. “Not only would that be difficult and dangerous, but it could also cause the release of my other children. Best not to fool around with forces like that.”

“But then how are we going to fight Arithan?” Candle asked.

“Arithan’s greatest strength is his cleverness and subtlety,” Oceanvine commented, “but in his case that manifests in his preferences to use attacks on the mental level. That nightmare curse of his for example.”

“Yes,” Aritos agreed, “He is a master of illusions, but don’t sell him short on physical attacks as well.”

“I don’t,” Oceanvine replied, “but how certain are we that what we’re seeing is real.”

“It’s an entire field of illusions,” Candle reported instantly, “but some of it is real and even with magic I cannot tell just what is real and what is false.”

“Some of these illusions are masking other illusions and in so many layers, there’s no telling what is truly underneath,” Oceanvine agreed.

“We’ll just have to take this one step at a time,” Silverwind decided. Just then there was an explosion several hundred yards ahead of them and a lava fountain spewed in a bright orange arc for a few seconds. Now that I really doubt is real.”

“Maybe not,” Candle replied, “but he’s managed to get our attention. “How can we proceed if we don’t even know where it’s safe to step?”

“We’ll also drive ourselves crazy trying to separate reality from illusion,” Aritos pointed out, “and if we just stand here, Arithan wins. He’ll just wait until he is fully recovered and leave.”

“Not if we get that rod away from him,” Candle pointed out.

“Easier said than done,” Oceanvine commented, “however I recall he does have a temper and loses it fairly easily. Hold on a minim.” She closed her eyes and checked the vicinity for mystic paths. “I see two paths here. Let’s close them up before we do anything else.”

“What good will that do?” Aritos asked. “If he still has the staff, he can use it to create a new one whenever he wants.”

“True,” Oceanvine agreed, “but not if we get it away before he can use it. The point is to make sure he can’t run for it after we get the staff.”

Aritos nodded and looked down at the ground for a minute. “Taken care of,” he announced at last. The ground shook violently and a deep rumbling sound filled the air.

“That sounds familiar,” Candle chuckled.

“All minor tremors sound alike to me,” Aritos countered.

“Me too,” Candle admitted. “Actually it was the timing of the tremor that was familiar. Your wayward son out there has a tendency to want to shake the earth whenever he is unpleasantly surprised. He did the same thing on the Isle of Fire. You know, for a guy with a reputation for being clever and subtle, your son is a bit too predictable. Excuse me for a moment, please. It’s my turn now.”

“What are you going to do?” Aritos asked, but Candle didn’t reply.

Instead he cast the spell that would give him Arithan’s location. It only took a moment to spot the demon. It wasn’t as precise as he had hoped, but then Arithan moved and Candle realized that the demon’s movement, rather than obscuring his position, actually made him easier to locate. “Big mistake, Ari!” Candle chuckled. A moment later a large glowing arrow appeared in the sky and pointed down at the ground less than two hundred yards away. The ground shook again much more violently. “There he is,” Candle told the others.

Before anyone could do anything, however, the quake grew worse and a deep fissure opened up in the ground beneath them. They all jumped away from the gaping wound in the ground, but not all in the same direction. Oceanvine and Candle jumped backward, Aritos to his right, but Silverwind dived forward. It looked like he had gotten clear of the fissure, but he disappeared as he hit the ground. Aritos got back to his feet immediately and started dispelling illusions.

The fissure turned out not to exist at all, but Silverwind had fallen into a pit just beyond it. Oceanvine instantly jumped into the pit beside him and asked. “Dear? Are you all right?”

Silverwind groaned. “Nothing a week of bed rest won’t cure.”

“I know that tone,” Oceanvine told him bluntly. “You’re in pain. What did you break?”

“My dignity. I’m just bruised.”

“You’re not just bruised,” she told him bluntly.

“Well, my shoulder is a bit sore and I think I may have twisted my left ankle,” Silverwind replied, “but I can keep going.”

“How? By levitation?”

Uh, yes. I’ll go with that,” he replied and instantly lifted himself up to the edge of the pit. Sitting, he admitted, “That was harder than it should have been.”

“Just sit there,” Aritos advised. “I’m sure you can back us up from here as well as anywhere else in the

vicinity. But this is going to take some rethinking.”

“Not really,” Oceanvine replied, casting a visible and impermeable ward against the ground that extended fifty feet toward where Candle had indicated Arithan was hidden. “Let’s go,” she told them, stepping on to the ward and walking briskly to the other end. Candle and Aritos followed.

Until that point the illuminated arrow had stayed stationary, but as they approached, it suddenly moved fifty yards to the left. “Hah!” Candle laughed. “I bet he thought he could just jump away.” He closed his eyes to help concentrate, found a large loose boulder and threw it at Arithan’s position. It was close, the arrow moved only at the last moment, but the ground shook once more and suddenly Arithan was rising up into the air.

Aritos sent a brilliant bolt of some form of energy at the floating figure, but it passed through him without effect.

“No, just another illusion,” Candle commented. “See how the arrow stayed in place? Gives me an idea, though.” With another thought he caused another two arrows to appear and point at the same location from other directions. “Triangulation,” he explained simply. Overhead, the figure of Arithan was causing lightning bolts to fly at them, but they too were illusory.

Oceanvine extended her ward another fifty feet and then she, Candle and Aritos advance once more. “I wish we could actually see him,” Candle muttered.

“I can dispel his illusions,” Aritos informed him, “but I think we should wait until he is closer. We know where he is and it’s better if we don’t give him a chance to figure out how to stop my counter spell. Speaking of which, start hitting him with whatever you can.”

“I have an idea, but I’ll need to let this ground ward go, is that safe?” Oceanvine asked.

“Seems to be,” Aritos replied.

Oceanvine released her ward and they all dropped to the ground. She sat down on the uneven surface and quickly slipped into a comfortable spell trance. She determined Arithan’s location and quickly enveloped him in a spherical ward. She used it to lift him up and start moving him closer to them. Once he was captured, she was confident enough to open her eyes.

Inside the clear bubble, the demon was raging. He tried a number of different ways to escape. First he attempted to become much larger, but stopped when he ran out of space and the ward would not even stretch. He shrunk back down and tried casting spells at the ward, to no avail.

“Did you make it one of your alternating current wards?” Candle asked her quietly.

“I should have,” Oceanvine admitted and was about to correct that oversight, when Arithan poked his hands partway through the confining ward and ripped it apart. Oceanvine grunted and buried her head in her hands in reaction to the pain of magical backlash.

Candle wasted no time and threw a powerful spell at the ground below the demon. Under his direction the ground became orange hot and rose up to envelope Arithan up to his hips. The demon screamed and Candle quickly caused the rock to resolidify. He knew that would not hold Arithan for long, but while the demon was freeing himself, Candle used telekinesis to pluck the golden rod from Arithan’s belt. Arithan screamed again, this time in rage as Candle caught the rod and before Arithan finished freeing himself

from his rocky encasement. The demon sent a blast of power at Candle that threw the journeyman backwards several hundred yards. The glowing arrows abruptly disappeared.

“Candle!” Oceanvine screamed. Then with pure murder in her eyes, she turned back toward Arithan and enveloped him in white hot fire. Arithan’s screams could not be heard over the roar of the blaze he was trapped within and Oceanvine kept the blindingly bright blaze centered on the demon even as he ran blindly around in a panicked attempt to find relief. Finally, Arithan fell to the ground and Oceanvine, exhausted from her efforts, slumped to her knees.

Arithan did not look at all well. His clothing and hair was gone, burned off by the flame, his skin was blackened all over, and he was severely emaciated. However, even in the brief moment that followed, Oceanvine and Aritos could see he was already healing rapidly. His body was healing and filling out again.

“Without divine powers he’s hard as hell to beat, especially on his own island,” Aritos said, mostly to himself. Then he looked at his son and encased him in a ward entirely unlike anything Oceanvine could have imagined. He used it to block his son from the healing powers of the island. Even now, Aritos found it impossible to hurt his son. Arithan was irredeemably evil, worse even than his brothers, but Aritos still loved him in spite of his faults and in spite of the thousands of centuries of disappointment. And in his moment of hesitation, Arithan struck.

It was his nightmare spell, directed at both Aritos and Oceanvine. Oceanvine knew what it was and was able to shield herself from the worse of its effects, but Aritos had no idea what had hit him. He lost control of the ward even as the pain and nightmarish visions engulfed his mind.

Oceanvine fought her way free of Arithan’s curse, but Aritos was hopelessly lost in a sea of his own worst fears. She expected to see Arithan gloating, but she had injured the demon more than she had believed. Arithan was a hundred yards away on the ground and curled up in a fetal position. She tried to gather her strength to attack him again while he was so vulnerable, but she didn’t have the strength. She knew Aritos did, however, but he was sunk in his own despair. She took his hand and tapped into his power, but the nightmares of a God threatened to overtake her. She drew back and tried again, this time shielding herself mentally. She didn’t have to actually see the nightmares to banish them, but Aritos had more power than anyone she had ever encountered before. She privately wondered if he had truly been stripped of his divinity by the other Gods or if he had merely been tricked into thinking They had done it. She had to be careful not to intentionally absorb his power because the nightmares came with it. Even so there was so much of it that some filtered into her and it took all her concentration to ignore the nightmares that bit at her mind. Finally, she got a grip on the curse Aritos was suffering from and directed his power into banishing the curse. Then she quickly went to work on the echoes of the curse that were trying to get a hold on her own soul.

She opened her eyes to see Aritos breathing hard and just opening his. “Thank you,” he told her simply. They both turned to see what Arithan was doing. Unfortunately he was standing over them, fully recovered and gloating.

“Well, well,” Arithan said in his oily voice. “Father, did you really think you could stop me? Well, I heard you say you were mortal now and that make you more vulnerable than even you can understand. Allow me to educate you.”

Before Arithan could do anything, however, he was flung away from them by what sounded like the screeching roar of a hurricane-force wind, although Oceanvine could feel nothing more than a slight breeze. She looked over at Aritos and asked, “Are you all right?”

“What was that he hit me with?” Aritos asked.

“His favorite trick,” Oceanvine explained. “It’s really just a grown-up illusion spell, but it uses your own power to create in your mind whatever it is you most fear. I did what I could to banish the curse, but you’ll still be vulnerable until you learn to fight it for yourself.”

“And you can fight it?”

“Silverwind does it better. He can just shrug it off, but then he had to live with the curse for years before he could do that. Candle can too, but that’s Candle for you. He does things most wizards can’t even understand. Oh my! Candle!”

“If he is as good as you say, he may still be alive,” Aritos told her. “We need to defeat Arithan, however, before we can find out. What happened to him?”

“Silverwind, I would guess,” Oceanvine told him, getting back to her feet. “He did something similar to what Arithan did to Candle. The only difference is that Arithan is invulnerable. What ever possessed you to make him that way?”

Aritos stood up and answered “Foolishness, hubris – yes even a God can be guilty of hubris. I sought to make my children perfect, but until it was too late I didn’t understand that I needed a mate, but who was there for me? There were only seven of Us.”

“Are there no other Gods on other worlds?” Oceanvine asked.

“Other worlds?” Aritos echoed. “Perhaps, but We were young at the time Ourselves and the notion never occurred to Us. There is one for Me now, but until I am once more divine She is beyond My reach, and I realize now I may not survive the day. Well, if that’s the case, so be it. If I die it will be due to my own mistakes.”

In the distance they heard Arithan’s scream of rage. A moment later they saw him running toward them at tremendous speed. Oceanvine cast a quick protective ward. It was just a simple wall and was knocked down by the force of Arithan slamming into it. There was another hurricane screech, but this time the demon raised his hand and somehow Silverwind’s spell became ineffective. Arithan cast a fireball at the place Oceanvine had last seen Silverwind and there was a great explosion.

“No!” she screamed. And once more she enveloped Arithan in a sheath of energy so fiercely powerful that Aritos paused to consider the indomitable strength of this mortal woman. She was exhibiting power that he had never thought possible in any of his sibling’s children even though he had spent many centuries living among them. And she thought both Silverwind and Candle were even more powerful? That hardly seemed possible. Did the other Gods even have a clue?

“This is only a temporary solution, Oceanvine,” he told her. “Arithan will recover quickly on this island.”

“Then what...?” Oceanvine started to ask, but as soon as she was distracted, Arithan had an opening and hit them with his nightmare curse again. This time Oceanvine brushed the curse off almost casually, but Aritos was lost again in his nightmares and in blind panic, he swung his arms around and hit Oceanvine hard, knocking the wind out of her.

Arithan chuckled, blackened bits of skin falling off as he healed rapidly. Already his strength was much

closer to peak than his outward appearance might indicate. With a hideous grin on his face he advanced on Oceanvine and Aritos. Dazed, with her head spinning, Oceanvine could only sit there and wait for him to make his move while she tried to muster the strength and concentration to form a protective ward.

“Back off, Bosco!” a voice snarled from overhead. Oceanvine looked up and saw Candle. He wasn’t just levitating, he was flying. And after a quick loop, he landed directly between Oceanvine and Arithan.

Arithan tried his nightmare spell on Candle and achieved absolutely no effect save to make him laugh. “You know,” Candle told him contemptuously, “Silverwind was right. You really are a one-trick pony. Maybe you remember this too?” Candle held up his right hand and an eightbase bat materialized in it. Arithan’s mouth dropped open and stared at the journeyman in horror. Candle swung the bat back as though he was about to bat the demon’s head out of the lava field, but instead he lashed out with a high kick, which, with the assistance of a bit of levitation, caught Arithan in the throat.

Oceanvine recalled another trick Silverwind had played on Arithan. He had cast a ward that when broken had paralyzed the demon and incidentally changed his skin to the spotted condition it had been in until recently. She had learned that Arithan was too clever to trick the same way twice. Candle had just reminded her by kicking the demon rather than swinging the bat, although he was currently smashing it against Arithan’s head. It wouldn’t kill the demon, but it was keeping him helpless and disoriented.

Instead of trying to paralyze the demon, Oceanvine cast a spell designed to slow his bodily processes way down. Such a spell, she was certain, would kill a mortal except possibly when cast by a trained magical healer. The demon could survive it, however, but his reaction time would be slowed to a near halt, and possibly his recovery time as well. That done, she turned her attention to the helpless Aritos.

Dispelling the curse was easier this time because she already knew what mistakes not to make. Even so, it took longer than she liked. By the time she was done Candle was starting to get tired and Arithan was struggling slowly to get back to his feet.

“We need to drain him,” Oceanvine said to Aritos, “and keep him from recovering. I can drain what’s left of his power, I think. Can you keep him that way?”

“I can,” Aritos told her. “Not for more than a few hours, though.”

“Your siblings are supposed to show up anytime now I imagine,” Oceanvine commented.

“How do you know that?” Aritos asked.

“Well, I imagine some of them must, how else can they destroy Arithan? They specifically told us that was not our task, we merely had to defeat him. Did I say, ‘merely?’”

“I’ll remind you of that, someday,” Aritos chuckled.

“Candle,” Oceanvine called as she reached into her purse, “get out of the way.” She pulled out the mage stone she had received with her master’s degree. The seal of the University at Querna glowed a vivid green within the crystal.

“One more thing,” Candle said and without needing to pause, he stretched the wooden bat out an extra foot in length and then wrapped it tightly around the demon’s neck. Oceanvine made a mental note to ask him how the heck he had done that. With Arithan gasping for breath, Candle leaped back up into the air and flew back behind Oceanvine and Aritos. “Go ahead, Vine!” he called.

“That’s Oceanvine!” she shouted back at him and broke the mage stone. With the power contained in her last mage stone coupled with and guided by irritation catalyzed by Candle’s use of her disliked nickname, Arithan never stood a chance. Arithan grew thinner and thinner as both his substance and energy was leached out of him. When Oceanvine was done, there was nothing left but an articulated skeleton with a warped piece of wood around its neck. The skeleton fell to the ground and broke up into a group of disarticulated bones.

Aritos just stared in amazement at Oceanvine.

“Well?” she asked pointedly. “It’s your turn now.”

“What?” Aritos asked, still amazed by what Oceanvine had just accomplished. “Oh yes, of course.” The bones of Arithan were starting to move toward each other and reconnect. Aritos cast the spell that isolated his son from the curative effects of his island. “There,” he said sadly at last. A tear rolled down his cheek and he looked at what was left of Arithan “It’s done.”

Four

“I’ll say it’s done,” Silverwind agreed as he hobbled up behind them. He was using a long golden staff to support himself. Beside him was Methis. “Well?” he asked Her in much the same tone Oceanvine had just used with Aritos. “I don’t think You’re likely to find Arithan any more defeated unless You expect us to do Your job too.”

“I do believe you three could too,” Aritos replied. “Oceanvine especially. Methis, do You have any idea of what these people are capable of?”

“Of course,” Methis laughed. “Why else do You think Our kind won’t be needed here much longer, dear.”

“Oh, of course,” Aritos replied. “How could I have been so blind?”

“No need to beat Yourself up on that count,” Methis told Him. “I doubt any of Your generation would have noticed how far My siblings and cousins have come had Nildar, Wenni and I had not pointed it out to Them. You haven’t been around much the last century or so - and don’t think I’m not annoyed about that – so it isn’t like I would have had the chance to tell You. Still it is time to call the rest of Us. Do You want to do the honors, or should I?”

“That’s a bit beyond my abilities at the moment, don’t You think?” Aritos asked Methis.

“Dear heart, You really didn’t think You could be turned into a mortal by a cheap light show and a vague tingling sensation did You?” Methis asked.

“Wait a minim,” Candle cut in. “Are You saying Aritos is still a God?”

“Of course,” Methis replied. “Divinity is not something that can be cast off like an old cloak.”

“But My brother, Bellinen said I must become a mortal for the duration of the quest,” Aritos told them all.

“Did He?” Candle asked. “I wasn’t there.”

“No,” Methis disagreed with Aritos, “He asked if You were willing to be a mortal for the duration of the quest. I love You dearly, but You’ve been so remorseful concerning Your children all these ages that You leaped at the chance to do any sort of penance. After that it was just a matter of some cheap theatrics and You convinced Yourself. Frankly I thought Bellinen was a bit over the top. It was all I could do to keep from laughing. If there’s anything We are going to need to do this next millennium it’s to work on Your self-esteem. Now want to give it a go?”

Aritos smiled wryly and looked up at the sky for a moment. Four pairs of stars in the sky seemed to move toward the island, as they approached zenith, they grew brighter and larger until each one was discernable as a humanoid shape. They grew even larger as they approached and then, still too bright to look at directly, they landed on the ground of Island Aritos and abruptly stopped glowing. Nildar and Wenni were the first to land, followed rapidly by Gran and Querna and Emtos and Emmine. Bellinen and Merinne arrived last of all.

“I’m supposed to be the sly and clever one, but it appears You pulled one over on Me this time,” Aritos told Them by way of greeting.

“Only because We love You, brother,” Emmine told Him, kissing Him on the cheek.

Bellinen looked around with a puzzled expression on His face. “Where is Arithan?”

“Right here,” Aritos told him indicating the pile of bones.

“A bit excessive,” Bellinen noted. “If You had gone much further You wouldn’t need Us to finish the job, brother.”

“Not I,” Aritos disagreed. “Oceanvine did most of it, but Silverwind and Candle here played essential roles as well. In comparison I was barely more than a witness.”

“Well done, My children,” Emtos rumbled. “Well done, indeed.”

“Yes,” Emmine agreed. “You did so much more than We could have asked. It’s a shame We won’t be here to see what you come up with next.”

“You’re leaving, Mother Emmine?” Oceanvine asked softly.

“We are no longer needed here, child,” She replied. “You and all the peoples of Maiyim have grown up. We are proud of you, you know.”

“If We are not needed here,” Methis broke in, “I don’t know where else. You lot can go tour the universe if You want, but I’m staying right here whether I’m needed or not. There is no way I am going to miss what comes next. Besides if I want to see the universe I can travel with the people of Maiyim. I predict they’ll be landing on Midbar before this century is out and after that it will be on to the stars. Our people are all natural sailors and they’ll take to the seas of outer space as easily as they did to those of Maiyim.”

“I am so glad to hear You say that cousin,” Wenni added. “I feel no urge to leave Maiyim either. “We stopped guiding Our siblings years ago and have only observed them since, We must let them go their

own ways, but there's no reason We cannot continue to observe." Beside Her Nildar nodded his agreement.

"I must admit," Aritos told Them all, "that having seen what mortals can do, I very much want to be around in the future. The creation of Maiyim was My idea in the first place and even though I failed in My solo attempts to create life, I am very proud of what My nieces and nephews have managed. I intend to stay here as well, at least as long as They do."

The other Elder Gods looked at one another and communicated silently. Finally Bellinen turned and said, "Then into Your hands," He paused and turned to Silverwind Oceanvine and Candle, "and yours, of course, We place the future and well being of Maiyim. Know that even if We are on the other side of the Universe, Our hearts will ever be here."

Then, as one the Elder Gods began to glow again and lifted Themselves and the bones of Arithan up into the sky and soon disappeared. "A bit too flashy for My taste," Methis criticized.

"And just as well," Wenni retorted, "considering You're planning to stay here to observe."

"Just as You are cousin," Methis replied lightly but with a touch of acid in Her voice.

"Shh, You two," Aritos told Them, unable to hide His amusement, "not in front of the mortals."

"Oh they already know what We're like," laughed Methis.

"So," Candle interrupted, talking to Methis, "You and Aritos are..."

"An item?" Methis suggested. "A couple? Lovers, perhaps? Not yet, but We are destined for each other and always have been. I always thought it should have been obvious that with ten Gods and five of each gender that We would all pair off. Hmm, better not tell the priests though. They'd have fits."

Almost everyone laughed, except for Wenni who just shook her head resignedly and said to Nildar, "Is it too late to join the Elders?"

"You don't mean that, dear," He replied.

"Uh, Wenni?" Oceanvine asked, stepping toward Her. "You once healed my wounds. I don't suppose You could do the same for Silverwind?"

Wenni looked reluctant, but after a moment shrugged and replied, "Yes, of course."

"What's with the staff?" Candle asked Silverwind while Wenni healed his ankle. "It wasn't that long when I plucked it out of Arithan's belt."

"It does more than create mystic pathways that we can't travel on. Remember?" Silverwind replied. "It evidently has the ability to adapt to a user's needs. I suppose I don't need it anymore. Aritos, I suppose this belongs to You."

"You may have it," Aritos told him. "It has a lot of other uses."

"Such as?" Silverwind prompted.

Aritos smiled, “That would be telling. I’d hate to spoil the surprise. I know I said only the most accomplished mage could use it, but...” Silverwind stared at the golden staff as though that alone would be sufficient to unravel its mysteries.

“Nice bit of creation with the bat,” Oceanvine told Candle.

“Thanks. I liked it. And it was nice to see that I could learn how to do that before you did. You’re really hard to keep up with, you know,” Candle told her.

“I’m hard to keep up with?” Oceanvine asked, amazed that he felt that way. She was about to tell him how much she had to struggle just to stay even with his progress, but decided to keep that to herself for a while longer. Instead she shut her eyes for a moment and materialized a pillow in her hands, and then hit him over the head with it. “Try keeping up with that!”

Candle laughed, but before he could retaliate he noticed a strange, wistful expression on Oceanvine’s face. “What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I’m really going to miss my master’s stone,” she replied sadly, “even more than my journeyman’s stone.”

“You can get another one,” Candle suggested tentatively.

“It wouldn’t be the same,” she replied. “You have to admit it was a pretty special stone.”

“And you used it to accomplish something very special too,” Candle reminded her.

“I cannot replace the lost stone,” Aritos told Oceanvine, “but I would be honored if you would accept this token of My thanks and esteem.” He held His hand out and in it was what looked like a mage stone – a piece of crystal with a symbol traced within its heart.

Oceanvine reached out and touched it and the symbol within suddenly glowed bright golden. “That’s the color of a Wizard’s stone,” she told Him.

“No matter what the Universities might say, my dear Oceanvine, you are most definitely a wizard,” Aritos told her firmly. “Only a wizard is capable of saving the life of a God and you saved Me twice.”

“You would have recovered eventually,” Oceanvine told Him. “Silverwind did.”

“After how many years?” Methis asked. “And you are wrong. As gods We are eternal and that sort of wound would have lasted forever as well. We can heal from normal wounds instantly but magic changes the very nature of things; that’s how it works and while the nature of mortals can change, hopefully for the better, We immortals stay pretty much the way we are. Only someone else can cure the effect of malicious magic on Us.”

“What’s that symbol?” Candle asked. “It sort of looks like the Bond of Aritos, but...”

“Study it well, Candle,” Aritos told him, “That is the Seal of Aritos and the only true form. All those symbols you know of as the Bond are corruptions of this sign. You’ll also find it on the ends of Silverwind’s staff, but I suppose you ought to have a copy of your own.” And he held out another mage stone. Candle touched it and it glowed red.

“A journeyman’s stone,” Candle noted.

“I suppose you’re worthy of a master’s stone at least, but I’d hate to spoil all the fun you’re going to have,” Aritos told him with a chuckle.

“Thanks,” Candle replied. “And You’re right, as I think it through. It would spoil all the fun, especially when I include a comparison of your Seal with Your Children’s Bonds. I doubt any of my examiners will even know the Seal exists.”

“They will when you tell them about it,” Methis pointed out. “I can’t wait to read your thesis. Just remember you promised to use My library for research. And how about you, Silverwind? What will you be up to next?”

“It appears Your intended has given me an assignment for the rest of my life,” Silverwind replied wryly.

“Only if you feel like it,” Aritos told him. “Think of it as a puzzle to work on during a cold winter’s night.”

“It will be a while before I see one of those,” Silverwind laughed. “These two have both enrolled in the University at Merinne. I suppose I may pass the time teaching a class or two. I have outstanding invitations at all three Universities, after all. After that, well, who knows? I’ve been a bit too isolated in Renton and I get the feeling too much has been going on that I’ve been unaware of.”

“We’ll rebuild the home in Renton,” Oceanvine told him. “It will make a nice place in the summer and whenever we feel the need of a sabbatical, I suppose. And I’ve got an idea for a sort of school there.”

“What sort of school?” Silverwind asked.

“One that only does a special summer session. A two-month long term full of seminars and independent study. A way to give really dedicated students a chance to advance their knowledge in a less formal setting than University. Maybe some introductory classes for promising younger students too. I’m not certain if we want to keep it restricted to magical studies, though. It seems to me that too many of our colleagues these days don’t know enough outside their specialties. I mean look how much better Candle has done than his classmates because we gave him a broad-based education.”

“Sounds like fun,” Methis opined. “Need another faculty member?”

“I thought You were going to just observe?” Wenni snapped.

“And what better way to observe?” Methis countered. “I’ve taught before. I can keep to a curriculum whatever it might be.”

“I don’t have one yet,” Oceanvine told her. “You might have to come up with one on Your own.”

“Oooh! I like it!” Methis replied gleefully “Flintknapping one day, advanced cosmological theory the next and basic crop management the day after that.”

“It might not be what you have in mind, Oceanvine” Nildar laughed, “but your students will get a real education.”

“What would You call such a class?” Aritos wondered out loud.

“Life 101,” Methis told Him.

“You’re hired,” Oceanvine told Methis

Candle suddenly realized they were no longer on the lava field where they had fought Arithan. Now they were standing on the rocky beach near the *Maiyim Bourne*. “How did we get back here?” he asked.

“I did that,” Wenni told him, “while the rest of you were talking.”

“Well done,” Candle said admiringly. “I never even noticed it.”

“Thank you, Candle,” Wenni told him warmly.

“I suppose You’re going to want the boat back,” Silverwind said to Nildar as they and Wenni strolled down the makeshift wharf, “as soon as we’ve returned to civilization. She’s a lovely boat and it’s been an honor to sail her.”

“Keep her,” Nildar told him. “We always meant her as a gift to you three.”

“Are You sure?” Silverwind asked. “Some of the features of the boat could be dangerous in the wrong hands.”

“Then I suppose I will have to trust you to keep her out of those hands,” Nildar told him. “Think of it as a test.”

“I better not fail,” Silverwind commented dryly. “Well, then, might I offer You a ride off the island?”

“No, but thank you,” Nildar replied. “We have Our own mode of transportation.” He reached out and took Wenni’s hand. “Live well and long, all of you.” The young lover Gods glowed and began to rise into the air.

“Bless you all,” Wenni added. Then They were both gone.

“I’ll take you up on that ride,” Methis told Silverwind as she passed him and climbed aboard. “I didn’t have anywhere as much time to look her over as I would have liked and I can’t wait to ride her as she hydroplanes! It will make the nice start of a honeymoon too, won’t it, dear?” She asked Aritos.

“I suppose it will,” He replied.

“You know,” Silverwind whispered to Aritos, “It’s not too late to run.”

“Actually it is,” Aritos told him wryly. “It was already far too late the morning She was born.”

Candle and Oceanvine cast off and Silverwind began piloting the boat back out into open water.

“That’s reminds me,” Candle said to Methis a minute later. “So You and Aritos are going to marry, or mate or live together or whatever it is that Gods do.”

“We marry, Candle,” she told him. “Aritos and I are already married and you were a witness. We didn’t need a ceremony, We just came together. Didn’t you notice?”

“It must have been a bit too subtle for me,” Candle replied. “But when the Elder Gods had children, the mortal races were born as well, isn’t that correct?” Methis nodded. “What if You and Aritos or Nildar and Wenni have a child, will that birth herald the creation of a new intelligent species?”

“Yes, of course,” She replied mater-of-factly. “And We will have children someday.”

“When?” Candle asked.

“When the time is right, of course. And eventually Our child will marry that of Nildar and Wenni and have yet another child.”

“You’ve seen that in the future?”

“I can no more see the future than you can Candle,” Methis told him.

“But You always talk about future events as though they have already happened.”

“I do,” Methis admitted. “It’s a bad habit, maybe I’ll break Myself of it one day.”

“So Your conjecture about Your children was just guessing?”

“An educated guess. It makes sense, however.”

“But what happens after Your grandchild is born?”

“I don’t know, Candle,” Methis admitted. “I’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Standby to hoist sails!” Silverwind ordered.

“Excuse me,” Candle said to Methis, “I need to ready the jib.”

When he was finished, Silverwind called out, “Hoist away!” and Candle raised the jib while Oceanvine and Methis hoisted the mainsail. Wind filled the sails and the *Maiyim Bourne* began a long, pleasant voyage north.

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