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Off On a Tangent

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Foreword

“Off on a Tangent” was the first book-length bit of writing I ever accomplished aside from my masters thesis. The masters thesis, by the way, is not likely to see publication in e-book format unless I get terminally bored and decide to start typing it in. I wrote it on an old electric typewriter. I paid someone to type the final copies, which she did on an ancient Wang word processor, but I don't have it in any electronic form. But I have digressed and in record time.

It was 1989 and after much too long a time in which I kept telling people I wanted to write but just didn't have the time, I realized that was just an excuse and if I really wanted to write I would find the time. So one evening I just sat down and instead of playing computer games or answering email, I started writing. There was no plot outline or plan, really, just a basic idea in my head. The idea was this;

throughout history there have been many mysterious disappearances. There was the case of Benjamin Bathurst, mentioned right at the beginning, the *Mary Celeste* incident, and dozens of other cases in which people have just gone missing without leaving so much as a trace behind. Well, I like to think I'm a fairly rational thinker and don't believe for a moment that any of those incidents require supernatural, extraterrestrial, or other fantasy-like explanations. However, I do like to play with ideas and see where they go, so I wondered, "what if all these missing people ended up in the same place; some other world where they had to make a new living for themselves?"

The idea was what got me started although it didn't take me very long to decide it was a bit contrived. Heck! It was very contrived, but there you go. Anyway, the world I landed all these people on is a fantasy world in which magic actually works. That part I am still comfortable with, it's an old vehicle in the fantasy genre.

The book is amazingly episodic and is split into sections that could easily be presented as short stories, although I actually didn't notice that until well after I had finished writing it. I rewrote several sections a few years ago to smooth them out a bit and to fit these sections together a bit better, but the basic storyline remains the same. In spite of the flaws, I found I enjoyed rereading this and can understand why most members of my writers group of that time were enthusiastic about it. But make no mistake, I don't pretend for a moment that this is one of my better works. Still it's a nice, light story. Enjoy!

Finally, this book really is offered to you free. However, if after reading it you feel it was worth a dollar or two, rather than sending it to me, why not make a donation to the New Bedford Historical Society? The New Bedford Historical Society was organized in October 1996 as a non-profit Massachusetts corporation dedicated to documenting and celebrating the history, legacy and presence of African Americans, Cape Verdeans, Native Americans, West Indians and other people of color in New Bedford, Massachusetts. For more information contact the New Bedford Historical Society at: P.O. Box 40084 , New Bedford, MA 02744 (508) 979-8828 <http://www.nps.gov/nebe/nbhs.htm>

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Off on a Tangent

Chapter One

No, I don't know how it happened either. There I was, just minding my own business, heading north on Whittier, taking a walk around the block, when suddenly I was traveling in some other direction. One perpendicular to reality.

It's amazing the bits of trivia you can dredge up from a misspent youth under unusual circumstances. Ever hear of Benjamin Bathurst? Back in the early Nineteenth Century he was a minor British diplomat. While traveling to Austria as the ambassador from George III to Franz I, one morning, outside an inn in Prussia, he was seen to stroll around a team of horses as they stood hitched up to his coach. He walked just out of sight behind those horses as his secretary and valet watched. He was never seen again. I don't

know where I learned that. I think it was in a book somewhere.

Anyway, I know what happened to him. There's no doubt about it in my mind. He ended up as a batch of Envoy McNuggets delightfully chomped down by your not-so-friendly neighborhood fire-breathing dragon. How do I know that, you ask? Because that darned near happened to me.

Where was I? Oh yeah, out for a postprandial stroll - only instead of having my dessert I was about to thoughtfully provide that opportunity to the scaly gourmet.

I'm not sure where my head was at. I'm dead certain that I should have noticed the sudden shift in scenery. I mean, there are a few obvious differences between the occasional Cape Cod cottage, split-level ranch, and bungalow, and a collection of wattle and daub huts with the classic thatched roofs picturesquely situated outside the tall stone walls of a medieval city, aren't there?

Well, it wasn't as abrupt as all that, but I was understandably pre-occupied at the time. The corner of Whittier and Carroll Streets always had a bad reputation for fender-bender type accidents until they finally put up some stop signs. Of course, there's always some jerk who, maybe, just beamed down from Venus, and who hasn't the foggiest notion of what a red octagon means, and just drives straight on through.

I heard the squeal of tires behind me and turned partway to look over my shoulder. Of course, being the world-class klutz that I am, I just kept walking, straight into a telephone pole. Ooh that hurt! In pain and dizziness, I closed my eyes tightly. To keep from falling down I reached out to hold on to the telephone pole.

So instead of taking in the scenery, I was totally unaware of my change of address, until the pole moved. I opened my eyes to find myself face to flank with Rex, or Dino, or whatever the big lizard's name might have been.

Finally, I noticed what was wrong with this picture. I was in it.

The sleek lines of the beastie's musculature drew my gaze, inevitably, to endless rows of razor sharp, stainless-steel teeth set in a mouth that was likewise set in a permanent smile that would have made Jimmy Carter proud. Well, maybe Fido was happy about the situation, but I was quickly running through a short list of options. Unfortunately my internal computer only had two choices available on this menu; 1) run like heck, or 2) become part of the menu. I weighed the two carefully in my mind, considering all the possible consequences of taking either of these two options, and finally made my choice.

Fortunately that internal computer of mine has a zero wait state and I processed all this in somewhere under a nanosecond. Let Mr. Frost journey down the road not taken. I quite predictably ran for my life.

Spot, of course, was hot on my tail. Literally. I didn't manage to get more than thirty feet away, when a large tongue of flame was licking at the seat of my Levis. Flame on, Human Scorch! For a change, my mind clicked on and I remembered that when your clothes are burning the second worst thing you can do is to run around. As I didn't notice any swimming pools filled with gasoline, I was at least safe from the first worst thing I could have done.

I quickly dropped to the ground to roll the flames out. This allowed Rover to catch up, naturally, but he was running so fast that he went right past me. Before he could turn around I grabbed on to his tail, hoping that maybe he wouldn't be able to reach me. Foolish me.

Well, it sort of worked. His body was too thick to allow him to reach me down at the end of his tail, but just as I was feeling almost safe, he flicked his tail better than any towel in a high school boy's gym locker room, and I went flying up about forty feet into the air.

Well, this is it, I thought. In a moment I'll be one big flat, red pancake. For a change, luck was on my side and Prince's aim was as miserable as his breath and I found myself on top of the city wall. It was a rough landing, but at least I survived it. Old Fido was coming to fetch me, but looking around I saw an old-fashioned broom. There was no witch in sight to ask permission to use it, and I didn't really have the time to ask anyway. As the big lizard put his front feet on the battlements and poked his head up over the wall, I swung the broom and bopped him across the nose. He roared with the pain and came at me again. So I hit him again, in the same way. At that point he inhaled deeply, obviously preparing to leave a mere streak on the wall to mark my passing, but just as he was about to exhale at me I swung the broom one last time upward at his jaw closing his mouth on the flame.

He belched. I swear it, he belched. Then he roared in pain again, and instead of coming after me, this time he turned and ran for the hills, tripping once or twice over the thatched huts.

"Nice moves, handsome."

I spun around with my mighty broom on guard to find myself staring into the most vivid blue-green eyes I had ever had the pleasure to go swimming in. The fact that they were attached to a stunningly pretty face surrounded by long, straight, dark red hair only intensified the image. And, of course I couldn't help but feel the stirring of wild hormones at the sight of a form-fittingly provocative black leather jerkin and trousers stretched delightfully over an exceedingly feminine body. That dagger she was nonchalantly honing, on the other hand, was a definite turn-off. Still, she had an invitingly beautiful smile and, at the moment at least, seemed much friendlier than Rex had.

"Oh, come on there, cutie," she purred. "You don't need to beat me off with a broom." I noticed that I still had my broom held in a defensive manner and slowly dropped my guard. She almost ignored me as she sighted the edge of her dagger. She told me later that was to check for dull spots. Then, with a slight flourish she slipped it into a belt sheath.

Up until now, except for the occasional scream or grunt, I had been fairly quiet. Well, what do you expect? I'd only been here a few minutes and this was the first entity I'd encountered who seemed even vaguely inclined toward conversation. Now, however, that was about to change as I had a heart-felt need to speak.

"What the hell is going on here?" I tried to scream, but it came out as a whispered squeak. "What was that thing? Where am I?"

Red looked at me a moment, then said, "You're not from around here, are you?"

"I doubt it. Where I come from we don't have walled medieval cities, fire-breathing lizards and great castles taking up the better part of the downtown district..." A castle? How had I missed that one the first time around?

"Whoa! Sit down and relax. You're getting a might hysterical there. Let me think about this a bit. At first I thought you were just another dragon baiter out to tease poor old Glorn. You're a bit old for the sport, if you call it that, but you sure are dressed strangely enough for it."

Dressed strangely? I was wearing a sweater and jeans, and while I doubted I'd be setting any new

fashion trends with the scorched backs, they didn't seem all that strange to me.

"Dragon baiting?" I asked.

"Yeah. It's pretty popular with the rich kids around here. They get dressed up in the most outlandish costumes they can imagine, the more colorful the better. Then they take turns running up and touching Glorn, then running away before he can char them. It's pretty stupid, actually."

"It's not at the top of my list of ways to fill an afternoon," I admitted, "but where are we?"

"You really don't know? Yeah, I see that you don't. Well, this is Cushna. More to the point, you're sitting on top of the walls of Cushna. Pretty soon, we'll both need to be moving along. Our local Count, Clarence, takes a dim view of anyone but his guards roaming around up here."

"Count Clarence of Cushna?" I laughed.

"Watch it, honey. He's very sensitive about his name, the last one to laugh at it where he could hear was publicly tortured. Practice not laughing when you hear his name, especially if you're the type that likes to get drunk."

"Are you one of his guards?" I asked. It seemed likely to me. As she settled back to talk, she had drawn another knife, this one from out of her left boot, to sharpen and hone.

"Me?" she laughed. "You really are from out of town. Maybe they allow women in the guards in the big cities like Hatten and Boriston, but Cushna is strictly the sticks. Here they just want to keep their women bare-foot and pregnant. No, I'm what we call a free-lance agent. What they call a thief or a spy, depending on the job."

"What?" I was aghast.

"Hey, don't look at me like I just grew horns and a tail. It's an honorable profession, even out here. Been in the family for generations. Hey, you're not one of those macho hicks are you? I thought you looked more sophisticated than that or I'd have tossed you back down to Glorn."

"No, no," I protested, trying to assure her. "I supported Women's Lib and the E.R.A. and all that."

"I don't know what 'Women's Lib...and all that' is, but you say it like it's supposed to mean something, so I'll give you the benefit of the doubt as my dad used to say."

"So you're not a guard. What are you doing up here?" I asked.

"Hey, I like the view. What's it to you? Besides the guards only walk their rounds once an hour or so. On the weekends they make it every two or three hours so families can picnic here and enjoy it. Oh yes, they know there're people up here, but so long as they can catch their quota of us each month, they don't mind. Besides, that makes it all the more fun. If you get caught, you have to pay the fine. They get a percentage and that's it. Consider it a form of gambling."

"Ah, what do you use for money around here?"

"Same as anywhere, gold, silver, some bronze. The fine's a standard silver piece, if that's what you're getting at," she said holding up something that looked like a fat quarter. I thought of the U.S. Certified

Grade A coinage in my pocket, not to mention the dead presidents, and gulped. Not so much as a gram of silver in the lot.

"Won't they investigate the noise the dragon was making?"

"Glorn? No. He comes around once a month or so and stays for anything from a day up to a week. He's really quite harmless. They put those huts up just for him to destroy. They're fairly quick and easy to build and he seems to enjoy them so. He hardly ever bothers anyone outside the city unless they bait him. You just got him riled when you bumped into him."

"Oh." I let that sink in. Next time, no bumping into strange dragons. Then it occurred to me that I didn't even know Red's name. "By the way, I'm Robert, Robert Phillip Jones."

"All that? I am impressed, Robby. Glad to meet you, Robert Phillip Jones!" she said sticking out her hand which I accepted, grateful that she was quick enough to realize that I had repeated my first name. As soon as I had said it, I had visions of her calling me "Robert Robert" for the rest of our acquaintance. "I'm called Glaia, that's short for Aglaia, and one name at a time's enough for me."

"Hey, you two, hold it right there!" we heard a voice shout. Turning I saw something from out of a Robin Hood movie and I don't mean that he was wearing green tights and a pointy cap with a feather in it. No Will Scarlet nor Allen a Dale this. Oh, he might have landed the part for Little John, but he obviously never learned how to play politics around Central Casting, because he was still just another extra playing the part of Sheriff's Man At Arms #3.

"Time to scoot, Robby," Glaia said. "Follow me." With that she was running in the opposite direction from the guard. Startled I may have been, but I quickly followed.

We made it all the way around the corner before encountering another guard. I paused when I saw him, but Glaia increased her speed and headed at the guard at full tilt. Without bothering to think - well not thinking had gotten me this far - I did the same. The guard caught Glaia as she tried to force her way by him, but I was too close behind her to stop in time and I ran straight into them. The wind was knocked out of all three of us, but Glaia recovered first.

"C'mon, Robby," she said. "This is our chance."

"Uh?" I articulated.

"Wake up and run!" she screamed. I did my best, really I did, but even as I rose and started to run again, the first guard caught up to us. He might have only been an extra in the movies, but this boy had a Superbowl-class tackle. I was down and out. Somewhere through the haze in my head I heard Glaia say, "Sorry about that, handsome. I'll catch up to you later," and then the world went away for a while.

Chapter 2

It wasn't a very long while, although I could have used the rest. I rejoined the living as the two guards

picked me up to drag me down to the local station house, which was situated by the Western Gate. I was surprised by the gentleness with which the two guards handled me. I wouldn't be crying "police brutality" here. It leant support to what Glaia told me concerning the policing of the wall. They were just doing their jobs, while giving the locals a decent chance to enjoy their free time, I guess. My trouble didn't start until we got to the station house.

I started by trying to imply that I was a local, letting them conclude wrongly that I was a dragon baiter. I think they may even have believed me when I told them the truth about how I got to be on the wall. But, when it came time to pay the fine, they weren't about to make an exception just for me even if Glorn did toss me up there.

So, I decided to brazen it out. Reaching down into my pocket I pulled out every coin I had; four quarters, two dimes, three nickles, and five pennies.

"There," I said, putting the coins down on the desk in front of the captain of the guard. "I don't know your local rate of exchange. Take out whatever will cover the fine."

He looked at the coins for a moment, then he picked one up and dropped it back down, listening to the sound. He picked it up again and inspected it more carefully, especially the edge. Finally he looked back at me.

"Mister," he said, "if you weren't already under arrest, you would be now. Pretty and well made as these are, they are the most obvious counterfeits I have ever seen. Who do you think you're fooling? They're not even made of silver."

"Of course not. They're clad coinage. Much more valuable!" I lied.

"Not around here they ain't," he said. "These are just pieces of copper, maybe bronze, wrapped between two layers of... What do you call this stuff?"

"Nickle, it's very expensive." Always keep your lies consistent, I thought.

"Uh-huh," he wasn't buying any of it. Then I did a really bone-headed stunt. I reached into my wallet and pulled out the largest bill I had.

"Well," I said talking quickly, "if that's not enough, here. This is worth forty of those large coins."

He stared open-mouthed at the finely engraved portrait of Alexander Hamilton for far longer than I would have felt comfortable were he staring at me before saying, "Well I'll be... Look at this, boys. Paper money. If that don't beat all. Mister, the last clown who tried to pass paper money was the Prince of Hatten, over fifteen years ago. His own subjects strung him up for it and the king himself commended them for a job well done. Where the hell are you from?"

Oh well, I never did have much respect for that Hamilton bastard either.

"A long way from here," I said. "I doubt you've ever heard of it."

"Try me."

"Massachusetts." There was a long silence.

"All right. You've got me there," he conceded. "Tell you what. We've made our quota this month anyway and maybe you did get thrown up there by old Glorn. He was out there this morning. I'll let you off with a warning." I would have breathed a sigh of relief, but he continued. "Just show me your passport, so I can officially admit you to Cushna and you can go on your way."

"Passport?" I nearly squeaked.

"Yeah. Show me your passport. All foreigners are required to produce them. What's the matter? Are Massawhosians the only ones in the world without passports? I won't believe that. You'd have never got into the kingdom."

"Uh," I stalled, "I must have left it in my other pants."

"Right. That does it. I don't know who you are, but I was really trying to be decent with you. But I think you're just jerking me around. I won't put up with that. And if, by some chance, you're telling the truth, you're somebody else's problem." He turned to one of the other guards. "Book him!"

Dan'l, or whatever his name was, dragged me over to another desk and ordered me to sit. Not having a chance to get away, I did so. He asked me all the TV cop show questions; name, home address, occupation, etc., etc. I ended up telling him the truth but he didn't believe a word of it.

"Look, buddy," he said. "It don't make no difference to me what you say, but the County Prosecutor, he's gonna have a field day if you keep this up. Don't say I didn't warn you." I stuck to my story, although I avoided the fact that I thought I had somehow popped from one universe to another, or maybe had just skipped merrily up the time line. I didn't want to encounter what ever filled this culture's ecological niche held, where I came from, by psychologists. Sometime during my stay at the guardhouse it occurred to me that I hadn't had to learn a new language here, that the people here were speaking English like natives. Now this was unlikely in the extreme, but I decided not to worry about this, at least for now. For one thing, I'm terrible at foreign languages and because of that am not inclined to look the proverbial gift horse in the oral orifice.

Finally he finished with me and he and another guard escorted me to a waiting carriage. Yep, a genuine, horse-drawn affair straight out of Cinderella, except that this baby was painted black and white and wasn't quite so elaborate as the one in the Disney cartoon, and it had iron bars across the windows. As I was directed into the coach, I wondered whether the red lantern on top could be made to flash. I sat alone inside, noticing that the doors had no handles on my side.

It was a five-minute ride to the castle. I had thought the ride in this coach would be as rough as the one I once had in a re-creation of a Wild West stagecoach, but the designers of this Body-by-Fisher job understood the concept of shock absorbers and didn't hesitate to apply it. Having nothing better to do at the moment I took the time to look at the scenery. It didn't really look like Medieval, now that I had the chance to see it up close. More like an old New England town that just happened to have a wall around it and a castle near its center.

So far the biggest difference between the picture I had of Medieval life and what I encountered here was how clean this city was. I always thought of cleanliness as a modern concept and had visions of the average medieval town as hopelessly filthy with slop and worse being thrown out the windows into the streets with alarming regularity. The stench alone, I thought, would be enough to knock out a bull moose. But Here and Now, where and whenever that was, the air was fresh and clean and every thing looked freshly scrubbed.

The castle was built of some gray granitic stone trimmed with white marble. When I first arrived it had been a sunny day, but it had clouded over while I was in the guardhouse. Now it was raining lightly, the water glistening on the dark gray slate roof of the castle. The coach entered the main courtyard through a large gateway under a standard heraldic iron portcullis, the type you find on the back of a British new penny. We didn't pull up to the large main entrance to the keep but to a smaller side entrance.

As the coach door opened I was met by six armed guards and another man in long, blue, flowing robes. I was instructed to walk between the guards. The man in robes walked behind us. We entered a tight corridor which led to a small, marble-floored room, with several smaller rooms and another corridor attached. I was placed in one of the small rooms and told to wait. The guards and the robed man waited outside and refused to even acknowledge my presence once I was locked in.

The waiting cell was dry, clean, and moderately well furnished. The floor and the lower halves of the walls were the same marble that served as trim on the castle's exterior. That marble, it turned out, was not pure white but had a few light gray veins running through it. The upper half of the room was painted a warm beige. The room was also equipped with a comfortable couch along one wall and a sturdy table with two wooden chairs on either side of it.

I sat down on the couch and waited. After some time, I felt tired and closed my eyes. According to my watch, two and a half hours passed while I blinked. Feeling stiff I got up again and re-examined my surroundings.

On the table stood what I thought, at first, was an electric lamp. I didn't see a power cord so I looked closer. Under the shade was a brightly glowing globe of light. I estimate it was about equal to a 75-watt bulb. The light ball was suspended over the top of the brass pedestal. The light turned on and off at my touch. That didn't surprise me. I've seen that trick before, but I couldn't figure out how the object produced light.

"If you're through playing with the lamp, Mister Jones," said a female voice from the doorway, "perhaps we can work on your defense." I rose to see a young woman dressed in a severe dark-gray robe and carrying a black leather briefcase. Her black hair was tied back in some sort of bun and her two brown eyes were securely hidden behind a pair of thick-lensed glasses.

"I'm your appointed attorney, Mister Jones. My name is Paula Jaine," she introduced herself. "Call me P.J. Shall we sit?" Without waiting for me to respond she put her case on the table and sat down.

"Sure," I said flatly. "Make yourself at home, P.J." I took the other chair.

"I won't kid you, Robert. May I call you Robert?" she asked. I nodded; I've been called worse. "You're in deep trouble. Illegal alien, passing counterfeit money..."

"Not to mention walking on the wall," I said.

"Wall walking?" she looked momentarily confused. "That's not in here. Tell me about it." I did. In fact I proceeded to tell her the whole story, starting with my encounter with the town dragon. "Uh-huh," she said when I was finished. "Tell me, Robert, where are you from?"

I tried the same story about being from a far away land that I did in the guardhouse and got the same results.

"Massawhat?" she asked. I noticed that people here seemed to have the same trouble pronouncing the

name of my home state that the folk back home did. Some things are truly universal.

"Tell the truth, Robert," P.J. continued. "You're from another world, aren't you? Oh, don't look so shocked. It's happened before. Did you think that you were the only one this had ever happened to? It's a well-kept secret, I'll admit, but given how easy it is to get in trouble here if you don't know the rules, one doesn't get to be a lawyer without knowing all about it. We keep it from the common folk and I recommend that you do that too unless you like the idea of being burned as a demon." Suddenly I had this picture in my mind of jogging through Central Park with horns growing out of my temples and a few hundred torch-carrying peasants in close pursuit all screaming for my blood. I shivered, realizing that New York's Finest probably would consider that a routine evening event.

"Will that get me off the hook?" I asked hopefully.

"Probably not. At least not by itself. Ignorance of the law is not a valid excuse, but we might get the Count to be lenient on the basis that you entered this world against your will. Well then, I'll have to speak to the County Prosecutor and see if I can cut some sort of deal with him. I'll be back in a few minutes. Sit tight." She had the guards let her out and I went back to contemplating the walls.

You know, beige can be a very depressing color and marble can look awfully cold. About fifteen minutes later P.J. returned.

"I'm sorry to tell you this, Robert," she said, "but the C.P. won't deal. He thinks he's got you cold and sees no need to let you admit to a lesser offense. All we can do is take our best shot."

I asked, "What are the maximum penalties I face?"

"Well, for illegal alien you can be deported."

"Sounds easy. I haven't been here long enough to get particularly fond of the place."

"And counterfeiting," she continued, "is a capital offense."

"Oops."

"So," she concluded, "If convicted of both crimes you face execution, after which they'll ship your remains out of the county."

"Terrific."

"Mmm," she said uncertainly, "Well get some rest, Robert, I'll see you in court tomorrow morning."

I took another look at that mysterious lamp. No power cord. I lifted it and look at its base. On the bottom was a small friction-fitted hatch. I removed it and found a small cylinder about the size of two D cell batteries stuck together. It fell into my hand and I examined it closely. On the side were printed the words, "Sempeready Light Cell. Guaranteed one year continuous usage." A battery. Just one small problem. The battery was made of some sort of wood - oak I think.

Now that P.J. left, there was nothing much to hold my attention and the closest thing to a stimulating conversation around here would be with myself. So I decided to try taking a nap on the couch.

Twenty minutes later, I still hadn't nodded off, too tense I guess. Finally the door opened and the guards

came in along with that guy in the blue gown. I was instructed to come with them in the same fashion in which I was escorted to the waiting cell.

The cell they brought me to next wasn't quite so nice as the first one. Oh, it was clean enough, that was one constant throughout this whole escapade, but instead of the marble and the magic lights, this one was a dungeon cell - below ground level, rough stone walls, and solid iron bars. For furniture I had a pair of bunk beds, although no room mates, and a stone bench with a hole in it, that served, I guess, as a latrine.

I put in for the Continental Breakfast and a wake-up call at 10:30, but the weak joke got not even so much as a smile. These guys had heard it all.

It was sometime during the middle of the night that I heard some scratching noises from the far wall. Before I could get up to investigate, a large circle on the wall began to glow red and the air got very hot. Suddenly the heat dissipated and in place of the glowing circle, there was a hole in the wall. Jailbreak time! Well, what did you expect? I'm not telling you this tale from the other side. Well, okay, you got me, I am on the other side, but not that way. As I looked at the hole, a familiar face appeared in it.

"Hi, handsome! Did you miss me?"

"Glaia!"

"In the flesh, Robby. Care to take a stroll in the moonlight?" I thought about that for a moment, trying to escape could get me killed. Then I remembered that staying here had a good chance of terminating my health too.

"Sure, let's blow this joint" I replied and crawled through the hole. The other side of the wall was yet another cell, nearly identical to the one I just left, with one major exception. This one's door was open. I started toward that door, but Glaia caught my shirt, spun me around, and gave me a kiss that probably would have aroused me even after my execution. It seemed to last forever, but it ended all too soon to my way of thinking.

"There," she said, "no hard feelings about the way I deserted you, I hope."

"For a kiss like that," I said stunned, but attempting some gallantry nevertheless, "it was worth it. Of course if you want to make up some more..."

"We'll see, Robby," Glaia smiled. "We'll see. For now let's get out of here." She handed me a staff, drew a thin-bladed sword, and led the way out the door.

I was beginning to believe we could get out of the castle unnoticed, but as we took our third turn we stumbled into two guards coming the other way. I suppose that we might, possibly have tried to bluff our way out of this, but in all honesty, we didn't look like janitors. So while the guards tried to react, we pressed our attack. I didn't really know what I was doing, but with Ferd the guard fumbling for his sword, it didn't matter so much. My first, undisciplined blow caused him to drop his sword, and my second sent him on the 12:15 Express to Lalaland. Glaia was just finishing off her opponent with a thrust to his arm and a glancing blow to his helmet. It seemed to do the trick. He went down faster than the proverbial sack of red ceramic rectangular solids.

After that little bit of exercise we managed to leave the castle without further incident. Just outside the castle, Glaia stopped to pick up a small bundle from which she extracted a pair of cloaks.

"Put this on," she said. "I wouldn't want you catching your death, and it'll act as a disguise until we get to the agency, just in case they've started looking for you."

We proceeded at a brisk walk. I thought we should have hugged the shadows, but Glaia told me that would only attract attention from people who would otherwise ignore us. On the other hand, she agreed that I should leave the hood up. Not only would that make it harder for someone to see who I was, but wouldn't be conspicuous since it was cold enough to warrant wearing it that way.

We were barely started on our way when a siren went off in the castle.

"I think they're playing our song," Glaia quipped.

"Nice beat, easy to dance to," I replied, leaving off the tag line.

For half an hour we attempted to set the world record for the fastest nonchalant stroll, frequently ducking out of the way of guard patrols. Glaia said they may not have been looking for us, but why take chances. Finally we arrived at a large wooden building. A sign on the front lawn read simply "Agency." We walked up to the front door and Glaia knocked twice. A large man opened the door. He had graying red hair and a full beard, and might have looked perfectly in place on an Olympic weight lifting team.

"Glaia," he said recognizing her at once, "and who is this?"

"This is Robert Phillip Jones, Norbo," Glaia said. "I'm sponsoring him. He needs asylum."

"Again, Glaia?" Norbo sounded exasperated. "You bring in more strays than any other agent. However, you're also one of our best. Maybe there's some correlation. Oh well, come on in and tell me all about it."

We entered and sat down at a rough wooden table in a medium-sized room just off the front hall of the Agency's house. Norbo brought over three large mugs of a quite acceptable ale, definitely not Bud Lite. While nursing my mug, I told the same story I had to both the guards and to P.J. At more than one point Norbo looked questioningly at Glaia, who usually nodded or shrugged. When I was done, Norbo asked Glaia if we had eaten. When she said we hadn't and I allowed as I really didn't consider prison sausages to be real food, he told us to get something from the kitchen and to wait. He left us there.

"He'll be sending some people out into the town," explained Glaia. "He knows me, but my assessment of you could be wrong. Hey, relax. He'd have to find you out to be a spy of the Count's to turn you in now, and that I know you aren't. Wait here. I'll get us something to eat."

She returned a few minutes later with a large tray which held two plates stacked high with some roast meat, potatoes, and a small salad, and two cups of a red wine. I didn't know who or what the Agency was, but they sure did themselves proud in the cuisine department. When we were finished, Norbo returned.

"Well, you two sure did stir up a hornet's nest tonight," He said. "You, Mister Jones have a hefty price on your head, and you, Glaia, got clumsy and left a scarf with your monogram behind. I've told you more than once to stop wearing those things when you're on a job. We'll have to get you both out of the County as soon as possible."

"How soon can we leave?" Glaia asked.

"Tonight. I'd send you out now but every guardsman in town is out there right now looking for you."

They'll be calling here soon enough, count on it, but we have enough bolt holes to hide you for one day anyway. But eventually they'll be searching with magic and by then you'd better be out of range."

"It's almost dawn now," considered Glaia. "All right. We'll get some rest today and go out tonight as soon as we have full darkness. Where do you recommend we go?"

"Boriston. No, Hatten," Norbo said. Yes, Hatten. By the time you get there we should have laid a false trail. Maybe we'll fake your deaths. That way they won't bother sending out wanted notices, and if they do, you can get lost in the big city."

"Great!" said Glaia, sounding like she meant it. "I haven't been to Hatten in over a year. You'll love it. Great shopping, fantastic food, marvelous shows. Hatten's got it all."

"Better be careful, Glaia," Norbo warned. "These posters of you and Jones are already being put up around the town." He put a broadside down on the table. It had rough sketches of both Glaia and me and the legend, "Wanted, Dead or Alive: 1,000 gold ounces each", our names and a written description of our crimes.

"Terrific," I said, feeling very depressed. "Not here even a full day yet and I'm already on the Most Wanted list."

"Oh, I don't know about that, Robby," said Glaia, "but I like you."

I Do Believe in Witches!

Chapter Three

"Damn!" swore Glaia, storming into the small room.

"What's up?" I asked with concern. Eight hours of sleep had restored some of my natural optimism, especially that regarding my life expectancy. Glaia's displeasure, now that we were preparing to skip town, could not possibly be good news.

"It's going to take forever to get to Hatten," she said. That didn't bother me yet.

"So, what's wrong with that," I asked. "Just getting out of Cushna would satisfy my will to live."

"Look, handsome, do you really feel like spending the next two to three weeks doing your world famous pedestrian act? That's how long it will take to walk to Hatten."

"Oh. Well, I'm new around here. How was I to know?"

"Hmph!"

I was newer around here than I had admitted to Glaia yet. Where I come from, we seem to have an over-dependence on electronic marvels, like micro-computers, and the biggest local pest is your mayor, not the town dragon. However, since arriving on this world, by means that I'm still not aware of, I'd gone hand-to-hand with a fire-breathing dragon. For my trouble, I got arrested for trespassing, counterfeiting, and, of all things, being an illegal alien. That last was easy enough. All I had to do was breath.

I never actually had my day in court because last night, with Glaia's help I escaped the Cushna County Jail. Since then we'd been sitting around the local headquarters of an organization known only as the "Agency."

"Okay, so we're walking to Hatten," I said. "Do we have much choice?"

"Well," Glaia said, "I had hoped we could travel by sea. A few days voyage along the coast would have been pleasant. But Cushna's an unimportant port, and the only ship leaving on tonight's tide is headed north, not south. My alternative plan was to hire a coach to meet us outside the walls and we could travel in style to Hatten. Norbo cancelled that plan. He says it would attract too much attention. He may be right. If we were seen it could botch up his attempt to cover our trail. But at least he should have given us horses. That would get us out of the area in one night. He says that there aren't any horses to spare, but I think this is his way of punishing me for my carelessness. As it is we'll have to hide out tomorrow during the day, 'cause we'll still be in the county."

"Well, when do we leave?"

"Right now. I have a couple of packs ready for us downstairs. It'll be full dark by the time we can get to the door. Oh, here," she said tossing me a bundle. "Put these on, they'll help you fit in. C'mon, Robby, time to move!"

I looked at the bundle. It contained a pair of brown leather trousers with a matching vest, a pair of knee-high boots and a bright yellow shirt. An effective but alarming costume. All I needed was a sword and I'd look like one of the extras in the Pirates of Penzance.

"And," continued Glaia, "by the time you get those on, I'll be back with your sword." Terrific.

I'm no expert on swords, but I would call the blade she returned with a medium heavy rapier with a swept hilt. It's weight and balance felt comfortably good in my hand, although I must admit that the closest I had to experience with such a weapon was a single, abortive fencing lesson back in college. She also gave me a small dagger, mostly for eating with, she told me.

"Very nice," said Glaia when I had belted on the sword. "You ready?" I said that I was and we went down stairs. True to her word, Glaia had two small packs ready with a few basic provisions, a change of clothes and what Glaia referred to as tools of the trade. We put on the black woolen capes we had worn the night before during the jailbreak and headed for the door.

"Well, well," said a jovial voice. "On your way now?"

"No thanks to you, Norbo," Glaia said acidly.

"We went over that already, Glaia," he said sternly. "The best we could do was to send out a couple of pairs of diversionary agents to try to keep the guards off your backs until you jump the gate. Then once you're safely away, we'll arrange for a false trail ending in the river."

"Yeah. Very well. You have that packet for me?"

"Right here." He handed her an oilcloth pouch. "This contains your letter of transfer to the Hatten office as well as other communiqués." Glaia took the pouch and put it in her pack.

"Be careful," Norbo said, "and take care. That guard you skewered died this morning and they've redoubled their search for you. Good luck." Glaia sneered at that last, but I smiled and waved back. Norbo didn't have to give me asylum, nor did he have to cover my trail, but if he hadn't, I'd likely be decorating the highest tree in Count Clarence's courtyard by now. I, at least, was grateful for the help. It occurred to me that I didn't have the faintest idea of who my benefactors were, so I asked as we walked.

According to Glaia, the Agency was a clearinghouse for something vaguely akin to political temp. workers. Their agents hired out to do everything from collecting taxes and providing independent audits of noblemen's books for the Crown, to retrieval of kidnap victims, to spying, sabotage and theft.

However the Agency is not organized crime, except, perhaps, from the point of view of its agents' targets. Imagine a tall office building in Chicago, the one next to the Time-Life building, if you like. Now imagine a large sign on it that says, "Mafia International." Not bloody likely is it? I'm told that this world does have its own version of organized crime. It operates illegally and does not have a public office. In most respects, this world isn't all that different from my own.

Dodging the occasional patrol slowed us down a bit and it took over an hour to get to the wall. As was usual, no guards were there to keep the citizens of Cushna from the stairway to the top. The night was clear and we found several couples strolling in the moonlight.

"Oh great," Glaia grumbled. "We'll have to find a secluded spot on the wall."

"Glaia," I said in a low whisper, "you're the expert, but this seems a bad time to start making out." If truth be told, I found Glaia to be a real turn on, and would have gladly done so in almost any non-life threatening situation.

"Fool," she said looking skyward. "We can't very well climb down the wall in plain sight of everyone else out here. It would attract attention."

"Oh." I was embarrassed, but if it showed, Glaia gave no sign. We walked for a while until there were no couples in sight. Glaia attached our ropes to the wall and we prepared to descend. One of these days I fully intended to either enter or leave a town through the main gate. On the other hand it seemed I was developing a trademark.

"Halt! You two." I think it was the same guard who caught me yesterday afternoon. You know, the guy who looked as though he moonlighted as Little John's stand-in.

"C'mon, Robby," Glaia urged. "Let's scoot!" And with that she swung herself over the side and shimmied down the rope. How did she do that? When I tried the same maneuver, I nearly knocked myself out cold when I slammed into the wall.

Meanwhile, John-boy had caught up to where the ropes were tied and, instead of trying to cut them, he started hauling up on the one I was on. I was still a bit groggy, but this did wonders toward waking me up. Still, by the time I ran out of rope, I was ten feet off the ground and rising. I definitely had lift-off.

"Jump, handsome!" Glaia shouted. Well, I've never been very comfortable regarding heights. Oh, not to the point of a phobia, but if I were to use a parachute, the most thrilling part would probably be standing up after the landing. While I was getting up the nerve to jump, the guard had hauled me up another five feet. Just as I had finally made up my mind to jump, I heard a dull thwack and a cry of pain from above. Suddenly I was doing a fair-dinkum impression of a flying rock. Then, just before hitting the ground, my rope went taut and I was slammed into the wall again.

The next thing I knew, I was staring up at the sky, as Glaia's heavenly body came into view. There was concern on her face and a slingshot in her hand. Good shot, babe.

"Robby, are you all right?" she asked.

"Nothing broken, I hope. Just let me catch my breath and we can run for it." As I spoke a loud siren went off.

"Better catch it on the run, Robby. They're playing our song again." I got up and immediately regretted it. I was dizzy, disoriented, and not a little nauseous, but Glaia put her arm around me and helped me along. After a few minutes I began to feel better and we were able to move faster. All was going well until we ran into Glorn.

Remember Glorn? Tall, dark, scaly, spits napalm with the best of them? You got it! My friend the dragon. Last time I saw him we had just finished a three-minute round without referees that left me on top of the Cushna town wall and left him tip-toeing through the thatched roof tops. Yes, there he was in all his silver-green glory.

"Uh oh," I said with a slight pointing gesture.

"Oh don't worry, Robby," replied Glaia. "I told you Glorn's as gentle as a puppy and almost never bothers people outside of town. He just doesn't like being teased. On the other hand," she said hearing something behind us, "that troop of horsemen coming up the road poses a more immediate threat."

Running, we were a few hundred yards from a thick patch of forest. If we could make it there, the cavalry would have trouble keeping up and we'd have at least an even chance of getting away. Well, horses do run faster than people, and we didn't really have much chance of getting to safety without some sort of diversion.

I have learned that there are times of desperation when all rational thought - all logic - flies away. At these times we do things that, had we the time to consider our actions would not even cross our minds. We wouldn't try them because they have absolutely no chance of working. I think that at such times the difference between surviving and not is that a survivor's no-chance moves work.

In a flash of desperation, or maybe inspiration, I picked up a stick from the ground, turned and shouted, "Yo, Glorn! Here, boy, fetch!" and threw the stick directly at the on-coming horsemen. I should have been dragon-bait, sword-fodder or both. Instead Glorn gave a grunt, saw the stick flying and, with a roar, ran off to fetch it.

Now, imagine if you will, just what this must have looked like to the on-coming guardsmen. One moment they're riding down two relatively helpless people and then, just as they're about to catch their quarry, several tons of hyper-active lizard not only blocks their path, but is enthusiastically closing the gap between them. They scattered. I don't think that was a conscious decision that they made, though. No, the horses did the thinking for them on that maneuver.

Meanwhile, Glaia and I made it to the forest and kept going until we found a place to hide. We stayed there for an hour until all signs of the search for us disappeared.

"Hey," Glaia said. "That was great thinking. How did you know Glorn would chase after the stick?"

"I didn't. I just hoped that if he was as gentle as a puppy, maybe he'd fetch like one too. I figured we had nothing to lose, you know?"

Finally, we got up again and, by dawn, made our way to the far end of the forest. We were about a hundred yards from the woods when we heard a loud earth-shaking thumping noise coming at us from the north. We looked and there was Glorn bearing down on us. Before we could devise a suitable response, he slowed and, a few feet away came to a halt. He opened his mouth and dropped a pike at our feet. Unable to find the stick I threw, he had obviously found a reasonable equivalent.

Glaia recovered from shock before I did. "Good boy, Glorn," she said. "Good boy." Glorn made a contented rumble, then turned and left. She picked up the pike and handed it to me.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"You're the one who told him to fetch. Just be thankful that he didn't bring back a maple. Besides it might make a good walking stick."

"It'll make two or three good walking sticks. Let's cut it down."

"You want to cut up a perfectly good weapon? Why?"

"With what I know about fighting with a pike, it will be just as useful at a six-foot length as at fifteen. Did you pack an axe, or do I have to whittle this down?" She had a small axe in her pack but pointed out that there was a fold-up saw in mine so I used that to cut two six-foot lengths out of the pike shaft. At her insistence I kept the one with the pike head on the end and she took the other.

"Maybe you're right," she conceded. "This will double as both walking stick and quarterstaff."

We spent most of the day walking due west across open terrain without any further encounters. By late afternoon, we came to a road that lead to a small village.

"We'd better just pass on through here," Glaia said. "We're not yet out of the county and if we're seen here, Norbo will have trouble laying a false trail. Keep your hood up until we cross the river." I didn't need encouragement to keep the hood up. It was getting cold and capes have an unfortunate tendency to fly open in the wind. Give me a ski jacket any day.

The river was too wide for a bridge with the technology of Here and Now and, while crossing on the ferry, I briefly considered attempting to make a living by building suspension bridges. Well, I'd worry about that later, like when there wasn't a price on my head.

It was almost dusk when Glaia finally suggested that we set up camp for the night. We'd been up for over twenty-four hours and I for one was exhausted.

"Hey, handsome," Glaia said, "why don't you build a fire while I set up the rest of camp?" I said that was fine and went off to collect firewood, a task that took maybe five minutes there in the middle of the woods.

Some ancient Boy Scout training I'd had about two decades earlier came out of long-term storage as I put the fire together in log-cabin style. No matches. I tried to remember alternative ways to start fires. Flint and steel? I was always pretty good at that. For steel there was any given dagger, but I couldn't find any flint and it was getting dark. How about rubbing two sticks. There was a trick to that, I remembered. You need a soft, non-resinous wood for one stick and a hard wood for the other. Looking through my wood pile, I found what I needed. A fire-drill would have been easier, but I'd once seen a demonstration in which merely rubbing the sticks worked. I tried rubbing the sticks together with varying results. Very shortly, my arms were getting tired and the best I'd achieved were a few wisps of smoke.

"What the heck are you doing?" Glaia asked, startling me.

"Starting a fire?"

"With all that?"

"It was beginning to sound implausible to me too."

"Why don't you just use a simple ignition spell?"

"Spell? Like in magic?"

"What's the matter, Robby, you allergic? Oh, let me do it." With that she produced a piece of flint from her pouch and drew her dagger. She muttered a few words, put the flint and the dagger together and pointed at the woodpile. Instantly, the pile of wood burst into flame.

"You're a witch!" I exclaimed.

"Watch your mouth! I may hire out on the occasional spy and theft job, but my magic is pure white."

"But the fire! Magic! You cast a spell!" I blurted out.

"Right, I cast a spell. A common, everyday, household spell. Just like my mom taught me."

"You mean anyone can do that?"

"Well, some people are stronger with magic power than others, just like some can lift heavier weights than others. But a simple spell like that? Anyone can start a fire, if they learn the spell."

"Magic?"

"Welcome to the real world, Robby."

I thought about that for a moment. Well, why not? I'd already accepted the existence of a dragon, and the fact that regardless of where and when I was, this wasn't my world. Why not magic? I looked again at the fire. It was warm and comforting. Wait a minute, what was that about the "real world"?

"Glaia, I guess it's about time I told you the truth. I'm not merely from a distant land. As far as I can tell, I'm from another world altogether."

"Yeah, I know."

"You know?"

"Yeah, the Agency deals with newcomers all the time. We find places you can fit in, often within the Agency itself. In fact the Agency was originally founded about one hundred eighty years ago by a newcomer."

"Why didn't you say something before?"

"Agency policy. We always wait for the newcomer to present himself to us as a newcomer. Until then we treat newcomers like natives, although we do help them in any number of ways. Your lawyer, for example."

"P.J? What about her?" I asked

"She's part of the Agency. When you were arrested, I asked her to help out. She knew I intended to break you out on my own, but if that plan had gone awry, she was there to try and get you off legally," Glaia replied.

"Then what was all that with the fire? You knew I'd have trouble with it."

"Well, there's no rule against hurrying things along. Besides, I've never seen anyone light a fire without either an ember or magic before. I was curious as to what you'd do. What was that with the sticks?"

I explained the theory behind rubbing two sticks. "Actually, if I knew you were carrying flint, I would have asked to use it."

"Oh? Then you do know that spell."

"No, but you can create a spark by striking flint and steel together." She tried it.

"Hey! That's neat. I wonder if the spell would work with your sticks." I built a small fireplace for her and she went through her spell, substituting the two sticks for the flint and dagger. It worked, sort of. The small fire did burst into flame but so did the ends of the two sticks.

"Whoa!" Glaia said. "That sure takes a lot out of one. Tell me, does it take more energy to make a fire with two sticks than with flint and steel?" I said that it did. "Well, that explains that. These simple spells take as much energy out of you as doing the job by hand. It just goes faster is all. More advanced spells require you to tap into external energy sources, but that takes years of training to do safely. Still if I'm ever stuck without flint and steel, it's good to know I can light a fire with wood."

"Why did it work? I'd have thought that a spell requiring flint and steel would fail with wood."

"Depends on the spell. This one merely draws on the fire-making properties of the objects the caster holds. Shh!"

"What..."

Glaia, whipped out the two daggers from her boots and threw them into the darkening woods.

"Dinnertime!" she said following her knives. "Damn! I missed one. I must be more tired than I thought." She came back a minute later with a rabbit. She quickly gutted the critter and spitted it on a stick to cook over the fire. While it was cooking we used our capes to form a makeshift shelter over the bedrolls that Glaia had set up for us.

After dinner we were both too tired to stay awake. I had hoped that we might sleep together, but in spite of Glaia's flirtatiousness, she was pickier about her bedtime partners. On the other hand, we were both too tired anyway.

We broke camp the next morning after a breakfast of some of Glaia's travel rations. After the rabbit, I didn't find them particularly appealing, but then they were no worse than the average Big Mac.

Our second day of travel was less eventful than the first. Our morning was spent walking along the road, occasionally ducking into the brush to avoid what might be guard patrols. I think that, maybe twice, they actually were patrols. Around noon we left the road again and traveled several miles cross-country in order to avoid the guard station at the county border.

It was mid-autumn Here and Now, just like back home. My favorite time of year. I was glad I hadn't missed it in the move. The foliage was in full blaze, although here and there I spotted an incongruous silver colored tree. I asked about that. Silver maples and oaks. They sure didn't look like their namesakes back home. Glaia told me that through most of the growing season their leaves were an ordinary green, but when the weather became cold, instead of the more familiar golden yellows, reds, and browns, they turned silver. I examined one as we passed beneath a silver maple. In spite of its appearance, it was not metallic, just an odd-colored leaf. I nearly blinded myself when the leaf reflected the sunlight in my face and before throwing the leaf away I noted that it was totally opaque.

Now that we were out of Cushna County, we tried to hitch a ride on a passing wagon once we got back to the road. However, hitchhiking was not a common practice here and most of the wagon-driving teamsters sneered at our requests. One, thinking we were robbers with some new scam, threatened to shoot us with a small arbalest. The fact that he could, at best, only get one of us before the other got him, didn't occur to him or to us. We were just looking for a ride. Sunset found us setting up camp well off the road again.

"As far as I know," Glaia said, "there aren't any inns between here and Gansett, so we'll have to camp out again. Tomorrow night, however, I promise you, we'll have real beds and food prepared by someone else. If you like, maybe we'll go out dancing or take in a show. Gansett's a big town, not like Cushna."

I set up a shelter like the one we made the night before and built a fireplace while Glaia hunted for some fresh food. She returned half an hour later with an already cleaned pheasant and some mushrooms that she assured me were edible.

"Glaia," I said, "how about showing me that fire spell, the one you said was so simple."

"Well, it's not so simple that it doesn't take a lot of practice. Still, you have to start somewhere, if you're going to start at all, and that was one of the first spells my mom taught me. Okay, sure." She brought her flint from out of its small belt pouch. "Now hold that in one hand," she instructed me, "and put a piece of steel in the other. Your dagger will do, just make sure that you're touching part of the blade." That part was easy enough. I just looped my index finger over and around the cross guard, putting the inner surface of the finger in contact with the lower blade. "Next, imagine the fire you want to ignite. Think about the wood burning. This is very important. You must keep in mind exactly what you want to do and don't get distracted. If your intent doesn't match the incantation, it won't work. At least it won't if you're lucky."

"If I'm lucky? And if I'm not so lucky?"

"Don't ask. Do you have the fire firmly in mind?" I did. "Keep the image of your fire firmly in mind and recite this incantation: 'Tsamah ootah abarsh.'" She said all three words with an odd accent and that last word was said on a rising inflection, making the nonsense syllables sound like a question.

I paused so that I would be able to say the words with a straight face and get them right all at once. I took a deep breath and, with a clear picture in my mind of a roaring fire, I said the words. Suddenly, I felt a surge of energy collect from within me and flow into my arms. As I saw Glaia do last night, I brought the flint and dagger together and pointed at the fireplace. With that, the power that had flowed into my arms suddenly flowed out through the flint and steel. I didn't see a blazingly red bolt of energy shoot towards the fire last night, but I did now. The caster can always see the flow of power from his own spell, but only a true master of the art can see the flow of magical power regardless of who cast it.

The pile of wood in the fireplace burst into flame and the flames reached ten feet high and burned as hot as though I had poured gasoline on the fire. Glaia and I both dived back from the conflagration and covered our eyes as best we could on such short notice. Fifteen seconds later, the fire had burned out and in the fire pit was a layer of white ashes.

When the spots in front of our eyes faded, we stared at the rapidly cooling fire pit. Its sides were glazed and crackle-finished, continuing to crackle as we watched. I looked at Glaia and caught her gaping at me open-mouthed.

"This sort of thing happens all the time, right?" I asked.

She shook her head. "How are you feeling? Tired?"

"Oh, not too bad. Not much more than I did before. My arms are a little sore."

"Your arms are a little sore. What kind of fire did you imagine? All of Hatten ablaze?"

"No, just a nice comfortable fire, like the one you lit last night. Guess I overdid it."

"You overdid it all right. Robby, I was showing off last night. Most people couldn't start a fire that big. Just a few flames that they can fan into a full blaze. I don't think I could do what you just did with that spell. It really is a common household spell. You've got a lot of power there, handsome."

"That's good, right?"

"Not unless you can get some control over it. Until then you're dangerous. That's the real key to magic, to life really, control. Well, we still need something to cook on. Try again."

Once more, I laid the wood into the fire pit. This time I envisioned a far smaller fire, just a few flames among the kindling. Then, concentrating on this image, with flint and steel in hand I performed the spell again.

This time the fire was, indeed, smaller but no less intense. In a second the kindling had burned down to ash, but it had burned so quickly that the heavier pieces had not ignited.

"Robby," said Glaia, "I think you're concentrating too hard. Relax a bit. Don't try to put everything into it."

I nodded and tried again. This time, I didn't bother with the kindling, but envisioned the fire the same way I did the first time, encompassing all the wood. As I performed the spell, I tried to put less energy into it. The difference was sort of like lifting ten pounds instead of fifty. The action was essentially the same, but the latter required far more exertion.

Perhaps I was a bit too relaxed. The wood got hot but did not actually burn this time. I was beginning to feel tired now but at Glaia's insistence I tried again. I tried concentrating a little harder and was rewarded by a sudden burst of flame from all the logs at once.

"Now that's more like it, Robby!" Glaia encouraged me. "Are you all right?"

"I'm very tired, and rather dizzy as well."

"Don't worry, that's natural. Just sit here while I cook dinner. You'll be feeling better in a few minutes."

She was right. By the time the food was ready, I was feeling much better. It started to rain softly as we ate and we moved under the shelter. By the time we were finished it was raining harder and only the water-resistance of our capes was keeping us vaguely dry. Soon the last vestiges of our fire had gone out and without light there was nothing left but to get some sleep.

Glaia continued to resist my advances. As I lay there listening to the rain, I remembered that Norbo had said that she brought in more strays to the Agency than any other agent. Perhaps that was it. To her I was just another stray. As I thought this depressing thought, I heard her shift her bedding closer.

"It's cold, Robby, you know?" she said, and we spent the night sleeping back-to-back. Oh well, better than nothing, I suppose.

The night was wet, but with the dawn came even more rain. There are many things more depressing than breaking camp in the rain, but I don't experience them willingly either. I think the worst part of the whole procedure was putting the wet cloaks on after we were done. Glaia said that starting a fire in the pit now would likely cause a small steam explosion, so we breakfasted on apples and beef jerky. Not the breakfast of champions.

Trudging along the road was pretty much as it was the day before, except that this time the passing wagons splashed mud at us with unerring accuracy. Finally, around noon, we came to the outskirts of Gansett.

Chapter Five

Like Cushna, Gansett had city walls, but it had so out-grown the restrictions of such walls that over the half the city was outside those walls. Walled cities and towns here are a hold-over from an earlier time over a century ago, a time when there was no king over the various counties, duchies, baronies, and so on that made up this land of Gonquin. It was a period of internecine warfare known as the Interregnum. However, since the reestablishment of the Monarchy, Gonquin experienced relative peace and prosperity, and city walls were a picturesque bit of history, usually. Of course, in Cushna they kept Glorn out of the town, but dragons were not very common and there were other ways to handle them.

The Agency house in Gansett was just inside the west-side wall. It was larger than the one in Cushna, which was a mansion by my standards. This one was a Medieval-Victorian hybrid version of a five-story office building. It had a front lobby that forcibly reminded me of a hotel. This impression was reinforced when we registered at the front desk.

Just as Gansett was larger than Cushna, so, too, were the operations of the Agency. In Cushna we were met at the door by Norbo, the resident chief agent. In Gansett, we had to make an appointment. Thankfully, we had time to get a hot bath and dry clothes before we met Gansett's chief agent.

Glaia left me at my room, which adjoined hers. Normally I preferred to shower, but after the cold, soaking rain, a prolonged soak in a large tub suited me just fine. I was surprised to find that Here and Now ran to running hot and cold water. I'd seen no evidence of that in Cushna but perhaps that innovation hadn't made it to the sticks yet.

The change of clothing Glaia ordered for me was nearly identical to what I wore on the trip from Cushna except that there were several shirts to choose from. I'd gotten tired of yellow and put on a green shirt. It was a bit bright to my taste, but then they all were. I didn't know whether this was a cultural preference in clothing or just Glaia's. Since we were planning to stay indoors for a while, however, I left the sword out of the ensemble.

"Hey, handsome!" said Glaia from the adjoining door. "Ready for lunch?"

"Lunch? Why it's nearly," I checked my watch, "3:00 P.M. Maybe we should wait until dinnertime already."

"Well, I'm starving. Let's get a quick bite now and a real meal later." I agreed and we went downstairs to the Agency's tavern.

The tavern was a standard feature in any Agency house. In Cushna it had been self-service. Here there were waiters and waitresses. Our waitress greeted us with a cheerful, "Hi, neighbors" and handed us a pair of menus. I looked at a printed menu. This place seemed more civilized by the minute. A favorite light snack here was a form of open-faced sandwich. Glaia ordered one with roast beef and a pint of the local ale, a pale yellow brew, it turned out, with a thin taste. I, on the other hand, ordered the closest approximation I could find to a Rueben and a pint of the same ale Glaia ordered.

"What is that thing on your wrist?" Glaia asked me while we were waiting for our food. I explained the watch. It was a fairly standard cheap digital job with LCD readout, two time zones, countdown timer, stopwatch, alarm, and a pedometer. She took that in stride and asked how it worked. How do you explain electricity to someone who never heard of it? Well, I took my best shot, but she saw it in terms of

the same magic power in which she had recently given me instruction.

"No, no," I said patiently, "It's a different sort of power. You can't control it by force of will and incantation."

"Have you ever tried?" she countered. Well, she had me there. We agreed to postpone the debate until I had learned more about Here and Now magic. Maybe then we could decide with facts on our sides. She asked me more about the watch. She had no trouble with the concept of a battery. I remembered the oaken cylinder I had taken from the lamp and brought it out of my belt pouch. She recognized it for a battery at once. "Yeah, like that," she said. "Where'd you get that?"

"In the waiting cell in Cushna. It was in a lamp. I'd never seen a wooden battery before. How does it work?"

"It's fairly simple in theory, although you need an experienced caster to do it. First, you need to cast a holding spell on some sort of container. Oak works well on non-destructive spells. More powerful spells need stronger containers like stone. Anyway, once you've made a container, you can cast any spell you want into it. In the case of this one, it was a year supply of light spells. Finally, once you've charged the container, you cast a spell that allows for a release from the container. Once again, in this case it releases the spell at a controlled rate subject to a switch spell, which was part of the lamp you took this from. How do your batteries work?"

Our snack arrived just then and while we ate, I described the basic theory behind an electric battery. While she had trouble differentiating electricity from magic, Glaia had no trouble following my explanation of electric batteries. "There are some substances here," she said, "that hold an innate amount of magic power. Certain devices can be made to release that power." My descriptions of wet and dry cells sounded to her like the same sort of device. When we were finished, it was time to meet the resident chief agent.

Norbo must have had an office somewhere, but his style was more that of the jolly innkeeper. He met people at the door and sent them on their way likewise. Here the style was more like what I would expect from a big city executive. We went to the chief's office and were detained by a secretary who after a few moments in the chief's office returned and told us to go on in. This impersonal approach evaporated as we entered.

"Glaia, dear cousin!" said a handsome lady in her mid-forties. "What brings you to Gansett?"

"Just passing through, Aline," Glaia replied, taking out the oilcloth packet Norbo had given her. "We're on our way to Hatten. These are our orders, and I believe I have a communiqué for you in here somewhere." She found the described documents and handed them over.

Aline took them and quickly scanned their contents. She handed our traveling papers back to Glaia and, cocking her head slightly in my direction, looked inquiringly at Glaia, who nodded in turn.

"Mr. Jones," Aline said, "Welcome to Gansett and to Gonquin. Any idea what you plan to do here?"

I suspected this was a more serious question than it sounded but decided to play it on the surface level. "I'm still looking around the place and learning the ropes."

"All right," Aline replied calmly. "So, what can I do for the two of you, or is this purely a social call?"

"Mostly social," said Glaia, "but if you could arrange some better transportation for us than Norbo was able to, my feet would appreciate it."

"I might be able to help out," Aline nodded, "if you could do me a favor first."

"Uh oh!" Glaia said. "I know that tone. What bit of dirty work do you have this time?"

"Maybe nothing. We received a report this morning of a witch about ten miles north of here. It seems that she's been annoying the Fay colony up there."

"The Fairies usually take care of themselves. Why'd they come calling for help this time?"

"I don't know. That's why I need someone to go take a look. You're good, Glaia. As good or better than anyone I have here. Certainly better than anyone I have available at the moment. Do this little chore for me and I'll arrange the best transport available for you."

"Okay. What, exactly, do you want me to do?" Glaia asked.

"Go up and take a look at the situation. If she isn't a witch, find out why the Fay say she is. If she really is a witch, handle her, if you think you can. Otherwise come back for reinforcements. In any case don't take any unnecessary chances."

"What about Robby here?"

"You know the rules, Glaia. No non-Agency personnel on an assignment - unless he cares to join up." Aline left that hanging and they both looked at me.

"Hey," I stalled, "I'm new here. I don't know enough about the Agency to judge what I'd be getting myself into."

"Very reasonable, Mr. Jones," Aline told me. "Would you be willing to join on a temporary basis? Say for the duration of this mission?"

"Don't let her kid you, Robby," Glaia put in. "Anyone can resign from the Agency without prejudice regardless of length of tenure. We don't have term contracts. It's all piecework. We're essentially free agents, honor-bound to complete any mission we take, if we can, but nothing says we have to take a mission."

"Then what's all this about you transferring to Hatten?"

"One needs a local office to work out of. The Agency lets an agent know where the best likelihood of a steady flow of jobs is. You don't have to go, but if you stick around a crowded office the work can get real scarce."

"Mr. Jones," Aline said, "you'll be doing me a real favor if you'll take the job with Glaia. As I said, she is good, but she can be a bit reckless when she doesn't have a partner."

"Hey!" objected Glaia.

"Stop that, Aglaia," Aline admonished her. "You know it's true. Besides, you already implied you wanted him to go along anyway."

"Very well," I said before Glaia could get in a reply. "I'll give it a try. I need a way to make a living here anyway. Where do I sign?"

"That won't be necessary," Aline assured me. "As Glaia told you, being an agent is strictly up to you. We just find you the work if you're qualified and if you're available."

"One more thing, cousin," Glaia said. "Transport for the two of us is fine for my fee, but Robby's going to need some spending money. If his change was turned down as counterfeit in a hole like Cushna, you can just imagine how fast they'd spot it in Hatten."

"No problem. I'll pay him the value of transport for two to Hatten. Will that suit you?"

"It'll do," Glaia said warily.

"Done then. Take what you need from stores and spend the rest of the day preparing. You can leave in the morning. Thanks, Glaia. I won't forget this." She handed us a small packet with a map and general instructions, and we all went through the usual parting statements before Glaia and I left Aline's office.

"Robby," Glaia said, "why don't you go rest in your room while I make the arrangements. I'll be back around dinnertime. We'll go out then, okay?" I was feeling a bit tired and a nap sounded fine by me so I went back to my room and fell asleep on hitting the bed.

Dinner was fine. Glaia, as ever, was pleasant company. We went out and stumbled into a block party not too far from the Agency and eventually returned to get some sleep.

Chapter Six

Now, however, we were on the road again, this time heading north. While we were in town the rain had stopped for all of half a day, but no sooner did we return to our careers as professional pedestrians, then it picked up where it left off. After three miles we had to leave the road to follow a winding footpath that the Agency's map assured us would eventually lead to the alleged witch's cottage. The path followed land contours and must have doubled the actual distance we needed to travel. On the way we passed several small houses and groups of houses. Glaia said that they were hunting lodges, the local game keeper's cottage and farmers' houses. Not everyone lived in the city, and those who did and were well off, often built a second home out in the sticks, along the ocean and lakeshores and other pleasant, non-urban environs.

It was nearly dark by the time we found the cottage we were looking for. It was a small, one-floor, wooden building with a thatched roof and shuttered windows.

"Robby," Glaia suggested, "we're going to need to observe this place for a while. Let's move back into the woods and set up camp."

We found a small clearing in the midst of extremely dense woods. Dense enough to cover the visible

traces of a small fire, if we could find enough dry wood to start one with. We found some vaguely dry wood by stripping off the bark from various dead tree limbs and some logs on the ground but we still needed something for kindling.

"How about carving this up," I said holding up the light battery.

"Are you crazy? If you break the containment spell, it will release the entire light spell at once. No telling what that would do."

"Sorry. I just thought it might negate the spell, and not having a lamp to put it in anyway..."

"All right. Just remember that any magic can be dangerous, even an innocuous light spell when taken in large quantities. However, you have reminded me that we can carve up one of these drier pieces of wood. The wood inside should be dry enough to light." A few minutes later she had the fireplace prepared. "There, light it up."

One of the items she acquired for the trip was a piece of flint for me. I pulled that out now and, remembering my lesson of the night before last, lit the fire on the first attempt.

"Very good!" Glaia commended me. "We might just make a wizard of you yet."

"A wizard? Really?"

"Well, it would take years and years of training, but you've picked this spell up very quickly. Don't let it go to your head, though. You won't have even this elementary spell mastered until you can do it in your sleep. Here, let me put a control on that fire." She cast another spell that I couldn't catch and the fire burned darker and not as warm as before. "There, that will help keep it from detection and it will burn longer that way too. We just want the fire for warmth, anyway. I think we'll do without cooking tonight. No time for hunting. We've got to put that cottage under surveillance."

Glaia said that her control spell would also keep the fire burning smokelessly and prevent it from spreading beyond the bounds of the fireplace. So, tossing all my Boy Scout training in regards to fire safety away, I followed her to the edge of the woods where we could keep an eye on the cottage. We ate the same sort of travel rations that we had on the trip from Cushna. I was really getting to hate that particular cuisine.

Staking out the cottage was on my personal top ten list of boring activities, right below, or is that right above, counting grains of sand on a beach. There was a light on in the house. We could see it through the shutters for a while and then it went out and stayed out. After an hour, I suggested to Glaia that she go take a nap for a few hours. I'd come wake her up if something happened or when it was her turn to watch, whichever came first. It was a long and uneventful night; let's just let it go at that.

I woke an hour after dawn and went to join Glaia at our watching place in time to see a little old lady come out of the house. She went to a well to draw some water and then returned to the house.

"She certainly seems ordinary," I said softly.

"Mmm," Glaia agreed. "This isn't what I expected to find at all. Still, appearances are usually deceiving. If nothing happens today, we can always try the blunt approach this afternoon and just walk up and talk to her. You hungry?" I was. "Wait here, I'll get something to eat." With that she left quietly. Half an hour later nothing else had happened back at the cottage when Glaia returned with some hot biscuits

pre-spread with strawberry jam and two mugs of tea. We were just polishing off the tea when we heard a buzzing sound to the north rapidly growing in intensity.

"Action, at last," Glaia whispered. We didn't have long to wait. Two winged humanoids flew into the clearing and started circling the house. One was a male. At first I thought he was bald but then realized that he must have shaved his head as a light blond stubble was faintly visible on his scalp. The other, a female, had very long, jet-black hair but only growing from the top of her head, the rest also having been shaved off. Both had long, slender, pointed ears and wore studded leather jerkins and trousers of rough blue cloth.

"Come on out and play, old woman!" shouted the male.

"Be gone!" came a frail voice from inside. "Leave me alone!"

"No." taunted the female, laughing maliciously. "We want to play with you like you did with Franz!" They circled a few more times and then the female conjured and threw a ball of fire at the thatched roof of the cottage. It caught on fire immediately.

"Good shot, Greta!" shouted the male.

The roof burned for all of five seconds and then the flames were extinguished. The male threw another spell at the house and it started to shake.

"Way to go, Hans!" Greta shouted.

The walls were beginning to crack when a blue aura seemed to envelope the house and the shaking stopped.

I leaned over to Glaia and asked softly, "How advanced is this stuff?"

"Very," she replied. "The Fay are naturally adept at their own form of magic, but that old lady is no slouch either. These are adolescent fairies, I think."

"You think?"

"I can't be absolutely certain. They look the same outwardly from adolescence until their old age, around fifteen centuries."

"I always thought they were supposed to be immortal."

"Robby, nobody is immortal except the gods, and maybe not even them. The Fay just seem immortal because they live so long."

"So why do you think they're young?"

"The way they're dressed and their hair style, or lack of it. I hear this is a new fad among the young Fay. A new militant look. They feel that their people have had a weak image for too long and now they want to change all that. They claim that they are a superior race and I hear that some want to subjugate all others, but that is only hearsay. Besides their elders do not agree with this new attitude and have been keeping the youngsters under their discipline."

"Looks to me," I said, "like they haven't been all that successful."

"You could be right. This is clearly a case of two young hooligans harassing an old woman. Good thing she isn't quite defenseless. I think we ought to pay a visit to their village Elder." We backed off and made our way through the woods until we found the path well north of the cottage. We only had to walk a couple of miles until we sighted the Fay village.

"Robby, wait here in the bushes," Glaia instructed me. "Here's the map. If for some reason I don't come back in an hour, find your way back to Gansett and get help. Understand?"

"Yes, but..."

"No buts. There's always a chance I could be walking into a trap. I doubt it, but you never know. The Agency always takes care of it's own. If the Fay won't let me go, Aline will send in some real heavies. Got it?" I nodded. She gave me a quick kiss and I felt the same electricity run through me that I did that time in the Cushna jail. Then she pushed me gently into the bushes and continued on into the village. It was almost an hour later when she returned.

"Come on out, Robby," she called. "I'll tell you all about it on the way back to camp." I joined her and she talked as we returned. "I walked in as the representative of the Agency that they requested. That was safe enough I figured, but with Fairies you never know. That's why I left you behind. Turns out I was right. I told the Elder what I saw with Hans and Greta. He says they were the ones who came with the claims of witchcraft. Evidently one of their friends was seriously wounded by Goodie Harla, the alleged witch.

"Anyway, the Elder says that Hans and Greta have always been a bit wild, but he can't believe that they would attack an innocent. I tried to get him to send an observer of some sort to watch them, but he wouldn't hear of it. Distrust of their own goes against their instincts. We'll need hard proof to get their help. Tomorrow morning we'll try talking to Goodie Harla. Maybe her side of the story will help us."

On the way back, Glaia managed to get a rabbit that ran across the path so we had some fresh meat for dinner along with rewarmed biscuits and more of the tea we had brought. This time we didn't watch the cottage, being fairly certain that there wasn't much to see. When we had passed it, the blue aura still enveloped it.

In the morning we finished off the last of the biscuits and yet more of the tea.

"I am really beginning to miss coffee," I complained.

"Sorry," Glaia said. "I don't usually drink coffee, so it didn't occur to me to bring any."

"You have coffee here?"

"In Gonquin? Yes. It's too cold to actually grow here, but we import it from down south. The tea, too. I'll remember to pack coffee for you next time." Maybe there was hope for this world yet.

After breakfast, we approached the cottage cautiously. The aura was gone now and the door was slightly ajar.

"Hello in there!" Glaia called.

"Be gone, foul creatures!" came the reply.

"Goody Harla! My name is Glaia. I'm from the Agency. May we talk?"

"Be gone!," Goody Harla repeated. "You'll not fool me again. Be gone!"

"Goody Harla, look at us! Do we look like fairies?"

"This is your last chance. Get out of my life!"

"Goody Harla!" Glaia tried one last time. The ground began to shake and I felt an odd chill run through me. "Damn!" said Glaia and we started backing off.

We were at the edge of the woods when the ground split open and something that looked like Satan's sister came out. She was big, nearly thirty feet tall, bright red, and completely naked. But Playboy wouldn't be featuring this horror - Hustler maybe. Her very presence seemed to embody everything obscene. and not even the American Civil Liberties Union would be able to find any socially redeeming value in her.

"Run!" Glaia screamed. "By all that's holy, run!" We ran, crashing madly through the woods. Behind us we heard the crashing of the demoness as she effortlessly strolled through the forest chasing us.

"Glaia," I said, breathing heavily as we ran, "maybe we should split up."

"Good idea. If you lose her circle back to our camp. If I don't come back in a day get help in Gansett. I'll do the same. Now, split!" We separated, Glaia going off to my left while I veered off to the right. At first I thought we might both be getting away as the demoness had stopped moving. However she was soon moving again and, after a minute, it became obvious that she was tracking me.

I was a far cry from a Marathon runner. As a matter of fact, I'm more than just a little overweight, and had long since dismissed Glaia calling me "Handsome" as merely her way, so I was rapidly running out of steam. I needed some way to defend myself and fast. Somehow I doubted that my sword was going to do much good against this monster. Even if it could cause damage, I'd be more likely to just make her angry. Then I got another one of those no-chance ideas that shouldn't work, but in my hopeless situation it was worth a shot.

As I ran at an increasingly decelerating pace, I started breaking branches off as I passed. After quickly examining and discarding several I found what I needed. The demoness was getting close and I was going to need a clearing - a fair-sized clearing.

Finally, with Big Bertha only fifty feet behind me, practically within her reach, I blundered into a clearing. As I stumbled across it I reached into my pouch to find the oaken battery. At the far end of the clearing I turned and faced the demoness and, with a clear image of what I intended in my mind, shouted the words, "Tsamah ootah abarsh!" I brought the soft wood stick together with the hard wooden battery and with all the concentration I could muster directed the energy that the spell released at the approaching demoness.

Even through my closed and averted eyes, the light was almost blinding and the heat was nearly unbearable. The demoness howled in pain with an intensity that left an impression on my soul. I threw the two pieces of burning wood from my hands with my last bit of physical energy and blacked out with the demoness' scream in my ears.

Chapter Seven

The next thing I knew, it was late afternoon. I felt like I was suffering from a severe sunburn on my arms and face. Checking, I was surprised to find that I hadn't burned off my hair and beard although I had lost the hair on my hands and forearms. I looked at where I had last seen the demoness and saw a large pile of red ashes. I'd have to ask Glaia about that. Now that I had the time to consider it, I would have thought that a demon would be impervious to heat. On the other hand, maybe I shouldn't question my good luck.

Where was I? I had been running blindly and to my right. I remembered crossing the footpath we had traveled to the cottage, so I tried heading back in that general direction and found that was only twenty feet or so from where I started. I followed it until I could find our camp and went there expecting to find Glaia.

She wasn't there.

I looked around, trying to determine whether she had been there. As far as I could tell she hadn't. I went to where we had kept the house under surveillance, hoping that she'd be there. She wasn't.

Could there have been two demons? Was Glaia, even now, not much more than a pile of hamburger? My blood ran cold at the thought.

I watched the house for an hour but there were no signs of life within. Eventually I returned to our camp. I didn't dare build a fire that night. The witch's cottage, and I had no doubts that she was - indeed - a witch, was down wind and, without Glaia's control spell, the smoke would be both seen and smelled.

I got very little sleep that night. First and foremost I was worried about Glaia, and second it got very cold, and what little time I didn't spend worrying I spent shivering. I must have dozed off sometime, for I woke up not long after dawn to find a heavy coat of frost on the ground. Still no Glaia.

It's strange how you can get used to someone so quickly. When I thought about it I had really only known her for a few days, but in that short time I'd managed to fall in love. She was the first person I'd met in this strange world, and it was due to her personality that up until now I'd not even bothered to think about going home. She'd told me to go back to Gansett if she didn't show within a day, but I couldn't leave her. Not just yet. I'd give her until nightfall and, while waiting, I'd keep an eye on the witch. On Glaia's account, at least, I had a score to settle.

I didn't have long to wait. An hour after I got to the watching post, I heard the now familiar buzzing of fairy wings approaching. Just like two days earlier, Hans and Greta flew in and circled the house, only this time they were joined by a dozen others, all dressed in the same style that Glaia said marked them as teenagers. After one orbit about the cottage, they came to a halt in midair maintaining an evenly spaced circle.

Then Hans called out, "This is your last chance, old woman. Come with us to stand trial by our law or suffer your fate here and now! We have your servant and will burn her tonight if you won't submit." The witch's servant? Could they mean Glaia? Maybe not, but she hadn't shown up back here yet and we

hadn't observed any servants around the witch's cottage.

The house was once again enveloped by the protective blue aura. In response the Fay began to sing. It was not a pretty song, more a single sinister chord that shattered the blue aura and caused the house itself to age decades in seconds. Soon there was nothing left but a pile of dust.

"The witch is dead," proclaimed Greta. "At dusk we shall celebrate, and at midnight the witch's servant will be tried at the stake!" The Fay cheered and buzzed back to the north.

I returned to the campsite and gathered up all the tools and supplies and moved them to the clearing that held the remains of the demoness. That clearing was closer to the road, and I had no intention of returning to our campsite no matter how tonight went. Inspecting our packs I pulled out enough food to keep me and Glaia going for a day or two. The rest of our supplies would only weigh me down. I put Glaia's cape in the one packed with the food and left the rest behind in the other pack.

With all that taken care of, I headed for the Fairy village. I didn't know for certain that Glaia was there but it was the best place to start.

I didn't get a good look at the village last time. The Fay live much closer to nature than humans do. Their dwellings are some sort of plant that I have never seen before. They grow out circular and hollow and seem to average about ten to twelve feet across. Each, well call them houseplants, has a door in it that opens for a fairy as it approaches. I think that part is magic, but it looked as automatic as the electric door at your local supermarket. The Fay in this village planted their houseplants around a central green area.

This afternoon, a large pile of wood was being built up in the center of the green and a large log stuck up from within the pile. I knew this for the stake at which they planned to "try" Glaia. Not being a fan of trial by fire I kept looking for Glaia. She wasn't out in the open, so staying just out of sight in the bushes at the edge of the village, I started listening to groups of fairies.

Over the next few hours I must have circled the village three times. Take it from me, eavesdropping on fairies is not only hard to do - their village has a lot of open space and there are few places to hide - but usually unproductive. At dusk the Fay gathered in the green and started a long and involved dance around the pyre.

As it got darker I was able to slip out of the woods and skulk through the outskirts of the village. Finally I got my break. I was just around the curve of one house when I overheard Hans talking to an older fairy.

"Hans," the older one was saying, "the council is uneasy. When the girl came here earlier, she claimed to represent the Agency. Are you so sure that she lied?"

"Yes, Elder," Hans replied. "We found her near the witch's house and when we challenged her reason for being there, she responded by throwing a blade of cold iron at Greta."

"Very well," the Elder said with regret, "but is it necessary to kill her? Can we not turn her over to the Agency for impersonating one of their own?"

"No! They will do nothing except maybe try to scare her. Then she'll just return to torment us anew. Should we give her the chance to injure or kill another innocent Fay? These human scum never learn. All you can do is purge the world of their filth."

"If you must. Is the prisoner adequately secured?"

"Yes, Elder. We have her bound and gagged in my house. In fact, I was just on my way to check on her now. I will see you at midnight, honored sir."

"Blessed be, my son," the Elder said and left. Hans turned with a sneer and walked off in another direction. I followed at a distance. His house was only a few doors away. There were two fairies on guard on either side of the door. It made me wonder how I'd managed to overlook that little clue to Glaia's whereabouts. He entered the house in the same mysterious manner that I'd noted elsewhere in the village, and I crept up to the back wall. I could hear someone, I think it was Hans, talking inside, but all sounds were muffled and indistinct.

After a few minutes Hans came out of the house and spoke to the guards, "She'll keep. I'll be back before midnight."

"Hey, Hans," said one of the guards. "We've been here for hours. When are we going to get relieved?"

"I'll send someone," he said without any real sincerity and left. Once he was gone, the guards grumbled about their situation for a while and then settled down to play cards.

While they were playing, I tried to cut a hole in the back of the houseplant with my dagger. It was slow going. The plant was very tough. When I was half-way around the hole I was trying to cut, I noticed that the cut was healing itself almost as fast as I could cut. I cursed the fact that I'd left the tools back in Glaia's pack with the superfluous supplies. The axe would have made too much noise but the saw might have been just right. The longer I took to free Glaia, the more chance I had of being caught.

It was time to try another application of the fire spell. Remembering what happened the second time I tried the spell, I put my full concentration on an area of the houseplant wall large enough to crawl through and cast the spell. There was a very brief, bright flash that I hoped nobody noticed and then a hole appeared as ash fell out of it.

I crawled on in and found Glaia in the center of the room. It occurred to me that we'd been through this before, although the situations had been reversed.

As I untied her restraints I couldn't help but whisper, "Hi there, cutie! Did you miss me?"

"Like life itself, handsome. Let's blow this burg."

"Suits me." We crawled out the newly arranged back door. It was already healing and I had to squeeze to get through. Glaia was stiff from having been bound since her capture and I had to help her as we made our way south.

"Robby," she said after we'd gotten out of hearing range of the village, "I thought I told you to go for help. If there's one thing you're going to have to learn as an agent it's when not to go it alone."

"Glaia, if I had gone for help, you'd have been briquettes by the time I got back." I told her what I saw and heard at the destruction of the witch's house.

"Damned fairies!" she swore. "They told me they were putting me on trial."

"Sure, trial by fire." Glaia went pale. Mostly to fill the silence I continued, "When I heard that, I knew I had to come directly and at least try, ooph!" That last was forced from me as Glaia hugged me with a strength and ferocity I'd not suspected she had.

When she finally let go I saw that she'd been crying. I never did know what to do when someone cries. Whether grown-up or child, I always feel so helpless. I clumsily dried her face with the edge of my cape and tried to say something reassuring, although nothing actually came out.

"We'd better keep moving," I said. "Pretty soon they'll be noticing tonight's star attraction just checked out." She nodded and we were off. We were nearly back to the site of what was once the witch's cottage when we heard the buzz of fairy wings behind us.

Just in time we managed to hide off the path as the militant Fay flew by over head, torches in hand. When they had passed, we continued carefully on our way. Then we heard loud, explosive noises up ahead of us and saw brilliant flashes of light. We got to the edge of the woods around where the witch had lived in time to see her still alive and kicking. Mostly kicking fairy butt. After all that had happened I wasn't sure who I wanted to see win. Several fairies lay sprawled on the ground. I wasn't sure if they were still alive and I, for one, wasn't going to bother checking.

"C'mon, Robby," whispered Glaia. "We'd better take the scenic route out. No matter what the outcome we'd better let Aline send her regulars in to sort it out." I agreed.

By the time we had circled around the battle it had begun to quiet down, or at least the spells were flying a little less frequently. We were well down the path away from the battle before either of us spoke again.

"Robby, you never told me how you got away from the demoness. I tried to lead her away but she insisted on following you."

"I'll show you," I said. We were near the clearing where I had left Glaia's pack and I led her there. I pointed at the pile of ashes. "There you are, flash-fried demon."

"How?" I told her. "Even as powerful as you are," she said, "you can't have enough internal power to fry a demon. It must have been the added power when the fire broke the containment spell on the battery. Good trick, but don't try it again. It could have backfired on you." We were about to leave and head back to the road, but Hans was blocking our path.

"I killed your mistress," he said, "but not before she killed my sister and several of our friends. Now I will kill you!"

"The witch wasn't our mistress, fairy!" I said. "We were sent by the Agency."

"You watch who you're calling a fairy, you lying, human scum!" Saying that he raised his hands and made a quick gesture. Without thinking about it, I drew my sword and slashed at the air in front of me.

By luck or by instinct - your choice - it was the right move. As my blade touched the flow of power he directed at us, I could see the flow and was able to divert it around us by directing my thoughts on the blade. Glaia must have been grazed by the spell. I heard her yelp and fall down but I didn't have the time to find out.

With a feral scream Hans drew his own blade, one made of bronze, and met me head on. I tried to block his blow but the bronze blade cut right through my steel one. Good bronze! I found myself holding

a bladeless hilt. Using it like one might use brass knuckles, I smashed it into his face. He dropped his sword and with a hideous cry of pain flew away unsteadily as fast as he could.

I helped Glaia up. She was winded but not harmed. We went a bit further down the path until we were far enough away to be hidden in case Hans or one of his cohorts should come looking for us. We made a hasty camp and hesitantly made a small, controlled fire to cook on. Against the chill of the night it felt good, but we didn't dare keep it going. Soon we put out the fire and turned in.

My advances to Glaia had, up until now, been gently rejected. Tonight, however, she made some advances of her own. Well, I suppose you're expecting a full description of fireworks only we could see, of passion in the moonlight, of a coupling that we felt all the way to our souls and all that. Right?

Well, forget it! A gentleman never tells, and neither do I.

Yo Ho Ho and a Bottle of Rum!

Chapter Eight

"For I am a Pirate King," I sang and danced to Glaia's obvious delight. "And it is, it is a glorious thing to be a Pirate King!"

You might ask why I was doing a one-man version of Gilbert & Sullivan. Well, why shouldn't I? There we were, on board the good ship, "City of Gansett" enroute to Hatten, courtesy of the Agency, for a certain little chore Glaia and I performed a few days ago concerning a witch and a whole village full of some of the toughest fairies I'd ever heard of. Of course, the large amount of the local version of pocket change I got for my share of the fee didn't dampen my spirits either.

But now it was relaxation time. We could sit and talk or, as I was doing, clown around on deck while Captain Garmon and his crew got us to Hatten. We would be a week at sea, counting two ports of call along the way, and while the "City of Gansett" was not exactly the "Love Boat", it would do for us.

"So," I said after I had finished my performance and accepted Glaia's applause as my due, "how about teaching me another spell?"

"Oh, I nearly forgot," she said. "I bought you a present while we were in Gansett." She reached into her pack, pulled out a gift-wrapped package, and gave it to me. I opened it and found that it was a small, bright red, leather-bound book. On the cover was a picture of a young boy in long flowing robes, twice as large as they should have been to fit him, making gestures with his hands that, I suppose, were meant to be mystical.

"The Junior Wizard's Book of Spells?"

"You have to start somewhere, handsome," she said with a grin. She was right.

"Okay, should I start anywhere in particular?"

"Try the beginning, and then work your way through to the end," she suggested dryly. "By the time you're through, you'll know as much as the average ten year old."

"Terrific. When do I get out of grammar school?"

"When you've mastered every spell in this book I'll consider teaching you some of the more advanced stuff." My disappointment must have shown. "Look, Robby, you have a lot of power there. Just look at what happens when you use a common household ignition spell. You can turn logs to white ash in seconds, and like most common spells, that one only uses the natural power you actually have within you. I shudder to think what would happen if you started tapping into external sources before you know your own strength. Go ahead, do the first spell in the book, It's always been a favorite of mine." Oh well, if it was one of her favorites... I opened the book and started reading.

Futaba's Phantasmal Lights

This spell is a sure-to-please entertainment and an excellent exercise in control. With it you can create globes of light in any color of your choice.

"A colored light show? What use is that?" I asked.

"It's for fun, Robby. Try it."

I read further. This was actually a simpler spell than the ignition spell that I had already learned. The only ingredient I needed was light. According to the book, I could create colored lights as long as there was an available light source but the maximum brightness of the light was mostly dependant on the brightness of the area I was casting the spell in. Like the fire spell it was important to accurately visualize what you intended to do. In this case it meant I had to have a picture of a light globe in my mind.

I looked at Glaia, while trying to think about what sort of light I would produce and instantly noticed her eyes. She has the most vivid blue-green eyes I have ever seen. That was the color I'd produce! So, visualizing a globe of that color, I recited the incantation prescribed by the book, "Tsamah quientarsh mo."

"Whoa!" shouted Glaia. I had closed my eyes while visualizing and incanting, a habit I had picked up reflexively after my first fire. I opened them to discover that the world had turned the color of Glaia's eyes. The effect only lasted a second or so and then, because my concentration had slipped, normal colors reappeared.

"What happened?" I asked.

"You conjured up a very large globe of light. At least that's my best guess. Try again, and do it like you did the fire, don't put everything into it." Following her advice, I tried again.

This time there was a globe of the same color eight inches in diameter about a foot in front of me. According to the spell book I could maintain it as long as I concentrated. As an exercise, it recommended attempting to keep it glowing for periods of a half hour or more. The book also suggested that I practice making the globe move around. I did both but after a few minutes of making the globe move around I started making it move faster and wilder and I soon ran it directly into the ship's main mast. In theory I should have been able to maintain the light, but I kept thinking of the light as a solid object and as it hit the mast I imagined it splashing all over the deck, which it did.

"Not bad," said Glaia. "Try something else." So I started experimenting with colors and intensities. I nearly blinded myself with a small dot of actinic intensity. After a few more attempts I noticed that Glaia had been uncharacteristically silent and I glanced over at her. The show-off - she was standing there juggling three balls of light.

Well, two can play at that game. I didn't know the spell could be used to cast multiple lights, but now that I knew it could, I tried it myself. Nothing happened. Okay, so I wasn't as good as I thought. In retaliation, I conjured an additional globe into the formation she was playing with. Her three immediately winked out.

"Hey!" she complained. I grinned in response.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Keep practicing. When you can maintain several different lights in various colors, all moving in different directions, you can go on to the next spell." Oh. I kept trying to produce more than one globe of light to no effect, while Glaia went back to our cabin.

After a while I consulted the book again to see if I had missed anything the first time around. Oh yeah, there it was, right in the middle of the page.

An accomplished student of the art can maintain any number of phantasmal lights. However, each light must be conjured one at a time. With practice you can maintain one or more while casting another.

Practice? More like mental gymnastics, if you ask me! For the next hour I tried to accomplish the feat of maintaining more than one light, without visible success. I was starting to feel tired. Even a simple spell like this takes some energy.

I looked around. It was starting to get dark so I decided to try something else before taking a break. Could I make a two-toned light? Why not? Sure enough, there it was, a striped ball of yellow and black.

Black? How had I managed that one? I tried to reason it out; Black is the absence of all color, but then so is clear. I tried to do clear, and succeeded in conjuring an invisible globe that wildly distorted the view of anything on the other side of it. Too bad I couldn't control the shape of what I conjured. With lens shapes I could have a telescope whenever I wanted one. However this spell only produced spheres, I'd tried that early on. I conjured up a small black sphere and held it there to ponder for a while. We sometimes call ultraviolet light black. Could this be an ultraviolet sphere? I doubted that.

"Black? How'd you manage that trick?" it was Glaia.

"I was just trying to figure that out myself," I said. "How does this spell work?"

"You think you're ready for advanced theory already, sport?"

"Try me."

"Okay, but stop me if you have trouble following along. Simply put, you are using this spell to control light, letting your choice of color shine."

"So, in effect," I interrupted, "the spell acts as a filter that allows only selected wavelengths through?"

"Huh? Sorry, Robby, I keep forgetting that just because you're a novice at magic, you're not uneducated. Yes, That's about it. So you already know how white light is made up of all the visible colors in the spectrum?" I said that I did and went on to explain how a rainbow is formed to prove it. "All right," she said, "then you know black is the absence of light."

"That's it!" I said. "I was thinking of it as the absence of color, but that could be clear too. With clear, I'm letting all the light through unfiltered, but with black I'm filtering it all out, leaving an opaque black ball."

"I've never met anyone who could do that before," Glaia said. "The spell also converts most of the light it affects to your desired wavelength. That's why you can conjure brighter light than you are working in. But with black, you're keeping it all bottled up. That's tough." She tried the spell herself and produced a dark gray sphere. "See! The best I can do is charcoal gray. The average person couldn't manage even that much. Now do you see why you have to learn this stuff slowly?" I agreed that maybe I did. I still wanted to learn something more useful but I'd just have to take it one step at a time.

The next day brought more practice. Glaia was impressed by my multi-colored globes. She had never thought to try that variation, but it wasn't particularly hard to do and she duplicated the feat with ease. I finally managed to produce a second light while maintaining the first, but they kept winking out when I tried to control their movement.

Around noon I noticed that the crew of the ship seemed unusually tense. Glaia and I asked the Captain about it.

"See that ship there," he said pointing beyond the stern. There was a ship about four miles away. "She's been gaining on us steadily since dawn. I tried changing our course, but she matches us move for move."

"Pirates?" Glaia asked.

"Quite likely. There've been reports of that sort of thing centered around Wadir lately."

"What can we do?" I asked.

"Just sit tight and get ready to use that sword on your belt. We're making a run for Lond, our next port of call. I saw you practicing with the Futaba lights. You know any useful spells?"

"I can start a mean fire," I answered.

"Tsamah ootah abarsh?" I nodded. "Not powerful enough," he said, "and it hasn't any range. You'd

practically have to be sitting on her deck to light her up. Too bad. From what I can see, you have good potential. How about you?" he asked Glaia.

"I know a few useful spells," she replied.

"Good," said Captain Garmon. "I'm a fair hand at defensive spells, but they'll get past my defenses eventually. Maybe between us, girl, we can hold them off long enough to make it to Lond."

The other vessel closed in on us rapidly. It seemed to be going faster than the wind was blowing. I'd have thought that was impossible with a sailing ship, but with magic how was I to know?

"Here they come," the Captain said. "Everyone get ready!"

"Incoming off the starboard stern!" shouted one of the hands.

I looked. Sure enough, a large fireball was heading for us on a high arcing trajectory.

"I've got it," called Garmon. He muttered an incantation and brought his hands together in a palms-outward gesture. The fireball suddenly splashed against something invisible.

"Good catch," commented Glaia.

"Piece of cake," laughed Garmon, "but they're just playing with us so far." The pirate ship got closer and they continued to shower us with fireballs. So far Glaia had, at the Captain's suggestion, stayed out of the encounter. They had been testing us to see what we could do and he was hoping that she could surprise them if she held off until absolutely necessary.

Glaia held off until they were just a couple hundred yards off our starboard beam. At that point she started firing off an assortment of spells. Most of these were diversions, she told me later. What she was really working on, under the cover of the more flamboyant spells, was a freezing spell that was slowly coating the rudder and the controlling mechanisms that led to it from the wheel with ice. That was the real reason for learning the Futaba light spell. It was an exercise in control, teaching you to divide your attention while controlling several spells without any of them suffering.

Suddenly the pirate ship started glowing a dark, dull red. A wavering beam of that red stretched out toward the "City of Gansett" and struck at Glaia. Glaia screamed briefly, then slumped to the deck.

"Damn you to Hell!" cursed Captain Garmon, shouting at the top of his lungs, then in a quieter voice to me, "You'd best get her below, mate. She'll be out of it for hours."

"What happened?"

"They've got themselves a high-class wizard. That's what happened. Detected her spell and followed it back with one of his own. Sapped her strength."

"Can we still get away?"

"Not bloody likely, mate. Get the girl below. Then prepare to use that sword of yours. Maybe we can drive them off with steel." He didn't sound as though he believed it. I carried Glaia back to our cabin and laid her down on our bed, then dashed back topside. The pirates were less than fifty yards away. As I returned to where the Captain stood cursing and spell casting, I got another one of my desperation ideas.

Turning toward the fast approaching ship I formed the picture of my intention in mind and cast the spell.

"Tsamah quientarsh mo!" A large black sphere enclosed the pirate ship.

"By all the gods, light, dark, and in between!" swore Garmon with uncharacteristic quiet. "Hold that spell, mate! Hold it for dear life! We'll steer for that fog bank hugging the coast." He then shouted out some orders to his crew and we started moving away from the pirates. I didn't hear most of what he said as it took most of my concentration to keep the pirates inside the huge black bubble I'd created. Every so often a part of the ship would poke through the edge and I'd have to move the sphere ever so slightly. Time passed.

"Just a little bit longer now," the Captain called. As he spoke, I noticed that my view of the sphere, now nearly a mile astern, was fading out. We were entering the fog bank. I waited until I could no longer see where the other ship was and released the spell. Exhaustion set in and I nearly collapsed where I stood, but somehow managed to sit down in a more or less controlled fashion.

"You all right?" the Captain asked.

"Just tired," I replied.

"That was amazing, mate. Never saw anything like it. I take back what I said about you not knowing any useful spells. Oh, I saw those small black lights you conjured. I saw a master of the art do that once before but I've never seen a Futaba so damned big. How did you do it?"

"I don't know," I answered honestly enough. "Why didn't their wizard knock me out the same way he did Glaia?"

"Well, I see two possible reasons for that," he said. "First, you have to know what spell you're following back to its source, just like you have to know what spell you're countering. I doubt he knew what he was up against. The Futaba spell is 'every kid's first spell', so to speak. I daresay that the idea of using it as an offensive weapon must be as novel to him as it is to me.

"Second, you had him blinder than we are here in the fog. Must have been rather confusing in there with all that light."

"Light? What light? You mean darkness, right?"

"No. With a black Futaba light, as I understand it, the light goes in but it doesn't come out. So, I guess it was pretty bright in there. You might even have blinded them permanently, one can only hope. To make it dark inside," he added off handedly, "you'd need a mirrored sphere, but that's even harder to do than black."

Mirrored? I tried to do that and succeeded. Hah! Who says that Disco is dead?

Chapter Nine

We docked in Lond that evening. Captain Garmon told me that Glaia would probably be out until morning and suggested I take a walk through the marketplace nearby.

Lond was a small city similar to Cushna where I first entered this world, and the marketplace was only one hundred yards or so up hill from the docks. I was tempted to buy a couple of light spell batteries like the one I fried the demoness with north of Gansett, but from what Glaia had told me, I was just as likely to fry myself or the ship instead, what with the unpredictability of such a stunt. Instead, I bought a few cigars. I don't smoke often, but I do indulge once in a while. I found a small tavern where I had dinner alone. I didn't linger in the tavern although two crewmembers from the ship invited me to join them, but returned to the ship as soon as I had eaten.

We sailed on the pre-dawn tide and I woke as we cleared the lighthouse that marks the channel in Lond's outer harbor. Glaia showed no signs of waking and I spent the time by her side in the cabin practicing with Futaba's Phantasmal Lights. I finally managed to create and maintain two or more at a time, but I still couldn't do it with ease. I knew that I had to be able to handle this without straining before I could go on. To help me along and provide a greater challenge I started working with multiple mirrored globes - they really were more difficult to work with than the black - and then started mixing types. Around mid-morning Glaia finally woke up.

"Uh," she groaned, "what hit me?"

"Some sort of counter spell, I'm told," I answered. "How're you feeling?"

"Dizzy, hungry, and I have the headache that conquered Gonquin. Last time I felt this way was New Year's Day about two years ago. But at least then I had a good party to remember as consolation."

"Feel up to eating?"

"It's worth a shot," she said after a moment's reflection. "Maybe something light."

"Okay, wait here. I'll see what I can find in the galley."

"Thanks, handsome."

The ship's cook brewed a large pot of tea and provided me with two mugs and a platter full of Pastry. Back in the cabin, Glaia was sitting up and, while she ate, I filled her in on the action she had missed.

"Not bad," she commented, regarding my use of the large black globe. "Not bad at all. Are you making any progress on multiple spells yet?" I quickly conjured up three spheres, black, mirrored, and a two-toned red and yellow, and set them up orbiting about each other. "You're getting there," she said, "but their movements are a bit jerky yet. When you can make them move smoothly and without the obvious strain you're under - another day or two maybe - you'll be ready for your next spell."

"Think so?" I asked. She nodded. "Glaia, is there a spell that can produce this same sort of lights, but in any shape?"

"Yes, I think you'll find it toward the end of the book. Why?" I explained my idea for a magical telescope. "Hmm," she said, "Yes, that would work, but it will take real concentration to focus and maintain. It's far easier to use a spyglass. Still, when you get that far, it'll be a good exercise for you. Well, I'm feeling much better. I guess most of the problem was hunger after all. I still have a headache, though. Let's go up on deck and see if Captain Garmon has something for that." He did, and a few minutes later Glaia was drinking a bitter potion that was suppose to be good for pain.

We spent the rest of the day on deck. Glaia's health and spirits continued to improve until she was back

to her usual irrepressible self. I spent the afternoon trying to juggle Futaba lights while she distracted me with random bits of conversation. All in all, it was a good practice session.

The next day I started getting bored with the spell. I was very tempted to look ahead in the book to find something more interesting, but I kept having visions of flash-fried demoness overlaid with visions of flash-fried Jones. And my use of the black Futaba sphere had reinforced both Glaia's and the book's warning about skipping ahead. However that didn't stave off boredom one whit and Glaia repeated that I still needed to work on it. In the spirit of Gomez Addams and his trains, I started whizzing the lights around and crashing them into each other. Unfortunately it wasn't particularly satisfying. They made no noise, no smoke, no sparks, and, unless I released the spells holding them, they weren't even destroyed. My boredom, however, was soon over when the Captain informed us that our friends the pirates were back and bearing down on us at high speed. And just when we thought it was safe to go back into the water.

Glaia started tossing incendiary spells at them even before they were in range, in the hopes that they might veer off. However, the approaching ship developed a protective blue aura - I'd seen that spell before - and they just bounced off.

This continued for another fifteen minutes until the attacking wizard had had enough, I guess. Without warning, a cone of mixed gold and silver light shot out at and caught us. Time stopped for us and the next thing we knew, the pirates were almost out of sight on the western horizon. The Captain started cursing loudly and ordered members of the crew to check the hold.

"What happened, Glaia?" I asked.

"Stasis spell, Robby. They stopped us in our tracks and robbed us blind. At least, I'd bet the farm they robbed us blind. We'll know in a moment." Sure enough, a loud howl from out of the hold told us what we needed to know. When we checked our cabin, the thieves had gone through our belongings with abandon, but nothing seemed to be missing. On the other hand we weren't carrying anything of real value anyway. There was a knock on our door.

"Captain Garmon would like to see you in his cabin," the first mate said when we opened the door.

"We'll be right there," Glaia replied. "C'mon, Robby, we can finish straightening up later."

"What do you think he wants with us?" I asked as we walked.

"Beats me," Glaia replied. "Let's find out." We reached the Captain's cabin and knocked.

"Come on in!" Garmon said. When we were in, he continued, "Have a seat. You both work for the Agency, right?"

"Actually," Glaia said, "the relationship is closer to that of free-lancers using the same employment agency, but ..."

"Same thing," he interrupted. "I have a job for you if you want it."

"Well," Glaia replied, "as the senior agent available, I am empowered to negotiate, as long as we put our agreement in writing and the Agency gets its cut. What's the job? I'll tell you right now, having Robby and me attack the pirates in their lair to get your cargo back is right out."

"No. Not quite, anyway. The cargo they stole was in two parts. First, they got a thousand weight each of refined gold and silver that we were to deliver to the Royal mint in Hatten. If you can find out where it is, we can let His Majesty's army retrieve it and maybe even wipe out that nest of piracy while they're at it."

"And the second?" I asked.

"A small wooden chest that we were transporting to the Agency House in Hatten. By my contracts I only have to supply information directly leading to the recovery of the gold and silver to both collect my freightage fees and not have to reimburse His Majesty. The Agency chest, on the other hand, is a bit different. In that case I must pay for all expenses related to its recovery. So I want to hire you to find and, if possible, mark the precious metals for later recovery, and to retrieve the Agency's box. How much for the job?"

I let Glaia do all the talking from this point on. For starters, I didn't have the foggiest notion of how much to ask for, and, also, she's probably a better negotiator than I am. Besides, I wasn't sure if we wanted the job. Glaia should know if we were up to it. After a solid hour of intense bargaining, Glaia and Garmon agreed on a price and we put the deal down on paper. As with most Agency jobs, we would only get paid on the successful completion of the job, so either Garmon got off the hook or he was, at worst, back where he started. On the flip side, as Glaia assured me, we weren't exactly doing charity work either.

Chapter Ten

Garmon figured these pirates were working out of Wadir so he dropped us off, after dark, on a beach less than half a day's walk away. He would proceed on to Hatten and we would meet him there within the week, hopefully.

"Let's move off the beach and into the woods over there," Glaia suggested. "The road ought to be to the south. We can find it in the morning." As we reached the edge of the woods we saw a small campfire a few hundred feet away through the trees. "Wait here, Robby. I'll check it out."

Glaia moved almost silently into the woods and I sat down on the beach side of the trees and listened to the lapping of waves. Was I nervous? Well, yes. We'd expected to be here alone and Glaia's cautiousness made me worry about who might be around that fire. It was a tense, fifteen-minute-long eternity before I heard Glaia's voice call out to me.

"Hey, Robby! C'mon over! It's okay." I stumbled my way over to the fire. Compared to Glaia's graceful and silent glide through the forest, my progress was more akin to the average mastodon.

The fire was in a fair-sized clearing. Glaia was chatting with a small gentleman with long silver and brown hair and beard. Poking through the hair were a pair of pointed ears and his fingernails appeared to have been painted silver. I learned later that was their natural color. He was wearing a dark green jerkin and trousers and a lighter green shirt all with polished silver buttons. His shoes of thick brown leather were pointed and he had, although he wasn't currently wearing, a dark brown leather Robin Hood-style cap.

"Robby," Glaia introduced, "this is Aethelbricht Aethelthrythsson of the White Duck Lineage of the Black Oak Clan. He's an elf. Aethelbricht, this is Robert Phillip Jones."

"Pleased to meet you," I said holding my hand out to him. He shook it in a perfunctory manner staring at me for a long, uncomfortable moment.

"You're not from around here," he asked finally. "Are you?" I knew what he meant, and it wasn't did I just blow in from the Coast.

"Oh terrific!" I said. "Glaia, I thought that sort of thing wasn't generally known. So far, half the people I've met here have been in on the secret, and now this guy can tell by looking. Maybe I should just wear a sign. 'Greetings! I am from another planet. Take me to your leader.'"

"Calm down, Robby. Elves are different, they can tell. Really, to most people the existence of newcomers is a secret."

"Secret? Hah!" laughed Aethelbricht. "Some secret. Girl, do you have any idea of how few people actually don't know about newcomers? Just look around you. There must be a thousand books about aliens from beyond in print. And half the popular fiction these days features the adventures of a newcomer. Secret, right."

"Well, yes," allowed Glaia, "but nobody really believes it. Fiction is supposed to be made up and most of it is pretty wide of the mark anyway, and the crackpots who write what they claim is the truth wouldn't know the truth if it up and bit them." Oh great, now I was a UFO.

"You have a point there," Aethelbricht conceded. "Still, I'd love to see what would happen if the general public knew that their beloved king was a newcomer. Can you imagine the investigation the Curia would make into that cover-up? Or do you think they're in on it?"

"I wouldn't know." Glaia said uncomfortably.

"Oh, I thought you Agency people knew it all. You know I've been tempted several times to go to the press and let the whole thing out."

"You wouldn't!"

"Sure I would, but actually I think the King's doing a damned good job - maybe because he is a newcomer - so why upset a system that works, hmm?"

"Elves!" snorted Glaia. "You're all crazy."

Surprisingly, Aethelbricht did not take offense. Instead he smiled and said, "It's in the blood. You know, girl, you've got some strange sense of courtesy. You come to my fire, ask for my help, and call me crazy. You know, I think I like you. Hey, Jones, you'd better watch yourself with this one. She's fire."

"Enough already. Truce, okay?" Glaia said. "How about telling us about Wadir and where we're likely to find those pirates?"

"Later, girl, later," countered the elf. "First we'll eat, then we'll drink, and then we'll talk about your pirates." He waved his hands and a large pot filled with stew appeared over the fire and a small stack of

bowls and spoons materialized in front of him."

"Hey, that's neat," I said. "How do you do that?"

"Simple, really," said Aethelbricht as he served up the food. "I made this stew last week, and keep it stored in a little side dimension I know where the time moves so slowly that it won't cool down for a year of our time. I keep my dishes there, too."

"Now that'd be a useful thing to know. Can you teach me how to do that?"

"Sure, I ca..." Aethelbricht started.

"No, he can't," interrupted Glaia, before the elf could complete his answer. "He didn't use a spell like you've been learning, Robby. That sort of manipulation is a natural talent of elves. Except in a few cases, most of their magic can be accounted for by creative uses of that talent. Right, elf?"

"Right," he said, somewhat reluctantly. "You could have let me have a little fun, you know." I got the impression he would have preferred to lead me on, and, of course, I was naive enough to believe almost anything about magic. He could have had me doing all sorts of foolish stuff trying to duplicate his trick. I wasn't sure if practical jokes were a common feature to elves or just this one, but I was glad that Glaia had save me from the embarrassment.

We ate the stew and washed it down with some water from a nearby spring. Then when we were finished and Aethelbricht had returned the stew and dishes to wherever they normally stayed, he produced three cups and a flask of a very sweet liqueur that tasted like mint and oranges. It was not to my taste, but I politely sat and drank the stuff.

While we drank, Aethelbricht finally told us what we wanted to know. Wadir was a small town: no walls and no city guards. It was, nominally, a trading port, but most of the trading was in stolen goods. So far, they had been a rather small operation and a recent one, at that, so the Royal army and navy had not yet gotten around to cleaning the place up, and a few healthy bribes in the right places were convincing an equal number of highly placed officials that the problem wasn't really all that great.

Glaia said that this latest theft of precious metal would probably be enough to convince even the most corrupt bureaucrats that it was time to close this gig down.

Aethelbricht drew us a rough map on a scrap of deerskin, showing us the general layout of Wadir and a few possible warehouses that might hold the stuff the pirates had stolen, assuming, of course, that the pirates that attacked us were working from out of Wadir.

"How do you know the town so well?" I asked the elf with a little suspicion.

"I do a little trading there every once in a while, or at least I did before the pirates started using the port. It's gotten a bit rough there lately. The natives never could take a joke, now they get downright hostile. I suppose I ought to be moving on soon." We spoke a little longer until I started yawning and Glaia suggested that we should all get a little sleep. Aethelbricht said that his kind was normally semi-nocturnal, and he would be glad to stay up and watch the fire for a while.

"Should we set up a watch schedule?" I asked.

"It shouldn't be necessary," he said. "We're a fair way from Wadir, and the pirates don't stray much from their taverns, at least not while on land." So with that, Glaia and I went to sleep.

In the morning we woke to dark gray skies. The weather had warmed a bit, but the air smelled like rain. Terrific. I really hate overland hikes in the rain. We had some more of Aethelbricht's stew for breakfast accompanied, this time, by a strong black tea and some dark brown bread.

"Hey, Jones," the elf said, "I've been thinking. I might be able to send you home. Interested?"

"Home? Is that possible?" I asked. Glaia shrugged.

"I don't really know," replied Aethelbricht. "It's never been tried. That's why I'd like to do it. In theory it's just another dimension like the little ones I store my food in, but out of all the infinite universes, it could be a long search. I could use a good challenge."

"Gee, I don't know. I hadn't thought it was possible, and I'd sort of resigned myself to staying here, and lately I seem to have a better reason for sticking around than for going back," I said looking at Glaia. She avoided my eyes. "Would it be possible to be able to go back and forth when I want to?"

"It might be possible to work something out. First, I'll need to find your world. Then we need to see if a permanent door could be established. That's very rare, but you never know. I'll need something from your world to use to help me find it."

"Glaia, is this on the level?" I asked, "or is this just another attempt to set me up?"

"From what I know, the theory is sound," she replied noncommittally, "and if he's just playing a joke, we can kick his butt from here to Hatten. Go ahead, give him something." I looked through my wallet. All my paper money and my coinage had been confiscated in Cushna. I didn't want to risk a credit card in case I could really get home to use it again, so I finally gave him a business card some coffee salesman had given me a few weeks ago.

Aethelbricht said he'd be able to find me if he was successful in his attempt but not to expect anything for at least two weeks, maybe longer.

Glaia and I headed on down to Wadir. As we walked I tried to ask her questions about elves, about our mission, about the weather, anything. She gave me very short answers, not speaking more than absolutely necessary. Well, I can be pretty dense at times, but after a couple of hours even I began to catch on. I've always hated stories in which the main characters have suffered in silence when a simple conversation could solve their problem, and decided to bring it out into the open.

"Glaia," I started when we took a rest stop, "something's bothering you."

"Mmm? No, not really, I think I'm just getting a cold or something. Don't worry about it."

"Hey, I'm not that dense. Spill it."

"Maybe later, okay?"

"Glaia, we're about to go walking into a dangerous situation. Now you're the pro here, correct me if I'm wrong, but if there's some problem between us, that has to interfere with our work. Not only that, but

any problem that unnecessarily divides our attention has got to decrease our chances of survival. What do you think?"

"Not now, Robby."

"Yes, now, or I'm out. Glaia, you've been like this all morning. Ever since the elf brought up the chance of sending me home." Click! Like I said, I may be slow on the uptake but even I can see a problem that stares me in the face. "That's it isn't it?"

"Robby, how well do we really know each other?"

"As well as we can, I suppose, considering that we haven't known each other very long," I replied. She was silently watching me. "Glaia, I've been waiting to meet you all my life. You're very special to me. Do you really think I'd leave you just like that?"

"Really? Robby, it's so easy to say that. What will you say if Aethelbriht tells you he's only got you a one way ticket back home. What then?"

That had me. It was easy just to say the words. What would I do if that were the case? "I don't know," I admitted at last. "I'll really have to think about it. Would you be willing to come with me?"

"I don't know," she blurted after a long pause. "I don't know your world. I've spoken to other newcomers. From what they tell me about their worlds, I'm not sure I care to try another. You don't talk about it much. For that matter, you sure don't seem too homesick."

"Well, I've tried to put it behind me. Not knowing how I got here means I don't know how to get back, or even if it's possible. I figured that I was best off trying to fit in here. But, yes, sure, I think about my home a lot. I don't know whether it's a better world or not, just different. Certainly, my life has gotten a lot more exciting since I got here. Tell you what, by the time the elf comes up with a way to my world, it'll be at least as long from now as we've known each other. Why don't we put it on the back burner, you know, think about it. We can get to know each other better, and make our decisions then."

"Okay, but that doesn't solve the problem, just postpones it. And our minds will still be cluttered when we hit Wadir," Glaia pointed out.

"Glaia, I love you. I think I've been in love with you since we first met on the walls of Cushna. There is no way I'm going to leave you as long as you feel the same way. Do you?"

"I think so. Robby, I don't find it easy to admit love. I flirt a lot, you've noticed I'm sure, but it always made a good shield and it kept me from getting too serious about anyone. Then you came along. Damn, I don't know what to think."

"Want to skip the job in Wadir?" It wasn't a serious suggestion on my part, but it was an option that had to be aired. It also seemed to be a good time to bring us back to business. Besides, I didn't think she'd pass up the opportunity to make a profit.

"Hell, no!" she said, snapping back to a more normal version of herself. We kissed and held each other for a long time then. Finally, we got up and walked the rest of the way to Wadir.

Chapter Eleven

Wadir was pretty much as Aethelbricht had advertised: a small open town with packed dirt streets, nothing over two stories. Maybe I'd been watching too many movies but I really had expected to find a dirty little village, with all sorts of smells reeking of contagion scenting the air. That's how I envisioned a pirate town. However, like the rest of this world, so far, the town was a model of cleanliness.

We checked in at a small inn on the outskirts of town. This was Glaia's idea. She said that we were more likely to run into the pirates here, down by the water. This would give us a base to work from that was not in the midst of their activity. I questioned her on this.

"Wouldn't it be better to get a room where we could watch the streets?"

"Robby," Glaia corrected me, "this is a very small town. Everyone knows each other. The gossip network is probably fierce. In addition, it isn't really on to way to anywhere, at least not by the roads. Remember we had to turn off the main road to get here.

"Now, we were seen entering town by every housewife and businessman we passed on the way. Since this is such a small town, we're news, any stranger in town would be, and you can be sure that by nightfall most townsfolk will know about us. They won't know why we're here, they probably won't care, and if they do, they might even think we're here to trade with the pirates. Now how long do you think we can stick around town without obviously attempting to do business, of some sort, before someone starts getting suspicious?"

I thought about that a moment, "Maybe a couple of days?"

"Tops," Glaia modified. "So we have to get in and get out of here as fast as we can. Follow me?"

"Right. So what's the plan?"

"I figure we can spend the rest of the afternoon checking out the warehouses Aethelbricht mentioned. If our pirates are here, maybe we can figure out which one they are using. At the very least, we can scope out the best way in. As I think of it, maybe we should first see whether the ship that attacked us is in the harbor. If they're using Wadir as their base, it's a good bet that they are in port at the moment. After a haul like they took yesterday, they'd want to stop off and store their loot, and the captain would have a mutiny on his hands if he didn't give his crew a few days liberty. Any questions?"

"Yes, couldn't we extend our stay here, if necessary, by pretending to be doing business?"

"Good thinking," She answered. "One problem, though. What kind of business do you propose doing?"

"Uh," I replied intelligently.

"Still, it's not a bad idea. We should keep an eye on the local merchants in case we need to stick around long enough to need a cover story. If we'd been able to plan for this job, we could have posed as traveling salesfolk. Sell a few novelties, a few household appliances; make a fair profit during the day and scope out the pirates by night. Too late to worry about that. Let's go take a stroll."

We left our inn and started walking down the street. Glaia kept up a steady stream of idle chatter, leaving me an occasional opening to get a word or two in. While we walked and talked I kept an eye on our surroundings.

"What are you doing?" Glaia asked. I didn't get the chance to reply. "Robby, everyone knows you're a stranger. You're allowed to stare, it's expected. If you keep trying to look at everything out of the corners of your eyes, people will get suspicious."

"Sorry. I'm new to this." We continued on down to the harbor. Sure enough, there was the ship we were looking for tied up to the East Wharf. As we walked past, several scruffy men were walking down its gangplank along with a merchant type.

"Robby," Glaia whispered, pulling me over to a side and pretending to gaze out at the water, "this could be our chance. You go back to the inn. I'll follow these guys. They might lead us to the loot."

"Are you sure you want to go alone?" I questioned. "What if they spot you?"

"Trust me, handsome. This'll be easier if I go solo. Don't worry, I've done this before. Now give me a quick kiss; then we'll just walk on casually around that shack there." We kissed and continued on as she directed. Once behind the shack, we separated. She went back and started tailing the pirates while I continued on back to the inn.

I was about halfway back when I passed a tavern where a large party was going on.

"C'mon in, mate," a harsh voice to my left said. "Th' mayor's throwin a bash. Free drinks!"

Well, I figured, I could use a beer about now. Why not? The tavern was dark and noisy inside with several dozen people drinking, singing, laughing, and in general, whooping it up. The guy who dragged me in signalled to a barmaid who after a moment brought me a large tankard of a bitter, watery brew. What you get for nothing, I thought.

A few minutes later, after maybe four sips of my drink, I decided that I'd had enough of cheap beer and bad parties and got up to leave. I was suddenly very dizzy. The floor was rapidly gaining altitude but somehow managed to come to a quick halt when it reached my face. Splat. The world spun on my axis once or twice just before the lights went out.

I woke up with a foul taste in my mouth, probably the beer, on the floor of a rank-smelling, little room with a small desk and chair on one side near a grimy window with steel bars across it, and a large bed on the other. I think it was the bed that was the source of the hideous smell in the room. At first I thought that I was still dizzy as the world was still trying to move out of the way of my feet, but I soon realized that I was on board a ship. Great. Shanghaied. Just what I needed to make my day.

I looked out the window. It was dark outside, but we were still in dock. That was good. I still had a chance to get away. Once we were at sea I probably would not be up to a ten mile swim in icy waters. On the table I noticed a small wooden chest. Checking it out, I found that it was locked, but a tag on the lock told me that this was being shipped to the Agency. Specifically to the Agency House in Hatten. Well, well. I'd found the stolen chest, now all I had to do was retrieve it. There were voices by the door to the cabin I was in.

"A new crew member?" a deep rumbling voice asked.

"Aye, skipper," said another. "We drugged his beer, he should be out for hours. He's in your cabin now." Good thing I hadn't finished the drink.

"Good. I'm going back to town to get a final count on the gold and silver in storage. Those bastards had better not short me again or I'll fry their gizzards! Check the new 'recruit' and make sure he's still out, but let me know when he wakes."

"Aye." I got back on the floor as the door open and feigned unconsciousness. After an eternal moment the door closed and locked again.

Okay, time to blow this scene. Checking, I found that I still had both my flint and my dagger although my purse was now considerably lighter, as in empty. My fire spell was still my best out of the two I knew, and I hadn't practiced it much lately. In much the same way as I had rescued Glaia from the Fay, I concentrated on burning a large hole in the side of the ship. Once more, an extremely intense and controlled disk of fire burned a hole suitable for climbing through, and picking up the chest, which seemed to be of watertight construction, I dove into the frigid waters of Wadir harbor.

I was afraid that someone might hear me hit the water, but the sound attracted no attention from the ship, and I quickly made my way to the next wharf. Climbing up out of the water I discovered that the air seemed even colder than the water was. There was no way to dry myself off so I made my way quickly back to the inn.

The innkeeper saw me as I entered shivering and led me directly to the large fireplace. He promised brought me a large, hot grog while I dried off by the fire.

"Robby!" Glaia cried as she came out of our room, "Where have you been?"

"Let me dry off," I begged, "and have a hot drink, and I'll tell you the whole story. Okay?" She nodded. When I had warmed up a bit we went back to our room and I told her about my little adventure. She started to give me a firm lecture about caution in unfriendly territory, but I showed her the Agency chest, and while she still didn't let me off the hook on that count, she wasn't quite as harsh as she had been.

"We got very lucky with the chest," Glaia said as I put some dry clothes on. "Maybe a little too lucky."

"Do you think it was a set up?" I asked.

"I don't see how it could have been," she replied, "but the fact that you took the chest and broke out of the ship using magic means they'll probably be watching the gold and silver more carefully now."

"I wasn't quite so lucky at finding where the metal is. The men I followed made several stops this afternoon. I think we can exclude the visit to the ship chandler and no less than three separate taverns, but they also went to two warehouses and what passes for the local bank out here in the sticks. We might have a chance breaking into a warehouse but if they already cashed the metal in for coinage, we might never be able to get at it. We'll have to cut our losses and leave town. We just don't have the tools to crack a bank's safe."

"I just remembered," I offered. "When I woke up in the cabin, I overheard the captain telling someone that he was going back to get the final count on the metal in storage. Evidently he's been short changed here in the past. Does that help at all?"

"Do you have any idea of when you woke up?"

"It was after dark," I replied. "I didn't think to check my watch."

"Good enough. I saw the bank close at dusk. Odds are the stuff is in a warehouse."

"Okay. Which one?" I asked.

"That'll be easy," she replied. "We just look for the one with all the guards on duty." Terrific.

"All right," I said. Maybe she was just kidding, "When do we go, before or after dinner?"

"After, but before that, you'll need to learn a new spell."

"Yeah?" I asked reaching for my book. "Which one?"

"You won't find it in there. This goes against all sensible magic training, but I can't see any alternative. This one is an advanced technique. One of the things this spell does is draw power from an outside source. You have to promise me you won't try to apply the technique in any other way until I say you're ready for it. Promise?" After all the warnings about trying out high power spells before I was ready, this made me nervous.

"I promise. If the spell is that dangerous, are you sure I can handle it?"

"Oh the spell itself is completely harmless," Glaia said. "I just don't want you experimenting with what you're going to learn, understand?" I said that I did. "Good."

"There are several ways to draw power from a source outside your own internal reserves. However they can all be grouped into one or both of two categories: sympathy and contagion."

"Sympathy and contagion," I repeated. "Hey, I know about that. We covered it in Anthropology 220."

"What?"

"A class on magic in comparative cultures I took back in college. I majored in Anthropology."

"I thought you said there was no magic on your world, and now you tell me you've studied it. Mr. Jones, if you've been playing games with me..." she left the threat hanging.

"There isn't. I wasn't. I wouldn't," I protested. "Glaia, please let me explain."

"Start talking."

"Well, to the best of my knowledge there is no magic as you have taught me since we met. Magic where I come from is largely considered to be primitive superstition. However in primitive cultures where magic is believed in, there are witches, shamans, other types of magic users, and they practice what they and their people recognize as magic.

"Some of this magic can be explained as herbalistic medicine. Some of it is mind control. Some of it is pure hokum. Much of it is wishful thinking. All of it, however, uses the principles of contagion, sympathy, or both."

"Okay," Glaia said, relaxing, "I'm sorry I flew off the handle there. Like we were both saying this morning, there's still a lot we don't know about each other. Well, professor, tell me what you know about sympathy and contagion. Let's see if the two basic laws of magic are the same in both of our worlds."

"Well, a spell that uses the Law of Sympathy imitates the action that the caster wishes to produce. For example, many rain spells involve the pouring of water out of some container on to the ground. By casting water on the ground, the magic user is attempting to show the gods, or the spirits, or the forces of nature, whatever, what he wants them to do, only on a much larger scale, in this case rain.

"The Law of Contagion, however, states that the properties of one thing can be transferred to another through physical contact. A good example would be healing with a magic talisman. The talisman is usually made of something that either inherently holds power or that has had power stored in it, the finger bone of a saint, for example. The talisman might have power because the saint whose finger is being used was well known for his ability to heal. This ability is obviously inherent in the piece of his body, so that by touching the talisman to a sick person, the healing power of the saint is brought to act on the illness of the patient."

"That's a little sketchy," Glaia said after a pause, "but you have the general idea. This spell uses both the Law of Contagion and to an extent the Law of Sympathy. The first thing you'll need to do is place a coin on the pile of ingots. Now this is important, make sure you put a gold coin with the gold ingots and a silver coin with the silver ingots."

"My pouch is a bit short of cash at the moment," I said. "They rolled me while I was out. I'd better restock my supply of pocket change." Opening my pack, I grabbed a handful of coins, making sure I had both gold and silver. "Okay, go on."

"Why does the metal have to be the same?"

"Sympathy," Glaia explained. "The spell will treat all the gold as one unit and all the silver as one, but you can't mix the metals, not with this spell, anyway. So, because the metal of the coin is the same as the ingots..."

"What happens to the ingots also happens to the coin," I finished. "Got it. Actually this isn't just Sympathy, but Identity."

"Yes. Identity is a special case of Sympathy. Actually, Identity is rarely achieved. The closer one approaches Identity in a spell involving Sympathy, the stronger the spell is. However in this case the Law of Sympathy is a minor part of the spell; the major part involves Contagion. So, the coin is on the pile of ingots. Now you should concentrate, just like in any other spell. This time you should envision the hoard before you as a single unit. Got it?"

"Subtle, but it seems simple enough."

"Good. Now the incantation is a bit longer than the simple stuff you've learned so far."

"Should I write it down?" I asked.

"Yes, if that will help you to memorize it. Just be careful not to leave the written incantation behind. If our thieves know that the spell was cast, they'll have no trouble countering it. Ready? 'Ohnah minat tsamah takhana, meetzapahkit tsamah la moh, ohnah minat whimalnet lemarsh.' Got that?"

"Sort of," I repeated it back. She corrected me on a few pronunciations, but I was fairly close. After a few minutes of coaching I could say it like a pro, or at least an enthusiastic amateur. "Glaia, what do these words mean or are they just nonsense syllables?"

"They're not nonsense, Robby. It's an ancient language of power."

"Could you teach it to me?"

"I could, but I won't until you've progressed beyond that book I gave you." I looked at the book. It still had the same picture of the enthusiastic kid with the wizard robes and the title, *The Junior Wizard's Book of Spells*, on it. Glaia must have seen my disappointment. "Robby, using that language creatively is how magic research is done. Until you have more control and experience, it would be extremely dangerous for you to know more. Especially since you've already shown me a lot of creative aptitude."

"I've noticed that the word 'tsamah' comes up a lot." I commented.

"It's a word of summoning," she explained. "We don't really know what it means literally, but you can think of it as 'let there be' or 'grant me the power to.' Actually there are a lot of words in spells that we don't completely understand. The language is very ancient and was never used conversationally. Besides, for thousands of years there was a prohibition against writing it down. A lot of words were lost, or maybe never discovered. The most advanced research involves the rediscovery of the language."

"Anyway, this spell will form a mystic bond between all the pieces of the pile which will allow someone to trace all the pieces in the pile using the coin you add before casting the spell. Be sure to recover the coin or the spell is useless."

"How can the metal be traced?" I asked, unclear on the concept.

"Well," she answered, "it requires another spell to activate that property, but after that is cast, the holder of the coin can see mystic threads linking all the pieces included in the spell. Then it's just a matter of following a clearly marked trail. Understand?" I did.

After a light dinner in the inn's common room we finally left to look for the stolen metals.

Wadir reminded me of the old joke of the town where they rolled the sidewalks up at seven o'clock. According to my watch it was barely eight, and already the streets were empty. I guess that most people were home or in their favorite taverns. We passed a couple of raucous parties in two such cases, but I doubt we saw more than seven or eight people on the street the whole time. Not surprisingly the first warehouse that Glaia had targeted was dark.

Glaia pulled out a set of lock picks but after a quick look at the lock I said, "Leave this one to me." I pulled out one of my credit cards and, well, let's just say, as the ancient commercial put it, I mastered the possibilities. The door was open in seconds.

"Neat trick," Glaia commented. "You'll have to show me how you did that sometime."

The warehouse was nearly empty, not even any guards on duty. Trusting folk, these pirates. I commented on that to Glaia, but she said it probably meant that there was nothing of great value stored here. There were a few crates on both of the two floors in the storage area. A quick inspection of each proved to be fruitless.

"Glaia," I asked, "what's with the empty building? Where I come from this is a sure sign of Chapter 11."

"Chapter what?"

"Never mind.. What I mean is, a warehouse is a business. It makes money by charging for storage space. Now either space is really expensive here, or this business is on the verge of bankruptcy. How can it stay in business this empty?"

"It can't," Glaia answered. "This town used to be a bit bigger, a major port around here. But over the last ten years or so a lot of the business has been moving to the new harbor at Port Rhead. Little by little the place has been emptying out. The pirates, I assume, chose this port as a base because it had the storage facilities at a cheap price and a well-developed enough harbor to handle ships their size."

"So, when the pirate activity is wiped out, this town might die out too?"

"Not necessarily," Glaia disagreed, "but it probably will get smaller as the townsfolk move away. There are many farms in the area, it will probably become more rural around here, or, if the locals are enterprising enough, maybe they can turn this place around into a center for the local crops. In any case that's what would have happened if the pirates hadn't moved in anyway. Well, this place is a bust, let's try the other one. We have a few hours left until dawn."

The other warehouse was occupied. The front office was well lit and several rather burly gentlemen were sitting around playing cards. The storage areas were dark however. We watched the building from across the street for an hour. Finally several of the men in the office got up and walked around the building. After a while they returned and the card game started up again.

"Okay," Glaia said. "The guards did their rounds, we should have at least an hour."

"The last one took us three hours, and it was nearly empty," I countered.

"Yeah, well we'll just have to hide next time they walk around. Let's go." The back door this time had a dead bolt lock and not even Chase Manhattan's best plastic would get us through that, so Glaia used her picks and got us inside after about five minutes. Once inside, Glaia whispered, "Let's start on the second floor, there'll be less chance of being heard."

The second floor was fairly full of crates, barrels, bundles, and piles of other assorted items. It took us a few minutes but we soon found the stolen gold and silver. Unfortunately, that is exactly what we found - gold and silver - in one, big, unsorted pile.

"Damn," Glaia swore softly. "The spell won't work on assorted metals. We'll have to sort them out."

"Won't they be able to tell what we did, and thereby, maybe, to identify the spell?"

"All too easily. After we cast the spell we'll have to put the pile back the way we found it. We'd better make quick work of this." We took the pile apart as quickly as we could. When they were sorted out we each cast the marking spells. Glaia marked the silver and I did the gold. Then we quickly put the original pile back together.

"Hey, not too shoddy," said Glaia. "Let's get out of here." We retrieved the coins that were to be used as locaters, put them in our boots so we wouldn't confuse them with the other coins we had, and headed for

the back door. We got to the top of the stairway and found three thugs coming up. "Whoops," Glaia said, "other way, Robby." However as we turned around we saw another three entering the large warehouse room from the other side. No help for it, we charged the three on the stairs.

Two of the thugs on the stairs fell down immediately when pressed. The third held on for only an extra moment and then I butted him with my shoulder and he went over the banister. The group behind us had almost caught up and we scrambled down the stairs. The two who had fallen down were getting back up again but we avoided them by hopping the banister ourselves when we were near the bottom.

As we made it to the door, three daggers framed us neatly, one in either door post and one in the door itself. It was a bit unnerving but essentially ineffective. Certainly I planned to move a little faster now. We burst through the door and, immediately, something hard hit me from behind. I was vaguely surprised that I really did see stars for a brief moment before the lights went out.

What happened next, I suppose, comes under the jurisdiction of Dejah Thoris, or else her younger sister Vu. In any case, I'd been through this before. My eyes opened to dark brownness. A few minutes later, when the world decided to come back into focus, I found myself in another ship's cabin, tied up in a heavy wooden chair. The only light was coming in through two fair-sized portholes on one wall. The room reeked of dead fish and other creatures I couldn't identify. There was an ironbound door on one wall and next to me I saw Glaia tied up in another chair. She was still out and several bruises suggested to me that she might have taken a worse beating than I had.

I was feeling dizzy and nauseous and was contemplating the possibility of a concussion when the door opened. A tall dark-bearded, rank-smelling man walked in.

"So, you're awake," he snarled. "Bloody well about time. The little witch is still out though. Too bad. She killed three of my men. I'm looking forward to making her pay for that before I feed you both to the squid. While we're waiting you can tell me how you got out of my cabin yesterday."

Well, if he didn't know, I wasn't telling. "I don't know what you're talking about." His reaction was a bit violent. He backhanded me and sent me, and the chair, on a very short flight that left me on my side, still tied to the chair. I probably would have had to put up with that a few more times, but I hit my head on the floor and as my hold on consciousness was all too tenuous to start with, I blacked out again.

Well, to tell the truth, I wasn't completely unconscious. I more sort of browned out. I wasn't quite on the same wavelength with the rest of the world visually, but I made some sort of sense of the sounds I heard.

"I'll return when I can interrogate both of you," he said, kicking me for good measure. Exact chronologies of this particular episode escape me, but I think that is when I threw up. "Just try getting out of this room, friend," he said. Then he laughed a very harsh and grating laugh as he left the room.

A minute later I heard, "Robby, are you all right?" It was Glaia. I fear my response was more of a groan than a sentence, but a moment later I felt the ropes holding me suddenly slip free. Glaia helped me to lie down flat. "How are you feeling?" she asked. "Nauseous?" I nodded. That was a mistake that I immediately regretted, but she got the idea. She reached into her pouch for a few items and muttered an incantation that must have lasted a minute or two, but when she was finished I felt better. I was still bruised and battered, but at least now my nausea had passed and I could get up with impunity.

"How did you get loose?" I asked. I saw the tiny knife in her hand, but had trouble believing these guys had been kind enough to leave it in her reach. I was wrong.

"Bloody amateurs!" she spat. "They didn't even check for a knife up my sleeve. They left our daggers on our belts too. Stupid. Anyway, I've been up a little longer than you, but played possum while the captain was here"

"They cleaned out our pouches," I said, noticing I'd been rolled for a second time in as many days. "I really must stop making a habit of this. So, shall I burn another hole in the wall for us?"

"Go for it, handsome." I went through the whole routine with the flint and steel all over again. Nothing happened. I tried again. This time I opened up and put everything I had into it, I brought the flint and steel together and watched the power flow to the circle I imagined on the wall. Again there was no effect. I went over to the wall. The area I had cast the spell at was hot to the touch but not hot enough to burn.

"That's what he meant," Glaia said. "He's magic-proofed the room. Who the hell is he? That's no elementary spell. Anyone who can do that level magic can make a good living in the legitimate sector."

"Maybe he likes this job better. The pay scale seems potentially higher," I said. Actually I hadn't the foggiest about how much a good wizard could make, but Glaia agreed with what I said so I guess I wasn't too wrong. The air in here was bad, so I tried to open the porthole. A slight touch on my part, however, sent it falling out into the water. I looked at Glaia.

"Dry rot?" she asked.

"Looks like it," I replied. I tested the wall to see if the area of dry rot were large enough to break open a hole large enough for us to get through. A minute later I had a large circle cleared. "Hey!" I said, "this is where I cast the spell"

"Good going, Robby!" Glaia approved. "I knew you had power to spare but you actually managed to defeat the damping effect of a magic-proof room. You might not have turned this section to ash, but you weakened it enough for us to escape. Let's split." With that she dove out the hole and I quickly followed.

We were quickly followed by the outraged screams of the ship's crew. Oh well, I don't suppose we could rely on luck to get away quietly twice.

"Get the lubbers!" screamed the captain. "Fifty pieces of gold each to whoever kills them." Oh oh. It was time for a diversion. I want you to know that casting a spell while treading water is not the easiest act I have ever done, but I actually managed to torch off both masts and all the sails and rigging on them. Then for good measure, I started the entire bow of the ship burning.

The ship was sinking at its dock and the captain was still yelling out curses as Glaia and I climbed up on shore. I only remember one thing he said as we ran for safety inland. "I'll get you for this, lubbers! You'll pay."

Then we were out of earshot. Glaia and I finally stopped to rest several blocks away when it was apparent we were not being chased any longer.

"Still have that locator coin, Robby?" Glaia asked. I checked my boot.

"Right here," I said holding up the quarter-sized piece of gold.

"Good. Time to leave town. Mission complete."

"Glaia," I said. "We've been building up an impressive list of grudges against us in the last couple of weeks. Let's see - the entire county government of Cushna, the Fay, and now this pirate wizard, and we don't even know his name so we can avoid him. Eventually, we're going to meet one of them again. Then what?"

"I don't know. You're right, though. We've been a little too flamboyant lately. Let's get into Hatten and get our payment from Captain Garmon, and then we'll see. Maybe we should take a little time off. We can afford it for a while anyway. I know I can sure use a vacation."

"Sure," I said, "Let's go check out the Hatten night-life."

On the Town

Chapter Twelve

It was good to get away from Wadir. Oh it wasn't a bad little town for all its infestation of pirates. No, it was good to get away from Wadir in the same way that it is good to get away from quicksand, or the tax man, or a large tribe of hungry cannibals (or for that matter, your in-laws) intent on having you over for dinner.

Wadir had struck me as a not-so-friendly, insular little town that probably would have grown decidedly less friendly had Glaia and I stayed around long enough for the locals to learn that we were responsible for one of the town's leading sources of revenue having a change of venue, i.e. to the bottom of harbor. Instead, we had recovered our packs and one very small wooden chest and checked out of the inn we had been staying at mere minutes after that had happened. According to Glaia even that was probably cutting it too close.

There was one thing, however, that I knew for a certainty. While I wouldn't mind giving the inhabitants of Wadir a good excuse for a party on general principles, a picnic under the gallows tree in the town commons would be right out. Yes, it was good to get away from Wadir.

Two days later we found ourselves on the outskirts of an incredibly large city. Gansett had been the largest population center I'd encountered here so far, and while it was large compared to Cushna, Lond and especially Wadir, it was just another town when compared to Hatten. It would have taken us the better part of the day to reach the main city, not to mention the Port of Hatten, our first planned stop in the city, had Glaia not signalled a passing, bright yellow coach.

"Taxi, lady?" the cigar-smoking driver on top of the coach asked.

"You bet," replied Glaia. "Take us to the Port, we're looking for the 'City of Gansett,' and don't take us by way of Bronnix to get there."

"Sure thing, lady" he said, flicking his ashes. "I'll have you there in an hour or you ride free. Hop in!"

"Ah! sighed Glaia as the cab started forward. "Civilization at last." As she said that, we must have hit a pothole because the entire coach was jostled violently. "Hey!" she complained loudly. "Watch the bumps!"

"Okay, okay," the cabby replied. "Sheesh!" After that the ride was a bit smoother. Of course in a vehicle without much in the way of shock absorbers the concept of a smooth ride includes any one you can walk away from with your kidneys.

Glaia's temper had been getting gradually shorter and her irritability more pronounced over the last day. I had been finding it best to keep a low profile. This is not particularly possible in a party of two, but I did my best. Bert, the cabby, however, seemed to have only slightly more observational ability than the average rotting cabbage. To say that he filled in the conversational gaps would imply that he had allowed any to occur. Nearly the entire trip to the city's harbor was filled with Bert's monologue.

"Hey, you folks from 'round here? Great town, huh? Wouldn't want to live anywhere else, yeah. Y'know, there's a place down in the village where they serve the best damned ribs this side o' Octaw. They got this special sauce, y'see, unlike anything you ever had, and it's blue. Amazing, huh? Yeah, it's blue. I know, they always tell you there ain't no blue foods, but if that's the case, then what's with the blue food coloring? That's what I want to know. And what about blue Curaçao? There's this bar in the Square that specializes in Curaçao daiquiris. That's all they sell. They're not bad but give me a good mug o' beer anyday, y'know? Our local breweries, they're the best. None of that watered down whiz they'd give you down South, or even across the river. River, yeah, you're going to the port. You can get some good deals direct off the boat. Just about anything, y'know. I got a..."

Yes, he managed to keep this up all the way. Glaia was turning all shades of mad at him and would have stiffed him on the tip had I not stepped in and paid the fare myself. I figure that anyone who could keep that monologue up deserved a big tip.

Our business on board the "City of Gansett" was brief and profitable. For a small additional fee we agreed to carry the small chest to Agency Headquarters, where we were going anyway. We were saying our goodbyes to Captain Garmon when I saw a familiar face on the next wharf over. I tried steering Glaia and Garmon back into the ship's cabin without success.

"What is it, Robby?" Glaia asked with a faint trace of irritation.

"Over there," I pointed with a small motion. "The tall guy with the black beard. Look familiar?" They both looked.

"That's Captain Flavius," Garmon identified our pirate. "Funny, I haven't seen his ship around. I wonder where he left it." I told him and he escorted us back into his cabin. "You mean Flavius is our pirate? He's a senior captain in the guild, mate, and no slouch as a wizard either. You were lucky to get away without a scratch." Glaia went to the partially closed door and continued to watch the pirate surreptitiously.

"Not quite without a scratch," I corrected him. "We both came through with at least our share of bruises. There were very few positions I could sleep comfortably in the night we left Wadir. Glaia was the same, although we're both feeling better now."

"Still," said Garmon, "You were both lucky. He's always had a reputation for ruthlessness. I'd never have guessed he'd turn pirate though. You two had better stay here until he leaves the area."

"What do we do about Flavius?" I asked.

"Steer clear of him," Garmon advised. "I'll enter a complaint with the Mariners Guild. They'll investigate."

"From what you tell me," I countered, "they may not do a thing. You said it yourself. He's senior in the guild. If your guild is anything like similar organizations I've encountered, it's just another 'Good Old Boys' network. They'll spend more time protecting his name against all attacks including one from another guild member like you. There's also a good chance that you could end up getting discredited by Flavius' countercharges, assuming he just doesn't decide to have you killed."

"There's sense in what you say, mate," Garmon conceded. "That sort of thing isn't unknown. What do you suggest?"

"Did you already report the incident of piracy?" I asked.

"Of course. Did so as soon as I hit port. Gave them a full account of the encounter and a list of all the stolen articles."

"Good. Leave it at that. All you have to do now is give the locator coins to the people in the Mint and His Majesty's troops should take care of the rest." I looked at Glaia for confirmation. She nodded.

"All right, mate. I'll do that, and thanks for the advice. You Agency people always know the right thing to do." We do?

"Captain Flavius," reported Glaia, "left the dock area a few minutes ago while you were talking and took a private coach away. We can leave now."

"Good enough. Well, Captain, it's been a pleasure," I said, rising to leave. "Maybe we'll sail together again sometime."

"You're both always welcome, mate," Garmon replied. We shook hands and parted.

"Keep a lookout for other familiar faces," advised Glaia as we left the ship. "Flavius might not be the only one from Wadir in the neighborhood. It's all too likely they could be looking for us. We're probably on the Wadir 'Most Wanted' list."

"It's nice to be popular," I noted. "Where next? The local Agency house?"

"Actually, there are five Agency houses in Greater Hatten," Glaia told me. "We'll be going to the Agency Headquarters downtown." We hailed another cab and Glaia told the driver our destination, but he seemed to have trouble understanding us.

"¿Que?" he asked.

Glaia spoke clearly and evenly, "I said 'Agency Headquarters, please.'"

"¿Que?"

"Headquarters. Agency Headquarters."

"¿Que?" I had always scoffed at the sort of person who believes that no matter what language the

person you are talking to speaks, they will understand plain English so long as you speak it loudly enough. Now, however, for the first time in my life, I began to appreciate why they do that. It hasn't so much to do with making yourself understood, the yelling just makes you feel better.

"Agencia! Agencia, oh damn, how do you say headquarters?" Glaia was rapidly blowing her cool and her recent short temper was only accelerating the process. I think that pretty much all she needed to really set her off was just one more...

"¿Que?" Yep, that did it. Glaia leapt up to the cabby's bench and grabbed him by what would have been his lapels, had his tunic come so equipped.

"Look!" she shouted, "You are going to take us to the headquarters building of the Agency, and you are going to do it right now or I'll give you a customized haircut right down to your throat. Comprehende?"

"Oh, si! Si," the shaken cabby replied. We entered the coach and it proceeded to move off at a rate of speed that I, personally, found rather faster than strictly comfortable.

"You know," I said to Glaia, "we haven't the foggiest notion of where he thinks he's taking us, do we?"

"Nope," She confirmed my suspicion with a grin. "That just makes it that much more interesting. Hey! Watch the bumps up there!"

"Si!" the cabby replied and encouraged the horses to a full gallop. The rest of the trip was mercifully short. I think we set a new land speed record for this world in the process but five minutes later the taxi came to a halt outside a greasy-windowed pawnshop. "Agencia," the driver proclaimed proudly. Glaia and I alternately stared at the pawnshop and each other.

"Time to cut our losses?" I asked, hopefully.

"Not a bad idea," Glaia confessed. We paid the cabby and left the cab. He thanked us, I think, and drove off to inflict his form of transportation on some other unsuspecting members of the public. "Oh well," sighed Glaia. "We're only a few miles away. We can be at headquarters in an hour and a half. Let's walk."

Other than size, I noted another big difference between Hatten and the other cities of Gonquin that I'd visited so far. It stank. I mean it had an unpleasant aroma that was comprised of a fascinating blend of the scents of smoke, garbage, sewage and unidentifiable, rotting, dead things. In some of the neighborhoods we walked through, I found myself longingly remembering Count Clarence's courtyard in Cushna where I would probably be under a death sentence had I stayed. Glaia seemed totally unconcerned as we walked along, but I became increasingly nervous as the late afternoon sky grew darker. As evening approached the air grew cold and I pulled my cape around me for warmth, wishing, not for the first time, that I had managed to bring a parka or at least a leather bomber jacket along with me. Anything that wouldn't keep whipping open with every gust of wind. Maybe I could find a tailor while we were in town who could make me a warm coat. If not, maybe he could add a few more buttons to this cloak that would hold it closed, like some of the others I'd seen here.

"Freeze, suckers," a high-pitched voice said behind us. Of course, the last thing we did was freeze as Glaia and I both instantly spun around to find ourselves facing a boy, no older than fourteen, tops. He had a grim, feral look to his eyes and he held a large knife, not totally unlike the average Arkansas Toothpick, in a professional manner. "I said freeze, or you get cut." We stopped moving. The look I caught on Glaia's face was a cross between amusement and annoyance. "Gimme all your money," the

youth demanded.

"Get stuffed!" Glaia responded.

"Hey! I got twelve inches o' steel that says you will," he said waving the knife in Glaia's face.

My turn. "And I'll see those twelve inches," I said, drawing my sword; it had been well-concealed by the cape and it was about time it got some practical use instead of serving to trip me up every time I tried to sit; "and raise you another twenty-four."

Sizing up his chances against me, he looked down the length of my sword and made the erroneous conclusion that I knew what I was doing. He turned and ran. Of course, he got off lucky. Glaia would have left him with something he might have called a Heidelberg dueling scar in years to come, if he ever progressed out of the gutter.

The streets were well lit, and we made our way to Agency headquarters without further incident.

Chapter Thirteen

We were deep in the Hatten downtown area where the buildings must have been over twenty stories high. I'll admit that's not much compared to some places back home, but these were the first buildings I had seen here that had over three floors.

Agency Headquarters was no smaller than its neighbors. It had none of the hominess of the Cushna office. Neither did it have the luxury hotel feel of the Gansett office. This was a big-business office building in the old style. I realized that I was just beginning to see just how large an organization I had involved myself with. Later I would start to wonder whether that involvement was a mistake, but for now I was too struck by the size of the whole thing.

Headquarters was built of stone - a gleaming tower of alabaster with a pair of library lions on either side of a wide granite stairway which lead to a tall arched portal within which were three thick plate glass doors. I was almost disappointed not to find a revolving door; it would have fit in.

The main lobby, just inside, also had the impersonal feeling of a large corporation. Polished marble floors and granite panels gave the whole room a cold feeling. Welcome to the big city, Jones. Late as it was, there was still a receptionist on duty in the middle of a round desk in the center of the room.

"You just missed the boss," she informed us. "She's working late in the office, an important client, but has left orders not to be disturbed until her morning office hours. She usually schedules interviews with arriving agents from 8:00 to 9:00 AM. Shall I pencil you in for then? Fine."

"Can we get a room in the meantime?" I asked.

"Well, we have a shortage of such rooms here at Headquarters. Our usual practice is to situate agents at the other local offices, but I can let you have a room for tonight, until the boss can assign you."

"Good enough," said Glaia.

"Sign here," the receptionist indicated on a piece of paper, "and here, and here. Thank you. Here is your room key, you have room 1928. Good night."

"So we're on the nineteenth floor," I said. "Is that good or are we in for a lot of stairs?"

"Actually," said Glaia, "it's pretty good. They didn't give us the penthouse, but that's probably reserved for the chief of operations' living quarters, anyway. And unless you've got a thing for stairs, handsome, we can take the elevator up."

"Elevator?" I, then, noticed that I had followed Glaia to a set of doors. For all intents and purposes they looked like elevator doors. Sure enough, they soon opened to reveal a small room that, had I been home, I would have recognized for an Art Deco era elevator. "I didn't think you had sufficient machinery to run one."

"I beg your pardon," Glaia protested, pressing the button for the nineteenth floor. "We're not savages after all. However, even more reliable than our machines is our magic, which is what powers this lift."

"Oh? How does it work?"

"Much like that lamp you ransacked back in Cushna. The elevator has a large battery that has been charged with a high-powered levitation spell. The biggest difference is the expense. Light spells are rather low level, as you know. But a levitation spell capable of picking up this elevator room, not to mention its contents, is far more complex. By the way, how's the magic practice coming along?"

"Not too bad," I said, quickly conjuring up three light spheres and repeating her own show-off trick of seeming to juggle three of them. "Think I'm ready to go on now?"

"Sure," she said, "you were ready a couple days ago." Now she tells me. Oh well. "In fact, you'll find the next spell is a levitation spell."

"I thought you said they were far more complex."

"The one in the book could never lift an elevator, but you'll see what I mean. Here's our floor." We got out and after a brief walk down the long hallway we found our room.

The room was actually a small suite with a living room, a bedroom, and a bath. Even though it had been a long day, Glaia wanted to go out tonight. We could rest for an hour or two and then go out.

"Hatten," she said, "never sleeps. Why don't you wash up first, I'm going to want a long, hot soak after several days on the road, okay?" It was fine by me.

While I was waiting for her, I read the next chapter in the Junior Wizard's Book of Spells.

Impress and amaze your friends and relatives with the ability to lift objects through the power of your mind alone.

This spell will allow you to lift relatively light objects without actually touching them. However, it has severe limitations. First, it will not lift anything heavier than you can lift by ordinary means and, second, the object must be within arm's reach.

The book went on to describe the actual mechanics of the spell. I would need no tools or ingredients for this spell, or rather the tools for this spell were my own arms which would ape, in small movements, what I wanted the object I lifted to do full-scale. Now that Glaia and I had discussed the laws of sympathy and contagion, I began to see those principles working in all the spells I had learned so far. This spell, obviously, fell into the sympathetic category. Well, it seemed fairly simple and outright. Like all other spells, you first get a picture in your mind of the desired results. Then you recite the incantation, which links you with the object, which in turn allows you to control the movement of the object with small hand gestures.

There was a small, thin metal ashtray on the coffee table in front of me. "Well," I figured, "this is as good a subject as any, I guess." I pictured it lifting off the table and incanted, "Tsamah lemontah takhana."

I saw the connection form between the ashtray and me, a thin green line. Then I lifted my hands slightly and the ashtray shot upwards almost faster than I could follow. The green line quickly blinked out but the ashtray kept moving until it hit the ceiling. It was flattened on impact. It stuck to the ceiling for a second and then fell back to the table, leaving an impression in the ceiling. It clattered lightly on the table before coming to rest as I stared at it in shock.

I'm sure that one of these days I'll get a spell right on the first attempt, but this wasn't the day. The ashtray had turned into a sharp-edged pancake of metal. I decided not to try the same stunt on that ashtray again. With my luck, it would end up imbedded edge-first in the ceiling. I tried the spell again with a small throw pillow that was on the couch.

The pillow shot up, but it just barely hit the ceiling. Just as well. I didn't care to get covered with down when the thing burst. I kept trying with varying results and was just starting to get the hang of the spell when Glaia finally came out of the bathroom.

"How's it going?" she asked.

"I think I've got it," I replied, giving the pillow a mid-air spin.

"Not bad. Now do two." Damn. I should have known there'd be more to this exercise than lifting pillows. "Don't look so down, Robby. You should have it pat in a day or two. It's not all that different from maintaining multiple Futaba lights."

I would have tried right away, but she was ready for a night on the town, so I got up and we went to the door.

"Uh, Robby," Glaia said, "leave the pillow behind. It'll only attract attention."

"Hmm?" I looked up. The pillow was following me around just over my head. I released the spell and tossed the pillow back to the couch.

"You're making progress, hon," she told me. "The ability to keep a spell going when distracted is a major step, but in the future try to keep everything firmly in mind. That sort of thing can backfire on you too."

"Oh?" I asked as we walked, "How's that?"

"Well," Glaia replied, "here's something that happened to me. I was on my first job with the Agency. New agents are often a little too sure of themselves, and I was no exception."

"Now, working in the Agency is a sort of family tradition for me, although with the exception of my father, who was a newcomer like you, I'm the only one who's worked for more than a couple of years. I think when Dad suggested that we work with the Agency, he had the office work of the civil service wing more in mind. Certainly my brothers and sisters have all kept to that sort of work. I guess I always was the black sheep of the family."

"Anyway, for my first job I turned down a cozy little position running messages for a senator from Banlay in favor of the chance to play spy. There I was, fresh out of school and fancying myself a femme fatale. I can still hear Mom saying, 'Dear, that's not why we sent you to the University!'"

"So instead of being a page, building up political contacts and, in general, putting my Poli. Sci. degree to semi-practical use, I was out tailing the second assistant to Duke Edmund of Ashta's Chancellor of the Exchequer. No explanations as to why, mind you, just follow him and make a report of his doings." We came to the elevator then.

"It just occurred to me," Glaia said, "that I never found out who the 'boss' was that the receptionist referred to. Let's go by way of her office." That was fine by me. On the way, Glaia continued her narrative.

"Where was I? Oh yeah. Anyway, so here I am following this guy around. I found out later that the Agency considered it a very unimportant case, which was the only reason they gave it to a novice agent. I followed that bozo around for almost a week. Then one night, instead of going home, he went to a house on the other side of town. It was cold that night, and I wasn't able to watch from inside a nearby building, so I huddled up against a building within view of the one he had entered and used a survival spell my big brother taught me. It produces a small area of comfortable and dry warmth centered around the caster. It also stops most wind, allowing only enough for air circulation."

"Well, eventually the lights in the house I was watching went out and, being young and relatively inexperienced, I soon became bored. Eventually boredom turned into sleep and while I slept I maintained the spell and it snowed heavily. Two feet of snow must have fallen while I slept. I woke up a little before first light and thought I had gone blind. The snow had drifted up around me. The warmth of the spell caused the snow to melt and refreeze as a wall of ice. By the time I woke up the wall was almost six feet high and too slick to climb."

"When I finally gave up on getting out on my own, it was light and I called for help. The only one around was the guy I'd been tailing. It was very embarrassing. I suppose I should have given up on the clandestine jobs and gone into civil service like the family wanted, but I always have been stubborn. I did, however, let the Agency know that I wouldn't take anymore divorce cases. Damn, I felt dirty turning in that report on the guy who'd helped me out. I probably would have let him off the hook, but I didn't even know why I was watching him until I'd turned in my report."

"So, anyway, I wouldn't have gotten trapped in that snow pit if I'd been paying attention to my

surroundings instead of falling asleep," she concluded. We were near a bend in the corridor approaching the Operations Chief's office when we heard voices.

"Thank you, Captain Flavius," said a pleasant contralto voice. "I'll put my top agent on your case immediately. We should have an answer for you within the week."

"Thank you, Madame Jonet," we heard the pirate captain say. "I'll look forward to hearing from you."

"Damn," Glaia whispered as we heard Flavius' footsteps approaching us. "In here, quick," she said indicating a nearby doorway. I briefly considered the ridiculousness of hiding in a broom closet, but found that we had taken refuge in somebody's office. Outside, we heard Captain Flavius walk past the doorway and continue on toward the elevator. We stayed in the office until we heard the elevator doors close, then returned to the corridor.

"Why, Aglaia," said Madame Jonet, catching us leaving the office, "What a delightful surprise. It's been years." There was very little warmth in the greeting. Actually the title "madame" was very deceiving. I normally would have associated it with a much older woman. Instead she was about Glaia's age, in her middle to late twenties.

"Well, Jonet," Glaia replied with as much warmth as Jonet had shown, "you've moved up in the world. How's tricks?" Jonet scowled for a moment, but quickly replaced that expression with her original cold smile.

"Still have that attitude problem, Aglaia? Such a pity, but then that's why you're still just a field agent, isn't it, dear. Oh, and who have we here?" she asked, looking at me.

"This," introduced Glaia, possessively taking my hand in her own, "is my partner, Robert Phillip Jones."

"You have a partner, dear? You have changed after all," Jonet said. Then a nasty gleam appeared in her eye, "Have you two been working together long?"

"Since Cushna," I replied in an attempt to evade the question. Apparently it worked, at least partially, as she turned back toward Glaia. I noticed in that instance that Jonet was the first Agency person to whom I had not been introduced as a newcomer whether overtly or by implication. I had the feeling this was something personal between her and Jonet and since there was no way to stay completely out of it, I was on Glaia's side of course.

"Well, Aglaia, what brings you to Hatten?" Jonet asked. "Just passing through, I hope."

"No such luck, Jonet," Glaia replied acidly. "Robby and I have been transferred here. We're all yours, dear." Jonet took that in, looking like her pet skunk had just turned out not to have been descended after all.

"Wonderful, just wonderful," Jonet muttered. "I assume you've already made an appointment for an interview."

"Of course. Why?" asked Glaia. "Would you rather do it now? We could go back to our room and get our paperwork."

"No, tomorrow morning will be fine. It's been a difficult day. I've had three long meetings with Captain Flavius, a senior in the Mariners' Guild. It seems some pirates destroyed his ship a few days ago and he's

been trying to get me to assign some agent to bringing the culprits to justice. I finally agreed to find him an agent a few minutes ago."

"Finding the culprits?" Glaia laughed. "That's easy. You're looking at them."

"What? Maybe we'd better go into my office," Jonet said. We did so and told her what had happened on our voyage to Lond and points west and then of the job we were on for Captain Garmon in Wadir. "Glaia," Jonet said when we were finished, "you get into more trouble than any other two agents on this coast."

"You mean," Glaia returned with an impudent grin, "that somewhere there's an agent even more active than me? I'll have to work on that."

"Oh, stop it! It was just an expression. Anyone with more trouble on their record would either be out of work or dead."

"That's a matter of opinion," Glaia purred. "When you read our packet, you'll find that we come with high praise from both Norbo and Aline." I doubted that. I knew that Aline was impressed with my performance, but to Norbo I was just another newcomer. I'd have to read the packet myself before morning.

"Well," said Jonet changing the subject, or maybe bringing it back to where we'd been, "what do you suggest I do about Flavius?"

"Not my department," replied Glaia. "You're the boss here, do you mean to imply that this is the first time you've agreed to a contract with a client who lied to you about the situation? Just tell him that you've got your best agents working on the job, and then after a week or two you can report that he or she found no traces of the person or persons involved. I thought that was fairly standard procedure."

"It's not that easy to give a senior captain the run around, especially one who's also a master wizard," Jonet responded.

"The man's also a practicing pirate," I put in, "who nearly cost you your two best agents before we even had the chance to report in. Given the chance I'd conduct him on a guided tour of his own intestines." Jonet gave me a disbelieving look at that one. Well, I didn't believe it either, but it seemed like the thing to say at the time. Certainly this wasn't a good time for modesty.

"Here, here!" Glaia agreed. "Maybe you weren't listening, Jonet, but the man is a nothing but a thief and a murderer, for all of his respectable front. Furthermore, it is part of the Agency's royal charter that not only are we not to foster and promote criminal practices, but are to work, pro bono if necessary, toward the eradication of such acts when we find them."

"I don't need you to remind me of that, Aglaia," Jonet said in a voice that was louder than she had obviously meant to use, "Look. Like you mentioned, this is my problem. I'll sleep on it and we'll discuss this during your appointment in the morning. Have you given your packet to the receptionist?"

"No," Glaia answered. "I usually hand that over in person, don't you?"

"That is the recommended procedure," Jonet conceded, "but a lot of the younger agents have taken to handing them over on making their interview appointments. I guess I've just gotten used to that. You know, dear, you are one of the older field agents. You really should think about settling down."

Glaia's temper flared at that remark. "But," she said, "all your older agents are also the best. Your own record in the field didn't exactly set the world on fire; as I remember you lasted all of two missions - neither of which was particularly successful. Besides, there are good agents still in the field more than twenty years older than me. Some of us prefer that sort of work."

"That's your own decision, Aglaia. Do me a favor and drop your packet off at the desk. I'll pick it up after I eat and read it tonight. See you in the morning," Jonet said, bringing this meeting to a close. Glaia and I got our paperwork and dropped it off with the receptionist. Finally we left Agency Headquarters. A thought occurred to me then.

"Glaia," I asked, "do I have this right? Jonet is the chief of operations here at Agency Headquarters. Does that mean she's in charge of the entire Agency?"

"Oh heavens, no!" Glaia exclaimed. "Far from it. No that just means that she supervises the five local branches of the greater Hatten area. She still has to report to the East Coast regional chief who answers to one of the members of the Agency's Board of Directors. They, in turn, are presided over by the Chairman of the Board who answers only to the Crown. In most cases the Chairman has the final say in the Agency, but because of the royal charter the Crown can step in on Agency matters, but that's only happened twice since the Agency was founded. Actually at the moment the Chairman is the king, but that's a special case. Jonet is a bit young for the job she does have. That much is true, but getting kicked out of the field was the best thing that ever happened to her. You know what they say, 'Those who can't do, administer.'"

"I got the impression that you've known each other for a long time."

"Oh, yeah. No love lost between us, though. She and I were roomies our first year at University. We got along just fine at first, but she has a streak of romantic larceny in her that I wasn't willing to put up with."

"Romantic larceny?" I asked.

"She had a habit of stealing my boyfriends. I'd thought we straightened that breach of courtesy out by the middle of the first semester, but when I caught her in bed with my fiancé a few months later... I'm still not sure if she didn't do me a favor, if he was that much of a lout. We'd only been engaged two weeks by then, but I still won't forgive the witch. Thank you for backing me up back there. I'm well aware that I implied more than there was on a couple of counts."

"Oh you weren't too far off the mark from where I stand. Besides," I said, "I don't think I like her. She certainly left me cold."

"Really?" Glaia asked. "She's really quite beautiful, you know."

"Maybe. But there's a coldness in her eyes. I wouldn't touch her for all her physical beauty. You're more my type."

"Robby, you barely know me," she countered.

"I'm trying to correct that." She had been avoiding this subject since we left Wadir. "We're going to have to talk sometime soon, you know."

"All right, but not now, okay? Let's just enjoy the night."

"Okay," I agreed. Why spoil the night with what could be a major fight if I pressed too soon, especially given her recent irritability.

"I'm sorry," She apologized, "We really will talk, hon. I just need some time to think out how I feel. So," she changed the subject, "what would you like for dinner. How about something ethnic? I know this neat little Mongolian place just a few blocks from here. Ever had Mongolian food?"

"No, I don't think so," I said.

"Trust me," she replied.

Chapter Fourteen

It turned out that back home we'd have called this Chinese. Since Chinese food has always been a favorite of mine, I found the meal quite enjoyable. The foods were subtly different than the ones I was acquainted with, which made the meal all the more intriguing. After filling up on this world's equivalent of Lobster Cantonese and General Tsao's Chicken with piles of rice all washed down with tea and rice wine, we noted that we were suffering the effects of the long day we'd had, and yawning without control, we decided to call it a night. We left the restaurant and started back toward the Agency.

"You!" a male voice said behind us. We turned to find ourselves facing Captain Flavius. Well, I was awake! Nothing like suddenly facing a mortal enemy to push all thoughts of sleep out of your mind. Glaia reacted first executing a prodigious kick to his face. While he was dazed we ran for it. He wasn't dazed for long. We soon heard his cursing behind us.

I chanced to look over my shoulder as we turned a corner and notice that we were leaving bright red, shining tracks. I pointed that out to Glaia and without missing a beat, she threw a counter spell. We stopped leaving visible tracks.

"What was that?" I asked on the run.

"Tracking spell," she answered. "I countered it with a damping spell, but he'll soon catch on to that. We need to break our trail, otherwise he'll find us again when he figures out how I'm damping his spell. Quick, let's duck into this tavern. Maybe we can lose him." It sounded like a good idea at the time.

It was dark inside, but it was still brighter than it was in the street, even with the city's magic lights. As we walked toward the bar, we had the feeling that something was definitely wrong. When we were only a few feet away from the brass rail of the bar the people sitting there turned to see who we were. Yes, there was definitely something wrong.

"Oh Hell," muttered Glaia. "A Fay bar." Back home had someone said that to me, the picture it would have conjured up in my mind was one somewhat perpendicular to this one. We were standing eye to eyes with a couple dozen of the militantly punk fairies I had come to know as the Fay.

"Hey look!" said a Fay voice behind us with coolly malevolent casualness. We were surrounded. "Citizens - let's have a little fun. Want to dance, girly?"

"Hands off, fairy!" I really don't know what got into me, I'm sure that there was a better response for me than that, but at the time it was the best I could come up with. The fairy was a six-foot six-inch, muscle-bound, professional wrestler type with pointy ears, and I don't mean that he was one of the good guys. This was the sort who'd show up in the ring, not only with his phony manager, but with three other members of his two-man tag team as well.

"You watch your mouth, boy," drawled the poor elf's version of Hulk Hogan, picking me up by my leather jerkin. I hate to mention where I kicked the big oaf and in retrospect I'm sort of sorry I had to resort to it, but it turns out that male Fay are as sensitive there as male humans.

Meanwhile, Glaia had drawn a dagger and was flourishing it in the faces of the Fay. They jumped back horrified. I guess that the old tales about fairies and cold iron are true. I drew a dagger of my own and we took a stand back to back heading toward the door.

I was wrong. They didn't jump back horrified, they merely stepped back to give themselves the room to draw their swords. Bronze swords. I made a quick mental note to myself - next time don't fool around with knives when you have a sword on your belt.

There was no time to dump the daggers in favor of our swords, which may have been just as well. Last time I drew a sword on a fairy, he sliced it in two with his own blade. We stood there prepared to die with our daggers in hand.

"Drop them," a Fay voice said behind us. "We might let you live." We dropped the knives, thereby trading one melodramatic situation for another. "Well, well," the tall blond fairy continued walking around where we could see him, "Look who we have here." Oh boy, trouble with pointed ears. We managed to duck one mortal enemy only to find another.

"Hiya, Hans, old buddy," I tried. "How's tricks?" Glaia poked me in the ribs and Hans's face darkened. There was a new scar on his face since we last met. No doubt it was a lasting reminder of that blow to the face I had given him with my sword hilt as a parting gift. "It was worth a shot," I muttered. Evidently Hans disagreed and gave me a backhand blow that sent me reeling several feet directly into two Fay who immediately threw me back. I landed face first at Hans's feet and received a vicious kick in the shoulder for my troubles. I did my best imitation of a groan and he turned to face Glaia.

Glaia, however, had not been idle during my little flying lesson. I don't know the spell she cast, but everything above knee level in the room suddenly went black. She ducked down to floor level where I already was and helped me crawl to the door.

"Can you run?" She asked me when we were outside.

"Try me," I answered. We ran across the street and around the block, then ran another block and turned another corner before we paused to see if anyone was following us.

"Wait here, a moment," Glaia said after we turned into an alley. "I'll circle around and scout out the best way back to Headquarters." I watched her jog off into the darkness of the small alley and settled back to wait. I was starting to get worried when she didn't return until I heard approaching footsteps.

"Ah there you are," came the voice of Captain Flavius from the mouth of the alley. Oops! And there I

thought the footsteps were Glaia's. He was too far away to try a sucker punch, so I tried to run into the alley instead. I got all of two steps before I felt something trip me. Then I felt myself being dragged back and there was nothing around to hang on to.

I looked in the direction I was heading and saw a stream of magical energy around my ankles. When I got near Flavius, although not near enough to do anything, I felt myself being raised up and placed on my feet. He came closer.

"So," he said, "Where's your girlfriend?" Instead of answering him I tried to hit him. My arm stopped in mid-punch. I felt it being forced back. He pulled out a large knife and chuckled wickedly. "Let's play a little game," he said waving the knife at me.

"All right," answered Glaia from behind him. He spun to face her and she stuck him with her sword, driving the point upward under his ribcage. "A sword in the gut beats a royal flush, as my dad always says," she said with a tight smile. He went down. I looked at her partially in gratitude but also in wonder at what she had said. "Some day I really must ask him what that means." I felt the magical restraints release me as she said, "You know, suddenly I feel much better. Want to call it a night?"

"Is he dead?" I asked. Glaia checked for a pulse.

"Oh yeah. Good thing too. I wouldn't want to try and match him in a fair fight," Glaia replied.

I was a bit shocked at first by what seemed like a cavalier disregard for life, but quickly remembered that he would have done the same to us after a long session of torture. She was right; the world was better off without him.

"Well, I guess we solved Jonet's little dilemma." I said finally, offering Glaia my arm. "Let's blow this gig." We turned and left the alley.

"There!" we heard from above. We looked up, it was Hans and three other Fay. They threw some sort of spell and for an instant everything went orange and it grew very hot. After that instant I found myself sitting in the alley. Glaia was next to me, already awake. All these magical attacks were getting horribly familiar. I have got to get out of this habit.

Once more I felt that I was being restrained by magic. It wasn't the same spell that Flavius used however. Hans's helpers were humming a bit. I assumed music was a part of their magic, just as it had been when Hans and Greta had attacked the witch in the woods to the north of Gansett. Unlike with Flavius' spell I was able to move a little bit, not much but about as much as one could do if tied up with rope.

Hans was in a good mood. Well heck, no wonder! He finally had us both. No little loose ends running around behind his back. And oh yes, he was lording it over us. I tried to tune out his gloating monologue by focusing on our surroundings, but Flavius' rapidly cooling body wasn't all that much more pleasant. I kept looking for a way out. I glanced over at Glaia. She was looking vaguely in front of me and trying to tell me something.

Hans noticed we weren't paying attention to his "The Fay are the master race" rap and paused to slap us a couple of times each. After that little diversion, I pretended to listen for a while. When I could, I tried to catch Glaia's eye again, but we couldn't seem to make the connection. Trying to figure out what she might have been telling me, I looked on the ground before me.

There, just in front of me, was the knife Flavius had threatened me with. Hans caught me not paying attention again and backhanded me back into his reality. While he ranted I tried to remember that spell I'd learned this evening.

Finally I remembered. Now was that knife within reach of my arms? I strained forward against my magical binding, all the while keeping my eyes on Hans.

"Hey!" called a voice from the street. "Whata y'doing in there?" Hans turned to see who was talking and I made my move.

"Tsamah lemontah takhana," I whispered concentrating on the knife. I saw the magical power stretch out and link me to the knife. I used all I had both mentally and physically to make the required hand gesture.

The knife shot up towards Hans. I'd been aiming for his heart, but my aim was way off. It lodged in his hand for a moment and then fell out leaving a large smoking hole. Evidently cold iron wasn't necessarily fatal to the Fay, but it did inflict a lot of damage. Hans screamed in a voice that must have deafened every dog within a mile radius and took to the air still screaming in agony. The other Fay lost their concentration and we were free.

"All right," I said getting to my feet, "who's next?" They followed their leader.

"Hey!" The voice on the street called again. "You all right in there."

"Just fine, Bert," Glaia called. "Just fine."

"You know me?" Bert the cabby asked, meeting us as we emerged from the alley. "Oh yeah. Now I remember. You were the couple I took to the port this morning. How y'doing? Need a ride?"

"Sure, Bert," Glaia smiled, taking my hand. "How about once - no make that twice - around the park and then back to Agency Headquarters?"

"You got it, folks!"

On the Road Again

Chapter Fifteen

"Can't you two ever stay out of trouble?" complained Jonet. It's amazing how morning light can change the way you see things. Last night Glaia and I had turned total disaster into glorious victory more often than even we felt comfortable remembering. Now, just a few hours later our new boss was calling us out on the carpet. "Jones, you weren't in this world for an hour before getting thrown in jail for counterfeiting

and being an illegal alien. Aglaia, of course you have a record of getting in and out of scrapes since you joined the Agency, and don't think I've forgotten your antics back at the University.

"But when the two of you got together... Let me see if I have it all. Jailbreak, resisting arrest, assault and battery on a county guardsman, general mayhem with a dragon? Well that's a new one. Then in Gansett you wound up attacking the clients you were sent to protect. And in Wadir you sunk the ship of a senior captain in the Mariners' Guild after breaking and entering into a warehouse." Odd. While what she said was absolutely true, that wasn't the way I remembered them. Jonet was intentionally twisting our recent adventures to make us look bad. Well, Glaia said that the two of them went way back. This was just Jonet's way of giving Glaia grief.

"And that," continued Jonet, "brings us to your little escapade last night. You finally progressed to murder, and the murder of the same captain whose ship you sank in Wadir and who had hired the Agency to bring you to justice. And I've already received complaints about how you started a bar fight and later crippled that young Fay. I'll be meeting with the Fay elders later this morning concerning the incident." Jonet's receptionist had warned us that Jonet was planning to rake us over the coals. By agreement, Glaia and I decided to wait Jonet out and let her go on until she ran out of things to say. It was a long wait, but the end was in sight now. "How long do you two think the Agency is going to continue to cover up for you?" Glaia and I looked at each other and shrugged with exaggerated motions.

"Oh don't give me that," Jonet said, exasperated. "I..."

"Madame Jonet," I said flatly, "get a life." I, for one had finally had enough.

"What!"

"You heard me. Get a life. My God, woman, you've been going on for almost an hour now about how much trouble we are, how Glaia and I are totally incapable of doing anything right, and how much trouble you're going to have in order to cover for us. What you really mean, however, is how much trouble you got yourself into by signing a contract with Captain Flavius rather than just agreeing to investigate his complaint like you should have done.

"And now," I continued, "you're just too damned stubborn to admit that we just bailed you out. And why? Because you and Glaia have had a long-standing antipathy. Well, grow up, girl! We just saved your ass."

"Yeah," agreed Glaia. "Without us, you'd still be bound by the contract which would have been in conflict with Agency rules that say you must protect all agents wrongfully accused of crimes."

"Wrongfully?" Jonet asked sarcastically. "If it weren't for your criminal actions, Captain Flavius would never have wanted an Agency contract."

"Yes, wrongfully," I replied. "Let's take this from the start. I'm terribly sorry that I didn't pop around to the Cushna chapter of the Gonquin tourist bureau for a quick read through of that fascinating pamphlet, 'Dos and Don'ts in Your New World' as soon as I blew into town, but I was a little preoccupied at the time - running for my life. As for my arrest, I'm still surprised they didn't tack on wall-walking and teasing an endangered species. And pardon me for my little jail break, but at the time it seemed preferable to death by deportation.

"As for the job in Gansett, unlike your deal with Flavius, Aline only committed to look into the problem, which we did for her. And you know full well that by the time we discovered that our clients were no

better than the witch they filed the complaint against, they had turned on us as well. Even then we inflicted only enough damage to make our own escape. And if there was any problem there I suggest you consult with Aline. She assigned us to the job and certainly seemed pleased our results.

"Furthermore, I will remind you, although I shouldn't have to, that Flavius was a pirate who attacked Captain Garmon's ship without provocation - twice. Our involvement in Wadir was the direct consequence of the job we were hired to do by Garmon. And last night, we didn't go out looking for Flavius or the Fay; they found us. Everything we did was in self-defense, and if you had any sense you'd see that. I leave anything out?" That last to Glaia.

"Close enough for Agency work," she smirked.

"Are you through?" Jonet asked coldly.

"I'll let you know if I think of anything else," I replied.

"Good," she said with deceptive mildness. "As it happens I do have a little job for the two of you. You remember that small chest you retrieved for Captain Garmon? Well, most of its contents were just duplicate report packets from various chapters in Northeast Gonquin to be forwarded to the capitol." She opened her desk drawer and pulled out a shiny silver packet that despite its color, looked like an ordinary 6 x 9 envelope. When she put it on the desk top, it clattered. It was very stiff and very hard. "However, this packet is to be rushed to a man named Gaius Hammersmith in Hoga."

"Hoga!" complained Glaia to Jonet. "I wouldn't even send you to Hoga. Forget it. We don't have to take this job and you know it. Send it by the usual courier system."

"No, you don't have to take this job," Jonet said. "However, I don't have to find work for you either. Now you'll either take this assignment or you'll both find that even Hatten can get boring after a few months of unemployment. Understand?" We said that we did. "Once you've delivered it, you are to wait for a reply."

"Wait a minute," Glaia said. "This packet was being sent via the regular in-house delivery system. What's the hurry and why the personal, special handling all of a sudden? You're just trying to get rid of us."

"Right," Jonet said with a nasty smile on her face.

"But this could take months just to make the trip."

"Then I suggest you get started right now."

"Well, we'll need our travel expenses taken care of. The Agency pays, of course."

"Of course," Jonet agreed. "Just hand in your receipts at the successful conclusion of your mission, and you'll be fully reimbursed. But I won't reimburse you for traveling first class. No private coaches. You may each draw two new pairs of hiking boots from stores and as much travel rations as you can carry."

Terrific. "How about horses?" I asked.

"Horses?" she laughed. "In Hatten? You have got to be kidding." I looked at Glaia.

"The only uses for horses in Hatten," Glaia informed me, "are for pulling vehicles and glue. Maybe we

can buy some across the river."

"If you do," warned Jonet, "you'd better be prepared to sell them again before returning here. The Agency doesn't keep stables in the city, and I won't buy them from you."

"You're going out of your way to be difficult, you know," Glaia said.

"No, Aglaia, I'm just doing my job. That's the problem with you field agents. You have no concept of what it is like in administration."

"Jonet, dear," Glaia replied with a hint of steel in her voice, "I'll have you know that not only do I know precisely what your job is, but I turned it down when old Mario offered it to me three years ago. Check your files if you don't believe me."

"Right - Mario offered you this job? If so, why are you still grubbing it in the field?" Jonet asked with skepticism.

"The pay, for me, is better in the field, dear. Think about it the next time you call me incompetent. Ready to move, Robby?"

"Lead on, MacDuff."

"What?" they both asked.

"Never mind," I said. "It was a misquote anyway." We took the packet and returned to our room to pack.

"What sort of package is this?" I asked Glaia as we proceeded to stuff the few possessions we had and all the money we earned into our packs.

"Stasis wrap," she said. "Actually, it's just an ordinary paper envelope with a stasis spell on it. It's not all that different from the one Flavius used to loot Captain Garmon's ship, except that it's not as selective. If Flavius had used the spell on this envelope, he wouldn't have been able to open the hold in order to steal the cargo."

"But couldn't this still be the same spell?"

"It could, I suppose, but this is a standard spell so that it can be opened by anyone who knows the counter spell. Why there are even letter openers you can buy that will do it for you if you aren't up to that level of mastery or if you receive a lot of packages in stasis."

"Then why stasis wrap it? I'd assumed it was for security reasons."

"Well, security is one reason," she admitted, "but not security from theft, although there are a few very difficult and booby-trapped variants that are rarely used for that reason. This sort of packaging is used to protect fragile or perishable contents. Well, we've got all this stuff packed. Let's pick up our provisions and get moving."

"What about the hiking boots Jonet offered?" I asked as we walked.

"Well, I'm of two minds on them," she admitted. "We could use the new shoes; I'm sure yours are getting

a bit worn, certainly mine are; but have you ever tried a long walk in new shoes?" I had and saw her point.

"You think Jonet was just throwing a little more oil on the fire?"

"Could be."

"Let's get them anyway," I suggested. "We can always sell or trade them later on if we don't have the time to break them in."

"Good thinking," Glaia commended me. "I should have thought of that."

Fully equipped - well, as fully equipped as Jonet was likely to allow us to be - Glaia and I found ourselves at curbside near the front door of the tall Agency Headquarters building.

"So," I asked Glaia, "why can't we hire our own coach to Hoga? Is it expensive?"

"General principles, mostly," she told me. "I just don't want any expenses we can't get reimbursed for. It's bad enough that Jonet is making us front for the mission. She's within her rights, but usually an agent is given some operating capital for a long mission like this. It's a point of honor. I won't let her get the better of me. Understand?"

"Understand, yes. Sympathize, maybe. Agree, no. I don't see why we should allow Jonet's pettiness to inconvenience us any more than we have to. Again, how much would a ride to Hoga cost?"

"I don't know," she admitted. "It's been years since I've had to make a trip I couldn't get the Agency to arrange in some way."

"Dear, that's no reason not to know how much you're spending. Oh well, I see an easy way to find out right across the street. Yo, Bert!"

"Hey, it's the love birds," Bert said as he pulled his cab up to our curb. "Where to kids?"

"How much for a ride to Hoga?" I asked.

"Hoga? You don't want to go there," he replied. "Besides, I'm strictly local service. I can get you across the river - that's as far as I go - but the long distance coach to Leghan and points west left this morning; the next one doesn't leave for a week."

"See, Robby?" Glaia said, "We'll be better off with horses. Bert, you know any good stables?"

"Sure do, also across the river. Hop in," Bert replied, "There's a good stable in Palis where I buy my horses. They got all kinds. Hey, y'ever notice how..." And so it went all the way to the stable of Bert's choice.

I let Glaia haggle for the horses. I never really rode one for any extended period before, never mind bought one. We managed to save a little when the guy selling the horses learned we were going to Hoga.

"Hoga? Why would you want to go there?" he asked. "Well it's none of my business, but I don't want to add to your misery. I'll drop the price another two gold each, but that's my final price."

What kind did we buy? Darned if I know. They were brown and had four legs each. Beyond that, well, I probably could have picked them out of a police line-up if the other choices were cows, deer, armadillos, and mastodons, but I wouldn't put any big money on that either. Glaia assured me that she hadn't ridden recently and that we'd be taking it easy for the next few days until we became accustomed to riding for long periods. I watched Glaia carefully as she mounted, so I wouldn't mount from the wrong side and we rode literally and picturesquely off into the sunset in search of an inn.

That night, having grown bored with levitation and light shows, I opened the book to the next spell.

Maelruain's Minor Telepathy

Here's a dandy little spell that will allow you to read minds. Amaze your friends by always knowing what they're thinking. Never fail an oral exam again!

"Is this thing for real?" I asked Glaia. We were sitting by the inn's fireplace. There wasn't much business, just a few locals at the bar in the next room. We were the only transients this evening and had the large common room more or less to ourselves.

"Hmm?"

"Mind reading? Oh come on."

"Let me see that," Glaia said taking the book from me. "Oh it's a first edition. The editors let that one slip by them somehow. It was omitted from subsequent printings."

"So it doesn't really work," I concluded.

"Wrong. It works just fine. But to make it work you can only ask a 'yes or no' question and it takes more natural talent and power than most people have. The description is all fouled up. You can't actually read minds with it, but it does work as a lie detector if you can maintain it long enough to get your subject to answer. Of course the spell won't compel an answer, just tell you whether or not it's true."

"How does it do that?"

"With a Futaba light sphere. When you cast the spell a white Futaba light appears above the subject. If he or she speaks truthfully the light stays white, if the subject lies it turns black, and if he or she avoids answering it turns gray. I've tried it and can hold it long enough for one question if the subject answers quickly. It's very draining but you might be able to hold it for two or three questions. Give it a shot." I read through the directions and saw that I was missing a couple of tools.

"It says to use the ivory and ebony rods that came with the book," I said.

"Well, it was a used book," she replied. "You can't expect it to come complete. Wait here I'll get you mine." She went to our room and soon reappeared with the two rods. "We'll pick you up a set in the next decent-sized town we hit. While we're at it, I'll pick out a few other basics you'll be needing."

While she had been gone I'd read up on how to cast the spell. According to the book, the ivory and ebony rods are used in many spells that employ the power inherent in dichotomies.

Now with the ivory in my right hand and the ebony in my left I did the visualization and the incantation and sure enough, a white Futaba light appeared above Glaia's head.

"Now what?" I asked.

"Ask me a yes or no question."

"Anything?"

"Yes," she smiled. The light stayed white. I felt a major drain on my power but held on to the spell. "This is just a test anyway."

"Uh, is the sky blue?" Okay, I wasn't feeling particularly creative that night.

"Oh yes, particularly now at night," she answered and the globe turned black. Another amazing drain on my power hit me then. It was like eight hours of work hitting me in a few seconds. By that analogy I'd already put in a sixteen-hour day. I could see why most people couldn't handle this spell. Somehow I kept the spell going. I could feel I only had one more question in me and since I knew she'd avoid this next question anyway...

"I think it's time we talked about you and me, how about you?"

"Robby!" She protested. The globe went gray. "Not while you have that spell going anyway." She said more, I think, but the power drain hit me again and I nearly passed out from exhaustion. The room did go all fuzzy for a bit there. Finally, I began to recover. "Robby, are you alright?"

"Hmm? Oh yeah, yeah. You're right that spell packs a real punch. I'll remember it if I ever have a bad case of insomnia. This spell would knock anyone out."

"Well if you're feeling better, maybe we should talk about common decency and trust."

"The third question? Oh, sorry about that. I knew you were going to evade the third one anyway, and to tell the truth, I'd have released the spell if it hadn't knocked me out. Besides, it's been on my mind since just before Wadir. Well, I don't think I'll be using this spell very often," I yawned heavily. "Let's talk in the morning. Okay?"

"Okay," she replied quietly. I must have made it to bed, but the next thing I remember is the morning sun shining in through the window. I was alone in the small room and having no further incentive to stay there, I got up and dressed and finally walked downstairs to the common room where Glaia was talking to the innkeeper.

"No," he was saying, "I've heard of no problems on the road to the west. There was a rash of bandits two or three months ago, but the crown sent a company of Queen's Guard up and that little problem went away. All in all you've picked a good time for traveling. A little cold, I'll admit, but as long as the snows hold off you should make good time."

"Thank you, Ewen," Glaia said. "It has been getting cold, hasn't it? Is there anyone nearby we might buy some heavy woolens from?"

"Yes, mistress. I have a small supply that I sell here for my cousin. There isn't much variety in the colors, but I'm sure I can fit both of you. Will you be needing anything else?"

"What else do you have?"

"Why don't you come see for yourselves? I have a little store in part of the barn." We went out and not only found the heavy woolen garments Glaia was looking for but several small, basic tools of magic she said I would be needing, including my own rods of ivory and ebony. Of course, that presupposed I'd want to cast Maelruain's Minor Telepathy again. I certainly wasn't planning to.

On the way out, Glaia spotted a dark brown, wool felt, wide-brimmed, floppy hat and without preamble, plopped it on my head. Then she stood back to look at the effect.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"I've been thinking you needed a hat from some time now. What do you think?" she asked holding a small metal mirror in front of my face.

I studied it for a bit but then removed the hat. "Close," I said, "but no cigar."

"Oh come on, Robby," she replied putting it back on my head, "It looks good on you."

"It's not a Stetson," I said firmly, removing the hat to make it final. "You find me something that looks like my fedora and I'll wear it."

"What's a fedora?" Ewen asked.

"What's a Stetson?" Glaia got out at the same time.

"Stetson is a famous hat manufacturer where I come from," I said and also went on to describe what a fedora looks like. "With all the excitement, I forgot that I had been wearing my favorite hat when I went out for the walk that landed me here. It must have fallen off when I hit the pole or maybe when I was running from Glorn. I miss that hat, but this one just isn't right."

"I still think this one looks good on you, Robby," Glaia said again, "but if you don't feel right with it, then I won't push."

We went back to the inn and packed. After a large, country-style breakfast, we were back on the road. It was actually a fairly late start, but Glaia said we'd appreciate time spent acquiring the woolens the first really cold night we had to camp out.

That first night out didn't come until four days later. I swear that we'd been walking more often than riding, and even that was too much for my backside. I think I could gladly give up riding horses. Anyway, up until then we had managed to find an inn each night. Now we were entering an area where the population was considerably more sparse and towns were more than a day's journey apart. In the meantime I'd been busy working an particularly tricky new spell; Persis' Particular Prolongation. This, Glaia informed me, would be a very useful spell later on. I had to agree. Its purpose was to keep another spell operating without having the caster consciously hold on to it for up to a few hours. If I ever learned a spell worth prolonging, I'd be sure to use it.

At Glaia's insistence I had taken to practicing my magic in the saddle as we rode. It was good practice she said. It was a pain in the backside, I thought, keeping that observation to myself. However it did give me practice in concentration. After four days of this, I had it down to the difficulty level of walking and breathing at the same time, but I still hadn't managed to get the prolongation spell down under any circumstances. The problem was that I had to maintain one spell - for the purposes of practice I was using the Futaba's Phantasmal Light spell - while casting the prolongation spell. The problem here was that I had not yet successfully cast the prolongation spell and my concentration on that caused me to lose my grip on the Futaba spell. Considering that this was the simplest bit of magic I knew, I figured I was missing some trick, but Glaia told me that I just had to keep working on it. It shouldn't have been more difficult to maintaining a combination of Futaba lights while levitating small objects, which I could do with ease now, but this trick was eluding me.

Our progress brought us away from the coast and deep inland to progressively more mountainous terrain. Traffic was low on the road and after the first two days we encountered very few travelers. The road itself was in fairly good condition and reminded me forcibly of the Roman roads that can still be found all over Western Europe. On the whole we made good progress.

Once I started getting used to riding I found the journey fairly pleasant. We had been stopping at comfortable inns, eating good food, and sleeping in real beds. On the fourth night it felt like a major hardship to have to camp out and eat food we prepared ourselves. Glaia was right about the woolen clothes, however. It got very cold that night. A heavy layer of frost formed while we slept, and ice had formed in the pot we cooked our dinner in. In the morning, however, Glaia had a pleasant surprise ready for me.

"Wake up, Robby! Coffee's on."

It was comfortably warm in the bedding and I was hesitant to rise, but the prospect of the first hot coffee I'd had since arriving here was enough to overcome any objection I might have had to leaving our tent for the cold, cruel world.

"Where'd you find the coffee?" I asked.

"Back in Hatten. I remembered you saying that you liked coffee and made sure I picked some up for our next trip. It's really not all that hard to find."

"Do you mean that I could have been having coffee every morning since Hatten?"

"Mm hmm, that's right. Most every inn usually has some coffee available. Admittedly, more people drink tea in the morning, but there are those that prefer coffee. A good innkeeper will make sure he can cater to any likely customer."

It had been weeks since my last cup of coffee and the caffeine content around twice that of your average cup of tea hit me with a rush like I hadn't felt since I was a teenager.

"Ah," I said as the caffeine buzz set in, "now that's living. One of the four basic food groups."

"Four basic food groups?" Glaia asked, awash to the term.

"Yeah. Caffeine, Chocolate, Alcohol and Polyvinyl Chloride," I grinned. "As opposed to the four basic poison groups."

"Which are?" Glaia prompted.

"Heavy metals, light metals, organic compounds, and health foods." When Glaia didn't get the joke I explained how the experts back home would change their minds every year as to what is and is not good to eat. It didn't take long for her to get it.

Chapter Sixteen

We'd been enjoying clear, cold, weather for the last few days, but the skies started clouding up soon after we got back on the road and the air took on that familiar smell peculiar to an approaching snow storm.

Sure enough, by mid-afternoon, there were many tiny flakes drifting down - the sort you usually get about fifteen minutes to an hour before the big stuff. The big stuff didn't disappoint us. It came down right on schedule and we found ourselves in the middle of a major storm.

"We're going to have to find shelter soon," I shouted to Glaia over the winds which were starting to howl.

"I know," she replied. "We're some ten miles away from the nearest town. I'd hoped to get there before the storm broke, but there's no chance of that now. Keep an eye out for a farmhouse or something. If we can't find something within the next half hour we'll have to set up the tent on the lee of a hill and hope for the best."

The snow got heavier and started to come down at a rate I estimated at over three inches per hour. Glaia spotted a light just off to our right and we left the road in search of its source. The trees were closely packed here with thick undergrowth and we had trouble finding our way to where we thought we saw the light. Just as I began to think that we'd lost it, we stumbled into a clearing.

I don't mean a clearing as in an area where the tree population was sparse to nil, although it was that. No, this clearing was also comfortably warm and there was no snow on the ground. In the center of this clearing a man was sitting by an invitingly large fire. Rapt in his contemplation of the flames he seemed to be oblivious to our entrance.

I looked up to see why there wasn't any snow here and saw that it was snowing all around us, but it was being deflected by some force as if we were in a giant bell jar. Glaia had described a similar spell she used, but from her description I thought the area of effect was much smaller.

"Greetings, friend," Glaia called out to the man as we approached the fire. He didn't respond. We walked around to either side of him.

"Hello," I said uncertainly. Finally he took notice of us.

"Hmm? Oh, I didn't hear you coming," he said, "Have you been here long?" He rose to greet us. He was tall, I mean really tall. The man was seven feet tall if he was an inch. He had long, curly, blue-black hair

and an uncommonly handsome face with clear blue eyes the color of glacial ice. My normal response when a girl friend mentions that some other guy looks good is to say that he doesn't do a thing for me. But in all honesty, this guy had a perfect face, and for all his height he was perfectly proportioned. If he had trouble picking up any girl in a singles bar, it would only be because she was looking for someone short, with a hunched back, and who worked days in the bell tower at Notre Dame. I could see that Glaia was affected by him and my jealousy quotient kicked in.

"Oh no," sighed Glaia. "We just got here."

"Oh good," Mr. Basketball said. He sat back down and began to study his fire again.

"Uh, excuse me," when I spoke he looked up, "but while I don't mean to intrude, perhaps some introductions are in order. Hi, I'm Robert, and this is Glaia." I stuck my hand out and he accepted it.

"Good to meet you, Robert," he said, going through the forms, but in a perfunctory manner. As we clasped hands, I found myself instantly liking this guy. Talk about mega-charisma. "Charmed, Glaia. My name is Aldrick. Please make yourselves at home" He sat back down again and started to stare at the fire yet again and then stopped himself. "Where are my manners," he muttered in his rich baritone voice. "Can I get you anything to eat? Drink? Anything?" Once we had this guy's attention, it seemed that we really had it.

"Some real food would be nice," Glaia said. All we have are travel rations with us - beef jerky and the like."

"Beef jerky?" Aldrick asked enthusiastically, "I love beef jerky! Let's trade. How about a pair of steaks, fresh baked potatoes, green salad, and a bottle of red wine?" as he spoke the mentioned menu materialized together with a beautifully set table nearby. There were three settings, but the third was only an empty plate. Aldrick guided us to the table and sat with us. Glaia reached into her pack and pulled out all the jerky in it.

"Here," she said. "Help yourself."

"Thank you," he took several pieces and gave her back the bag they came from. "These will be sufficient." He started chewing delightedly while Glaia and I dug in to our respective meals. "I know that most don't really enjoy this sort of food," Aldrick said indicating one of the pieces of jerky, "but I could eat it all the time."

"Wouldn't you get bored eating only jerky all the time?" I asked.

"Maybe, but I hardly ever get this sort of thing. I can only conjure up gourmet foods. In fact, what I gave you is the least of the gourmet stuff I do. Sorry about foisting off the filet mignon and the Santa Brigida on you. I'd have been glad to have made it something less pretentious if I could have." Aldrick sounded genuinely apologetic.

"Hey, no problem!" I said magnanimously. "We can make do."

"You really are too kind," he replied. "I really wish I could develop more of a common touch, though. That's the problem with being a god, you know. Everything is first rate, even if you would prefer a good hunter's stew or a strip of jerky."

"A god?" Glaia and I said in near perfect harmony.

"Oh, I'm sorry, did I neglect to mention that? I'm one of what My uncle Pan calls the Avant Gods. We're the gods of things that don't yet exist."

"I don't follow that," Glaia said. "How can you be the god of something if it doesn't exist?"

"It's something We are born with," Aldrick tried to explain. "You see a god is born to be the patron of something. That thing doesn't exist until the god does. It can't. Each of Us are the living embodiment of that thing and then We continue to exist only so long as our patronage exists. When that finally disappears for all time, We die. Fortunately We're a pretty savvy lot and can often transfer Our patronage through a gradual process. Take for instance the patron of the Talara. Once the place was a grassland, but when it changed to desert, She got her followers to see it as Her will - good trick that - and so wasn't replaced by a younger god. As long as a god has something to be patron of, He has life.

"What that thing is though, can be pretty tricky to discover. The first few generations had it pretty easy. Time, space, the universe, They are what They are and that identity is pretty self-evident. Even the Earth and her various components - mountains, seas, deserts - are readily understood. But geographical and cosmological features don't come into existence everyday and a lot of Us get to be the patrons of other sorts of things - crops, wisdom, wine - man-made objects can be the worst. Great-uncle Bacchus must have spent two millennia trying to figure out what wine was."

"You're using Greco-Roman names for the gods You've mentioned," I pointed out. "What about the other pantheons?"

"Oh. Those were created in the minds of man, mostly for his own convenience. There's really only one set of gods, but people like to feel that their gods are theirs alone, so some of Us get many names, one for each culture that worships Us. Take My great aunt Venus; She also goes by Aphrodite, Ishtar, Astarte, Innana and a lot more besides, and don't even get Me started on Gaea.

However some of Us get only one name. My cousin is the god of a mountain near the South Pole that hasn't even been discovered by men yet, so He only has one name. Another cousin of mine is the patron goddess of a small spring on the other side of the Western Sea. Naturally, She doesn't receive any worship from outside that area and so only has one name too. The Avant Gods only have one name each too, those given to Us at birth."

"How do You learn what You are the patron of then?" Glaia asked. "Do You just hang around until something likely comes along and then try it on for size?"

"Sometimes. Just because We don't know what we are the gods of, doesn't mean that it can't exist. My brother, Antony, is the god of pizza. Well, as far as We can tell, pizza was around for at least a decade before He stumbled on it one day while wandering around Hatten. Of course it gained in popularity once He started active patronage of it. He makes a really good pizza, by the way.

"But usually We find out what We're the gods of and then inspire likely mortals to 'invent' the objects of Our patronage. Now My girl friend, Serta, is the goddess of mass transportation." He had been looking a bit less distracted until he brought Serta up. Now he started looking very depressed. "It took Her a century or two to work that out, but a couple decades ago She realized just how that differed from more private modes of transport and now you have the public coaches going from town to town and the taxi cabs in the larger cities like Hatten and Gonquin City. She tells me She's working on something called a bus next. She got lucky. Her patronage was another self-evident one. Her dilemma was more a matter of how to apply Herself. She just can't understand how the rest of Us have such a hard time of it." He

lapsed into silence again, then continued, "Take another brother of mine. He's supposed to be the god of fast food, and He doesn't even know what that is."

"How about a bacon cheeseburger on a bun with fries and a shake?" I offered.

"What?" both Aldrick and Glaia asked.

"Well, first you take some ground steak, form it into a patty and grill it. While you're at it, you can grill the bacon. Then melt some cheese on the patty and put the bacon on top of that. Put the whole thing between two halves of a roll of some sort and that's your bacon cheeseburger. For the fries, just cut a potato in to thin rectangular solids and fry them in deep fat until golden brown. Now for the shake you'll need some ice cream."

"I know what that is!" Aldrick exclaimed, "My cousin, Helewise, invented that a few weeks ago. How do you know about it?"

"Robby comes from another world," Glaia explained. "Obviously the gods of that world are a bit ahead of you here. Uh, no offense meant."

"None taken. This is great. What do you do with the ice cream?"

"Any number of things," I replied. "Usually I'd mix it with either milk or soda and then blend it all together, but there are those who would float the ice cream on top of the soda, and of course you can use flavored syrups and any flavor ice cream that appeals to you."

"All this sounds great, and I'll have to tell Helewise about that, but why do you call this fast food? It sounds like there's a lot of preparation to me. It would take a lot of time to serve by non-magical methods, wouldn't it?"

"Not if you use an assembly line," I replied.

"Hey! I know the god of assembly lines." Oh good, I thought I wouldn't have to explain that until He said, "What is an assembly line anyway?" So, I explained the concept of an assembly line, and followed up by explaining how that could be used to serve up certain types of food quickly.

"If you know so much, maybe you can help Me with My problem," Aldrick said.

"Okay, shoot."

"Well, I told you about my girl friend, Serta. I've been seeing her for a couple of centuries now, ever since She came of age, which for Us is around a hundred years old. Before She knew She was the goddess of mass transportation, everything was wonderful. We spent most of Our time together just reveling in Our love. I remember one date We went on that lasted the better part of a decade. But then She found her patronage and everything changed. There I was, over a millennium old and I still hadn't found mine. I asked Her to marry Me but She refused until I became a patron.

"So I started wandering around on quest. I talked to all my relatives, but They weren't able to help Me until I at least knew what the name of My patronage was. Then, maybe They could help Me work it out. Then, ten years ago, I was busy getting drunk at Brunhilda's Bar and Grill in Valhalla when Siegfried suggested that since the gods couldn't help Me, maybe I should try talking to a mortal, perhaps a wizard.

"The next three and a half years I tried interviewing wizards. They were very polite and understanding, but none of them had any notion as to how a deity can find His patronage. In fact, most of them never even realized that it was a problem. After that I got really depressed. I took to drinking as a regular part of My diet. For one year it was an exclusive part of My diet. Then finally, I achieved something extremely difficult for a deity. I got a hangover. Last time that happened it was the patron god of a large volcano in the South Oriental Ocean who got hung over. By the time He was done, the island was gone. So was He.

"Well, I'm not a complete fool. After the hangover, which lasted a bit over a year, I decided to stop drinking, at least until I complete My quest. After that, I probably won't be too hot on the idea either.

"Finally I ran into My big brother Baldarich and He suggested that I consult the Oracle. Now there's only one oracle powerful enough to answer divine questions. It's situated halfway across the universe in the center of a supernova that should have burned out eons ago. Even We don't know what keeps it going but the trip is dangerous to even the most powerful gods. I spent a full year preparing for the journey there and another year getting there and back.

"It was terrible. I spent all the time getting there and the Oracle gives Me a one-word answer. And it didn't even make any sense. So I returned home and started asking My relatives for their help again. Then I tried the mortal wizards I asked the first time around, at least those I could still find. So maybe you can tell Me," he said desperately. "What the hell are video-games?"

"Video-games?" I laughed. "You're the god of video-games?"

"Please, Robert. It's not a laughing matter. It means everything to Me. Can you help Me?"

"Yes," I replied. "I think I can. Okay, listen up. A video-game is played on some sort of viewing screen."

"A viewing screen?" Aldrick asked. I tried to explain the concept of television. No doubt that somewhere in the cosmos is some poor deity desperately in need of the information, but I got nowhere until Glaia suggested a magic mirror.

"Magic mirror?" I asked.

"Yeah," she answered, "They're used for very important, long-range communication and are hideously expensive, but it's a start. Maybe your idea for an assembly line can cheapen the process a bit. Anyway, it seems to me that it would only take a subsidiary set of spells to display a game board on the surface of a magic mirror."

"What I don't understand," said Aldrick, "is how that would differ from an ordinary board game."

"Well, you could play board games that way," I conceded, "but the real difference of a video-game is motion. They move and you have to deal with a moving target."

"Can you give Me an example?" Aldrick asked.

"Okay, here's a relatively easy one. It's a good place to start. It's monochrome and very simple. You have a small 'ball' of light going back and forth across the screen, er, mirror, and each player controls a sort of 'paddle', that is, a line of light several times longer than the ball is wide." I went on to describe the rules and play of the game. "Understand?" I asked at last. "It's called 'Pong'."

"I think I can follow that. Let Me try to work it out for a bit." Aldrick walked over to his fire and thought for a while. Glaia and I finished our meal and refilled our wine glasses, finishing off the bottle. We sipped the wine, occasionally glancing over at Aldrick. He looked like He had gone back to staring at his fire, but every so often we heard Him say something we couldn't quite catch.

We were just finishing the wine when He shouted, "I've got it!"

We ran over to see what He came up with. He had produced a magic mirror like Glaia had suggested, except that this one floated in mid-air. At Aldrick's command, the mirror went black and a fairly accurate version of Pong started playing itself as we watched. "What do you think, Robert? Does it look right?"

"It looks just fine," I said. "Where are the controls?"

"I'm still working on that," he admitted, "but I wanted to make sure that it looked right."

"You got that, all right. You will want to add a running score to the display, but other than that it looks fine."

"Thanks. This means more to Me than you can ever know," Aldrick enthused. It was fairly late and Glaia and I had had a long day. After making sure that our horses were happily grazing to one side of the protected area, we excused ourselves, set up our tent, and eventually fell asleep.

It was still snowing in the morning and Aldrick was still working on the controls for his first video-game. He paused briefly to conjure up a champagne breakfast with Eggs Benedict, strawberry crepes, and, in an attempt to get a bit earthier, bagels, cream cheese, and lox. At Glaia's prompting He also provided coffee, Mocha-Java - with real Yemenite Mocha, no less - and a large pot of tea - His own special blend, He said.

The storm kept up all day and my time seemed evenly split between Glaia coaching me in my attempt to produce a prolonged Futaba light and Aldrick needing my help with His Pong game. After a couple of hours I finally managed to prolong a reddish orange Futaba light. Once done, the spell became easier for me to perform. By noon or so, I got it nine times out of ten and our sheltered area was filled with various colored Futaba lights and a few other floating objects as well. So far none of them had winked out, nor had any of the floating things fallen.

"Glaia," I asked, "what if I need to turn the prolongation spell off? Is there a counter?"

"Of course," she replied. "Every spell has at least one counterspell. It ought to be the next spell in the book." I opened the book and found it.

Nichasius'
Minor Negation

This neat little spell will not only help you bring a show to flashy conclusion, but will also help you clean up the lingering effects of your practice before your parents discover the mess you've made.

Nichasius' Negation spell will counteract any spell in this book whether naturally long lasting or prolonged with Persis' Prolongation as long as it was cast by the same magician attempting to negate it.

"Better try to negate each one at a time. It's better practice that way," Glaia suggested after I had finished reading the instructions. The spell was unlike anything I'd learned so far. Evidently all negation spells must be tailored to the spell they are countering, although the incantation remains the same. So if I were countering Maelruain's lie detection spell, I would need to hold the ebony and ivory rods tip to tip as I had to cast it in the first place. Of course just removing my conscious or subconscious control from them could negate that spell, like most of the others I'd learned so far. The Prolongation spell, which was the spell I was about to negate, utilized a small polished piece of granite as a magical tool, so I needed to use it again for the negation.

Concentrating on one of the Futaba lights, I cast the spell. All the lights disappeared. Overkill again. However the dagger and three small stones were still being levitated. I walked over to the dagger and cast the spell again. This time, as I had been forced to do so many times before, I held back the full force of my will. At least that's the way I thought of it.

It worked. Only the dagger was released this time, but I had been standing a little too close to the floating knife when I negated the prolongation and had to duck back out of its way when it promptly fell to the ground point first, dead center between my feet. I was a bit shaken and when I tried to do the same with each of the three rocks, which had been orbiting each other, I released all three at once.

"Well," said Glaia, "practice makes perfect. Try again."

"Before you do," interrupted Aldrick, "could you take a look at My game here? I think I finally have the bugs out of the controls." I needed a distraction just then, especially since I was going to have to cast all the lights and levitate the stones - no more dagger juggling for a while - all over again and then prolong their spells before I could work on the negation spell again.

Aldrick, at my suggestion, had packaged up His version of Pong in a tall box similar to those I'd played games on in video-arcades. Having had the idea for the game, He really had all he needed to give some likely mortal the inspiration to "invent" it, but He was an enthusiast. Also, He really wanted to play the games. This must have been a natural, or maybe supernatural, part of His make-up. After all Bacchus liked to get drunk, reputedly. So of course the patron of video games would enjoy playing them.

Spells, it seems are not so different from computer hardware and software once you get beyond a certain level of complexity. That realization had helped me master the prolongation spell. One of Aldrick's big problems at first had been that the start button activated a spell that reset the game back to the beginning. This was, of course, what it was supposed to do, but it also reset the game if you accidentally hit it during a game.

Aldrick had to devise a dual conditional spell so that it would only bring you to the beginning if a game was not already in progress. That may sound easy, but Glaia assured me that it was at least two levels above anything I'd done so far.

Then He wanted to experiment with different control mechanisms. "Why not," He had asked, "make the edge of the mirror touch-sensitive with the paddle appearing where ever the player puts his finger. That would give him direct control just like in some field games I've seen."

I started to point out that on a game screen of the size He was using each volley would be too long, but I didn't make my case well. Instead I let actions speak for words. The first volley took twenty-five minutes to play out. Aldrick won it because the gods don't get tired as easily as out-of-shape novice wizards or

so I keep telling myself. I suspect that the god of video-games has perfect eye-hand coordination too.

Aldrick's next version of the game had paddle controls that felt like the familiar rheostat paddles I was used to from back home. This time the game only lasted about ten minutes, still a long game, but it was improving.

"Well?" He asked.

"Almost perfect," I admitted. "It still runs a little slow. You should speed up the ball a bit, and maybe add a few more potential vectors for it when it bounces off the paddle. Other than that, You're there."

"Great!" He said. "It won't take Me more than a minute." I waited. This time the game lasted just under five minutes, much better. The final score; Video-god - 11, Junior wizard - 6. Considering who I was up against, I was rather proud of that.

"Congratulations!" I said offering Him my hand. "You have your first game."

"Thank you," he replied with becoming modesty. "Let Me try working out a couple variations." He went back to work. While we'd been playing games, Glaia had started preparing a stew with the supplies we'd been carrying. The snow outside continued to pile up around the edge of our magic clearing. I saw now how Glaia had been trapped during the storm on her first mission. At least two feet of snow had fallen while we waited the storm out in the protection of Aldrick's spell, but all the snow that would have fallen in the clearing, had been pushed to the edge and now stood about five to six feet high with the inner surface melted and refrozen into a slick icy wall. I only hoped that Aldrick, the Video Kid, wouldn't abandon us here in His enthusiasm to spread the word.

I lit the fire for the stew. It had been a while since I'd had the chance to practice that spell. While the stew cooked I continued to hang prolonged Futaba lights and self-juggling stones up on the side of the protected area away from where Aldrick was working. I took a break and noticed that Glaia was reading a book.

"Another magic text?" I asked.

"No, just a piece of fiction," she answered. "I picked up a few used books in Hatten. it passes the time and we could be here a while."

I looked at the cover. "Sabina's Summer Passion?"

"It's mindless entertainment," she said defensively. I let her go back to her reading. As trashy as it was, it was probably better than most daytime television.

An hour later when the stew was ready, I strolled over to where Aldrick had been working. There were now three nearly identical Pong games, differing only by the actual display on each one. One was His original. Another gave each player two paddles to control, one an inch further in from the edge than the other. He was playing on the third, a one-player version of the game.

"Hi, Robert!" He greeted me, "This is working just great. Tell Me, though. How can you win against the one player game?"

"Huh? Let me see." A quick look showed me that he had programmed or spelled - or whatevered - the game to always return the volley. "You might want to put a delay on the game's paddle so that while it

always makes the right move, you might be able to out maneuver it."

"Oh. I'll try that. What is that wonderful smell?"

"Glaia made a sort of stew for lunch, You hungry?"

"Gods don't get hungry, Robert, but We do enjoy eating nevertheless, and I love stew. I just wish I could conjure them for Myself."

"You could try cooking the old fashioned way," I suggested.

"What?" He looked at me blankly, like He could hear what I was saying, but it was in some language He had never heard.

"Nevermind. How about setting a table for us, unless You'd prefer to picnic." He quickly produced a fine dining table with all the settings. We helped ourselves and sat down to eat. Aldrick seemed torn between his love of common food and His newfound love for video games. After a full minute of trying to relax and enjoy the meal, we found ourselves talking between bites.

The afternoon was pretty much a repeat of the morning. Aldrick kept working on Pong variants and I worked on both the prolongation and the negation spells. Glaia curled up with her book and the snow continued piling up. Sometime around dusk Glaia and I were talking to Aldrick. I was explaining some of the more advanced video games of my world and Glaia was making helpful suggestions for still more games. Her ideas were far more creative than mine since I was mostly just repeating what I had seen, while her ideas came completely from her own imagination. Aldrick was getting more and more excited by the moment.

Suddenly he said, "I've got to tell Serta about this! Now We can get married." Abruptly He disappeared. "I'll be right back," we heard Him say from out of the ether.

Chapter Seventeen

The area stayed warm even after Aldrick left. When He didn't return after an hour we had dinner. Then we talked for a while. Glaia still didn't want to go into her life story although she listened to bits and pieces of mine and she would discuss how she felt about various things. Our attitudes were not all that different on important issues for all the difference between our worlds.

The storm finally ended early in the evening and by the time we went to sleep there were stars visible above us. Throughout the night, however, the winds continued to howl and the snows continued to drift so that in the morning the icy wall around us was over twelve feet high and Aldrick had still not returned.

"The gods," commented Glaia, "have got no sense of time."

"Oh? You've met a lot of Them?" I asked. How would I know? Maybe the gods here hold regular office hours.

"No, not at all. In fact outside of mythology, I don't know anyone who has. But it stands to reason doesn't it? I mean They live forever, or as near to as makes no difference. If Aldrick says He'll be right back, we could be dead of old age and to Him it would be a blink of the eye. Look at all that snow and ice."

"You think we should work on getting out of here. Those ice walls look pretty high."

"They'll be tough to break too. Remember, this has happened to me before."

"Maybe you could cast that survival spell of yours so that it intersects the ice wall." I suggested.

"Good thinking, Robby," she replied, "but the spell automatically centers around the caster and its area of effect is so small that I'd practically have to be standing in the ice to do the job. Besides we could chip handholds in the ice faster than the stuff would melt."

"Well, do you know any other heat generating spells?"

"Only that ignition spell I taught you, and that only works on burnable materials. We might want to wait until that wind stops, too, but it's not a bad idea to work out some sort of way out of here. It will give us something to do in any case."

"So, what do you think? Handholds, or just chop our way out?" I asked.

"Here's the axe," she said, reaching into her pack. "Give it a try." I took it and walked toward the edge of the clearing. There was something wrong. I noticed that snow was starting to get inside the clearing and a layer of ice sloping up toward the ice wall reached three feet into the clearing.

"This seems odd, Glaia," I called to her. "I checked this out yesterday and the ice wall went straight up then with some very wet ground around the edge. Now it's all frozen and I swear the clearing is getting smaller."

"Oh oh," she said when she came over to look for herself. "Aldrick's spell is deteriorating. Even a god's magic has to be maintained, unless made permanent."

"Can we prolong the spell?"

"Prolong a god's spell? I can't. What your little book didn't say, Robby, is that the power that goes into a prolongation spell must be at least as much as went into the spell it is prolonging. The book doesn't bother mentioning that since it assumes that you'd only be prolonging a spell of your own. On the other hand," she said as the clearing started shrinking at a visible rate of speed, "give it a try. You might be able to handle the power requirement. Give it all you've got."

I prepared the spell and with every bit of concentration and mental effort I had in me, I cast it. An instant later I found myself lying on my back. The view was pleasant, however. Glaia was watching me with great concern on her face.

"Robby, don't try to move yet. How are you feeling?"

"Lousy," I answered. "What hit me?"

"Energy drain. You taxed all your reserves when you cast the spell and passed out until you could recharge a bit."

"Oh yeah. I remember now. Did it work?"

"Sort of. You slowed it down a lot. It's shrinking now at only a few inches per hour. You've been out for four hours. Think you're up to sitting up?"

"It's worth a try. I could use an aspirin, or at least some water to drink. This is the first time I had a hangover without the party first. I'm not sure I like the arrangement." I tried to smile but it must have looked more like a grimace.

"What's an aspirin?" Glaia asked as she helped me to sit up.

"A kind of pain killer," I replied. "Very good for headaches. Got anything like it?"

"I have some herbs that might help. I'll make an infusion for you. While I'm doing that why don't you have some soup? I mixed it up while you were out. I figured you'd need some nourishment when you came to." She got a bowl of soup for me then went to put some water on to boil.

"Chicken soup?" I said after tasting it.

"Can't hurt," she replied. "I picked up some bouillon packets along with our other supplies back in Hatten." It helped. Actually, as I ate the soup I started feeling more human. By the time she brought me a very bitter cup of tea I had forgotten my request for aspirin. But I drank the tea anyway; she wouldn't let me get up until I did. It took half of Aldrick's leftover wine to wash the taste out of my mouth.

Eventually I got up and inspected my handiwork. I've said before that the caster can see the magical forces he controls. Before I tried to prolong Aldrick's protection on the area, the interface between the clearing and the outer world was invisible. Now, however, I could see a transparent, rosy glow all around us. Glaia was right; the interface had moved maybe a foot since I had last seen it.

"How long do you think it will last?" I asked Glaia.

"I'm not sure," she said. "That Futaba light you left hanging last night is still there and you put a lot more into prolonging the shield. I'd say that we have at least two days. After that we're out in the cold and at the bottom of a pit."

There was a sudden flash of light then and two tall figures materialized. One was Aldrick, the other was an almost equally tall lady. She had long blond hair and blue eyes flecked with gold and was clad in a long, deep blue, silk gown.

"Hey, friends," Aldrick greeted us, "I'm back. This is My fiance, Serta. Serta, these are My new friends, Aglaia and Robert."

"I'm pleased to meet you both," Serta said without offering Her hand as Aldrick might have. "Aldrick and I owe you a debt We can never repay."

Aldrick had such an unassuming, ingenuous way about Him that I had to constantly remind myself of His divinity. Serta, however, was very different. One could tell right away that She was not human. The way She carried herself, the way She spoke, you could tell that She knew who She was and that She wanted

you to know it too.

"I'm sorry We didn't get back to you sooner," Aldrick apologized, "but We were a little, ah, preoccupied, you know?"

"It's okay," I assured him. "We managed to keep busy."

"You must have been," he said. "I expected to find you two freezing, when I got back. My heat shield shouldn't have lasted this long."

"It didn't," I replied. "I had to prolong it."

"Hmm? Oh, I see now, it is a bit smaller, isn't it. Good job, though. There aren't many mortals that could have done even this much. You are a wizard, aren't you?"

"Not really," I admitted. "I'm still learning the basics."

"Keep working on it, Robert," Serta said with a smile. "The world needs more wizards of your potential magnitude." Aldrick steered me over to one side of the clearing before I could devise a suitable reply.

He seemed a bit nervous. My first thought was that He had some revelation concerning Serta. After all They hadn't seen each other in quite some time, perhaps She had fallen off Her pedestal overnight. However, my suspicions in that quarter were both unjustified and untrue. Actually, He just wanted to make sure that He completely understood all that I had told Him.

"Now," He said, "Could you run over the evolutionary progression of the games once more, please."

"Well, I think they could be introduced in whatever order You think best. You know this world better than I do, but my suggestion is to start with Pong, then hit them with Space Invaders, Asteroids, and Breakout. When that starts to pale, You should have the full color games available. I'd say to start with Pac-man, then Donkey Kong and Centipedes. Then try Dragon Slayer and other games of that ilk, and eventually wow them with Double Dragon. If we mere mortals haven't come up with whole loads of variants of our own by then, we're hopeless, You know?"

"Great!" Aldrick said enthusiastically, "Any other suggestions?"

"Just let Your imagination go wild. If one game flops, just try another. Also try designing a few of Your own. Build on the fantasy elements of this world. Remember these games are a release from the mundane pressures of life and make them increasingly tougher and more complicated, but don't forget to throw in the occasional simple game. They'll always be popular, especially with new players. Oh, these games are going to be expensive at first and will probably only be available in businesses that either use them as an attraction for customers or that specialize in them, so You'll need variety within a year or two. But also work on cheaper versions for use at home. The market will really boom once You have home models. Somewhere there must be a god or goddess - maybe more than one - that is working on home viewing-screens, or some such. A unit that is compatible with those will be easier to market. Got it?"

"Yes, and thank you."

"My pleasure. Feel free to call on me any time." We walked back over to where Glaia and Serta were sitting in the grass chatting like old friends. Okay, so maybe my first impression of Serta's aloofness was way off. They broke off as we approached.

"So, all finished, dear?" Serta asked.

"Yes, for now. Robert was most helpful," Aldrick replied.

"Good. Robert, Aglaia," Serta said, turning to us, "As I said, We will be forever in your debt, but perhaps I can make a small start. This storm has held you up for days, but I can give you quick transport to your destination. It's My specialty. Where are you headed?"

"We're on our way to Hoga," Glaia replied.

"Hoga?" Serta asked with a little dismay, "My dear, what would you ever want in Hoga?"

"Well, it's business. You know?"

"Well, I'd be doing you no favors in getting you there. I'll tell you what. I'll take you to Hoga now and when you want to leave, just invoke this," she said, giving Glaia a small brass coin with a hole in its center in the shape of the letter "H", "and you can have further transport to anywhere you wish."

"What is it?" I asked, straining to see it. On it were emblazoned the words, "Hatten Metropolitan Transit Authority."

"Well," said Serta, "when I finish working out the details it will be a subway token, but for now it will summon My prototype bus." She made an off-handed gesture and a fair approximation of a city bus appeared in the clearing. "All aboard!"

We boarded the bus. In the driver's seat sat a comely nymph in a blue uniform. She smiled at us as we boarded, found seats for ourselves, and found some stalls in the back for our horses and packs.

"Hoga, Denise." Serta instructed her.

"Hoga?" questioned the nymph. "Oh well, You're the boss. Hoga it is." The door swung closed and the bus rose into the sky and flew off to the west. I looked back and saw the clearing as it was surrounded by a hill of snow and ice that ended abruptly on all sides by the cliff with which I was already more than familiar. Thinking about it now, I'm not sure how well we would have managed in the deep snow outside the clearing. It's just as well Aldrick and Serta came along when They did.

The trip on this flying bus was exceedingly smooth, with none of the air turbulence and noise I had come to expect from flying in airplanes. The flight lasted about half an hour during which time Serta served us tea, coffee and small foil bags full of salted peanuts. We came in for a vertical landing in the center of a mid-sized city situated along the southern shore of a large body of water. Glaia and I lead our horses out of the bus and bid farewell to our friends the gods.

"You know," we heard Aldrick say to Serta as we started moving away from the bus, "Hoga might not be such a bad place to beta-test My new game."

"Beta-test?" Serta asked.

"A term Robert used..." At that point Glaia and I had walked out of hearing range.

"What next?" I asked Glaia.

"We might as well find the Agency House. We can find Gaius Hammersmith in the morning. Aldrick's clearing was real comfortable for winter camping, but a real bed would be nice, don't you think?" I had to agree. "Oh, you know, we might want to keep the part about our interactions with the gods quiet."

"Why?" I asked.

"Well, we're not likely to be believed. In fact anyone we tell it to is likely to think we're crazy, and I'm really not up to being locked up until we can prove our sanity, if ever. Got me?"

"I'm with you. The best we could hope for, you say, is acute and terminal unemployment?"

"You got it."

Delivery in Thirty Days or It's On Us

Chapter Eighteen

According to our instructions, the local Agency house in Hoga was somewhere in the downtown area. However, the town was larger than we had expected. We couldn't find the right street and the locals seemed to delight in giving us the wrong directions, or maybe they just didn't know. Either way, we walked for a long time through Hoga's red brick-cobbled streets from which snow had been cleared and was now piled up on what I suspect would have been the sidewalks in warmer weather. We must have seen the worst of the storm out in the woods. Here in the city I estimate they only got about four inches.

Hoga was governed by Baron Graham II and his Committee of Counsellors. In most cities in Gonquin this would not normally have been something I would have noticed. In fact, this was the first town or city in Gonquin, with the exception of Cushna, where I had taken note of the local ruler's name. This is not surprising since most local nobles kept a relatively low profile, a stance encouraged by the Crown. In Hoga, however, Baron Graham's portrait was posted at least once on every block of the business district, and many buildings and a public park had been dedicated to him. This minor fact, made it easier for us to eventually find the Agency house there.

After wondering around for an hour, we found the Baron Graham II Municipal Guardhouse and walked in to get more accurate directions than we had received so far. The Captain of the Guards was a polite, middle-aged gentleman who, over a cup of tea, gave us the directions we needed and also supplied us with a map of the city. It turned out that we were only two blocks away from our destination.

"I don't understand," I told Glaia after we left the guardhouse. "What's so bad about Hoga? Practically everyone we met on the way seemed to think we were heading into Hell. It's not a bad town, all considered."

"Well," Glaia replied, "it's a matter of reputation, I guess. Part of the problem is that for all its size, it's the biggest small town in Gonquin, if you know what I mean. And then, the politics here always make the most interesting court gossip. Strange things just seem to happen here."

"Strange?"

"Yeah. Not supernatural, mind you, or inexplicable or even unheard of, just the sort of stuff that could happen anywhere. Only here it seems to happen more often. So after a while it became a joke."

"Oh, you mean 'first prize - a one week vacation in Hoga, second prize - two weeks'?"

"Right," Glaia acknowledged the old joke flatly. "Here we are at last."

The Agency house here was very similar to the one in Gansett, a five-story office building, only this one was made of sandstone while the one in Gansett was faced with granite. Inside it was very similar too. Like most Agency houses, it was very similar to a hotel. We checked into a room and made an appointment to speak to the resident chief the next morning.

We decided that we would eat in the Agency's in-house tavern and spend a quiet evening in our room. Well, we were half right. We did eat in the tavern. It was a pleasant enough meal and we splurged on a bottle of good wine with which we toasted both Aldrick and Serta and their patronages. There were a few other agents in that evening and when we started toasting the gods, they joined in, but I think we raised a few eyebrows when we drank to "The Video-god!" Oh well, they'd find out. I noticed that while they hadn't the foggiest notion of who or what they were drinking to, it didn't stop them from joining our toast.

When we had finished our meals, we moved into a small back room to quietly enjoy our after-dinner drinks. Glaia was drinking a dark violet liqueur and I had triumphantly persuaded the bartender to produce a passable version of Irish coffee. Once I had explained how it was made several other agents wanted to try it too. As we entered the back room, the barman was busily brewing more coffee and whipping more cream.

There was an odd dartboard in the back room, similar to a Yorkshire board, but with the sections bent into a slight spiral. I was about to ask Glaia about the rules of the game when an older man entered the room with a "Gonquin Coffee" in hand.

"Glaia," he said with evident pleasure, "it is you. What ever are you doing on this side of the kingdom?"

"Sir Degarre! This is a surprise," Glaia returned. "I might say the same to you."

"Ah, little girl, but I asked you first," Sir Degarre countered.

"Tell me anyway, Degarre."

"Funny, that always seemed to work when you said it to me."

"That's different," Glaia said with a smirk. "I was just a kid."

"Compared to me you still are," Degarre pointed out. "Oh well, I've been out to the west coast as an envoy to the Krawaiian Empire."

"Degarre, this is Robert," Glaia introduced me, "my partner." Sir Degarre's eye-brows did a slight twitch; the significance was lost on me, but Glaia answered it with a small but emphatic nod.

"Pleased to meet you," Sir Degarre said, extending his hand.

"And you, Sir Degarre," I replied.

"Please," he said, "Let us drop the titles, hmm? I've known Glaia here since she was born, and anyone who can come up with such a delightful drink as this," he held up his coffee drink, "should be my friend for life." Hyperbole to say the least. Once again, I was being accepted on Glaia's say so. Then again, perhaps Degarre's friendship was as easily won as that.

"How long were you in Krawaii, Degarre?" Glaia asked.

"A little over a year and a half. Two years if you count travel time. After Viscount Peregrine was assassinated I was sent to serve as acting ambassador until Her Majesty could find a more permanent replacement. I was beginning to think the dear lady had decided to let me rot there. Anyway, I'm on my way back to the capitol. Your turn."

"We had a minor difference of opinion with the resident chief of Hatten and she decided to get us out of her hair for a while."

"Still having troubles with Jonet, are you? I'd heard she got the Hatten post after you turned it down. Oh, you didn't think I'd heard, hey?"

"I didn't make an issue of it. How did you find out?"

"Mario and I keep in touch from time to time. You really disappointed him, you know. Jonet was very much his second choice."

"I could never take that job," Glaia said. "You know that."

"Aye, girl, I know it. But what were you doing in Hatten? I'd heard you were further up the coast. Boriston wasn't it?"

"Cushna."

"Cushna?" Degarre was surprised, "You were out in the sticks, weren't you? You might as well have been out on the Claw."

"I was," Glaia said brightly, "occasionally. It's a very pleasant place to spend a summer vacation. Nice beaches and a certain amount of catering to the few tourists they get there."

"Really?" Degarre asked. "Perhaps I should try it out next summer. I could use a nice quiet spot for a few months before my next assignment, assuming I get that much time before my next assignment. So why did you leave Cushna?" Glaia told him. "Oh my," he laughed. "Dear child you always did have a knack for getting into trouble. You know, Robert, when she was five years old, she decided to take her toy bow and arrow - mind you, one arrow - and go hunting." Glaia turned beet red in embarrassment. "Yes, this girl was probably the only virgin in history who, when approached by a unicorn, tried to shoot it." He laughed loudly while looking at her fondly. "The poor beast. You should have seen it with that suction-cup arrow stuck to its horn."

"Please, Degarre," Glaia begged, "no more."

"All right, child, this once I'll show you mercy. But you owe me. Remember that."

"Sure, Degarre, put it on my tab."

"I was afraid you'd say something like that," Degarre said with mock misery. "So, what assignment did Jonet find to justify the use of two agents?"

"The delivery of a stasis-wrap package," I said flatly. On saying that I took a deep drink from my coffee, wishing the barman had gone heavier on the whiskey. Degarre stared at me for a moment. Then he looked at Glaia. Glaia nodded. Then he looked back at me.

"One moment," he said getting up. He went back into the bar and soon returned with a fresh round of drinks. "Now, start at the beginning." So, talking in shifts, Glaia and I told Degarre everything that had happened since I first bumped into Glorn. After warning me not to mention our encounter with Aldrick and Serta, Glaia even told Degarre about that. That more than anything else told me how much she trusted him. When we were done, he just looked at us for a few moments.

"Okay," he said at last, "I'm impressed. What do you plan to do for an encore?"

"Deliver the packet," Glaia answered.

"Get the reply," I continued.

"And then return to Hatten and shove it down Jonet's throat," Glaia finished. "Care to join us?"

"Ah," Degarre replied with a grin, "I'd better not, unless I can arrange an alibi. You may be joking now, but you forget I've seen what happens when you and Jonet get started. I think I'll live longer if I'm out of range. You, Robert, would be wise to do likewise, but if you insist on being there, keep Glaia out of trouble if you can. And now, I think this old man had better get some sleep. I'll see you two at breakfast?" We agreed and after shaking my hand and kissing Glaia on the cheek he left. We were about to leave as well, but a bartender came in with two more drinks.

"Degarre sends these with his compliments," he said.

"Robby," Glaia said, "I think Degarre likes you. He chased off a man I was seeing once, but I've never seen him buy anyone two rounds in a row."

"That's good?" I asked.

"Very good," she assured me. "I've learned to value his opinion highly, even when I thought he was wrong. And, Robby, regardless of what I thought at the time, he was never wrong."

"I like him too," I said, receiving one of Glaia's smiles. "I've been meaning to ask, what is that you're drinking?"

"This?" she said holding up the slender glass to the light. "It's a violet liqueur. Flavored with violets. Try it?" I was game. It was highly flavored and fragrant, only moderately sweet, and very flowery in taste. I hated it.

"Obviously it's an acquired taste," I choked out. "I've usually found that acquired tastes aren't worth acquiring."

"I feel the same way about coffee," she said taking a sip of my third drink. "On the other hand, the whiskey and the cream help a lot. Let's go to bed, handsome, it's late."

Our appointment with the resident chief, a middle aged man named Jan, went smoothly enough even if it was before breakfast. He was pleased to have us in Hoga and sorry to hear that we would be leaving soon.

"Are you sure you can't stay on a while?" Jan asked. "We're always short of good field agents here. Hoga's reputation, you know."

"I'm sorry, Jan," Glaia replied. "Jonet refused to front our expenses. Even you can't help us there, Agency rules."

"Unfortunately true. One resident chief may not unilaterally counter the decision of another. Well, if you change your minds, I'll be able to find work for both of you for as long as you care to stay."

"Thank you, Jan," I said. "Who knows. We were told to wait for a reply. If the wait turns out to be somewhat extended, we'll be available." We soon excused ourselves and went to breakfast.

Degarre was waiting for us in the lobby. We started heading for the in-house tavern, but he steered us out the front door.

"On my way out to Krawaii, I found a great little diner just around the corner. Much better than Agency food. C'mon." He was right, the food was good. We talked of inconsequential things until Glaia excused herself for a trip to the ladies' room. Then Degarre got very serious. "Robert, we only have a few minutes and we have to talk. First of all, I've always been rather fond of Glaia. She was the daughter I never had and I've watched her grown up into a beautiful woman. Second, you're the closest thing to a permanent partner she's ever worked with. Certainly the only one she's introduced to me as such. That means she cares deeply for you. Now I'll admit that on first meeting I like you. You seem like a nice guy and you're smart. In fact from the stories the two of you told me last night, I'd say you two are perfect partners. What I need to know is how you feel about her."

"I love her," I answered him. "I won't claim that I knew it from the first time I looked into those incredible blue-green eyes of hers. In fact, my feelings for her started out as a mixture of gratitude and physical attraction. But that soon turned to respect and friendship as I got to know her. I certainly wouldn't have followed her across the countryside for so long if it were merely a physical thing. I'm not sure when I first realized I was in love. We've been through a lot together in a relatively short time. I would gladly marry her, but she's reluctant to talk about anything that even vaguely sounds like a serious relationship."

"She's been hurt before, Robert. I had to chase one slimy character off once, and she won't even tell me everything about that relationship. Give her time. If you're really serious about how you feel about her, you can wait."

"Yes, I can wait." I agreed.

"One other thing, do you love her enough that you could give her up if it were for her own good?"

I had to think about that one. "I don't know," I said at last, "I've never been in that position. I don't know what I'd do, but I'd like to think that I would do the right thing."

"Good answer. And you're right. If you've never had to give up someone you love, you don't know how you'd act. I'm not sure I'd have trusted you had you said anything else. Okay, she's coming back now. Don't let her know we've had this talk."

"So what did I miss?" Glaia asked as she rejoined us. "You two were pretty deep into your conversation as I came back."

"Oh, I was just filling Robert in on your most embarrassing childhood moments," Degarre said with a devilish grin.

"Degarre, you promised!" Glaia protested.

"Oh, so I did. I'll take it off your tab," Degarre returned. "By the way, you'd have more recent news than I would. How's the family doing?"

"Mom and Dad were just fine last time I heard. Busy, but happy. My brothers and sisters, the same. The usual. They'll be glad to give you the details when you get there."

"How long has it been, Glaia?" Degarre asked.

"Since I saw them? About a year, I think. But I've been keeping up a correspondence with Lavinia, or I was until we left Cushna. There's probably a ton of mail following me somewhere. We haven't stopped long enough for it to catch up yet."

"Any plans for returning to the capital? They miss you, you know."

"I know," Glaia said sadly. "Maybe after we finish this assignment. I could use a vacation." The rest of our mealtime conversation was filled with innocuous teasing between Glaia and Degarre. When we were finished we walked with Degarre to the public coach terminal. His luggage was already loaded for him.

"Farewell, you two. Robert, take care of my little princess, and, Glaia, I'll see you soon, I hope."

"I hope so too, Degarre." Glaia said. She hugged him fiercely and after he and I shook hands he boarded the coach just as it was ready to leave. We stood there, watching the coach pull out of sight and then returned to the Agency house.

We found ourselves a small conference room there and with the aid of maps, we found where Gaius Hammersmith lived. The address we had for him was not actually in Hoga, but rather about ten miles outside of town.

"Well, pardner," I drawled, "time to saddle up and ride off into the sunset."

"Robby," Glaia said, not having my experience with bad Westerns, "It's an hour to noon and we'll be heading south."

"Never mind."

The home and work place of Gaius Hammersmith would be unusual on anyone's world. I'm not sure if its design was genius or utter insanity, but it's more likely a healthy mixture of both. Imagine the circle at Stonehenge. Now make it a bit smaller, but not much, and fill in the gaps between the stones with walls

and the occasional window. On top of that mess, place a large conical roof shingled with red brick tiles.

A servant met us at the door and led us to a large circular, central chamber straight out of "Alice in Wonderland". All the other rooms in the building were accessible through this one so there were some twelve doors unevenly spaced around the wall.

"The master will be with you presently," the servant said and then left through one of the doors. "Presently" turned out to be some twenty minutes later an unpleasant man who smelled as though he hadn't bathed since leaving his parents' home some centuries earlier met us there. He wore long, flowing, black robes that may well have been white when they were new and he had an attitude that was about as bad as his odor.

"I'm a very busy man," he greeted us. "What do you two want?"

"We're from the Agency," Glaia replied. "Your package, sir."

"Well, it's about time. Give it here." Glaia handed him the package. He took out a device I would have called a letter opener, muttered an incantation and touched it to the hard, silver envelope. The silver color faded out leaving a plain manilla envelope with a couple bulges in it. He opened the envelope and a pair of vials fell into his hand. "What the hell?" he said. After searching, he also found a packing slip. Scowling, he opened one of the vials and smelled the contents. "What's this?" he demanded.

"Smells like kerosene," I said after a moment's inspection.

"It is kerosene!" he shouted. "I ordered a petroleum-derived lubricant, not lamp oil. And this," he indicated the other vial, "is a concentrate of maple sap."

"What was it supposed to be?" Glaia asked.

"Oh, it's the right item, but I ordered a cup, not a quarter gill. Now according to my contract you have one month to get me the right items or I get a double refund on top of those items."

"I'll need to see that contract, of course." Glaia said.

"One minute - I'll get it." he walked through one of the doors and returned a moment later with a legal looking piece of paper in hand. Glaia read it through. "There, are you satisfied?" Hammersmith asked.

"Yes, sir, you are within your rights." Glaia replied.

"Then get out of here! And I expect to see you in less than a month with my order." He herded us to the front door and slammed it shut at our backs.

"Ingratiating sort of fellow, isn't he?" I commented dryly.

"Typical hermit type," Glaia said.

"First hermit I've come across with a household staff."

"Maybe so," she conceded, "but he's still the sort to keep himself away from the rest of civilization. Probably engaged in some obscure research; even if he discovers something useful, which is very unlikely, no one will ever know about it."

"So now what do we do?" I asked.

"Let's go back to town for the night, then we'll have to leave for Northeast Gonquin in the morning. That's the nearest source of both those items he wants."

"Why us?"

"Jonet, damn her eyes, made this our personal mission and we agreed. That means we have to make good on all errors. Had it remained as part of the in-house courier system, the Agency would have footed the bill, but now, we'll have to pay the penalty if we have to default. Damn! She must have known."

"Glaia," I said as reasonably as possible, "how could she have known. We brought her the package ourselves after we retrieved it in Wadir. She probably never knew what was in it or that it was coming."

"You're right, Robby. I guess I've just got this paranoid streak in me."

"Well, I'm not saying that Jonet wouldn't have set us up for this, just that she got lucky and did it inadvertently this time. So how do we get to Northeast Gonquin and back in time? Won't we have to retrace our route?"

"No, there is a more northerly route that would save us a few days. But it's still just about a month's journey time each way. I'm afraid we'll have to use Serta's token. It's a shame. I was hoping to use it to get back to Hatten in record time. But, I'm afraid it can't be helped."

We were back in town only a few blocks from the Agency house when we heard a familiar voice behind us, "There you two kids are. I've been looking all over for you."

"Watch where you step, Robby," Glaia growled. "There have been elves here." It was true. In spite of everything that had happened to us since we saw him just before our assault on Wadir, Aethelbricht Aethelthrythsson had managed to track us down.

"Hey is that any way to greet an old friend?" Aethelbricht said trying to sound hurt and not succeeding very well. Then he said to me, "Especially since I've found a way to get you back to your own world?"

"Really?" we both asked, although Glaia's voice carried a distinct tone of sarcasm.

"Sure," Aethelbricht replied. "It's as easy as this!" There was a sudden burst of light that blinded us temporarily. When our eyes cleared up a bit we found ourselves in a city totally unlike anything I'd encountered in Gonquin.

Looking at Glaia, I saw that she was staring open-mouthed, upward at the tall concrete, steel, and glass buildings all around us. As her eyes dropped down to street level I followed her gaze to a line of automobiles that were just waiting for the light to change so that they could run us over. Oh yes, we had materialized in the middle of a crosswalk. I grabbed Glaia's arm and lead her to the sidewalk. She was still staring at the scenery. Finally, after several minutes, she took my arm, looking very pale and frightened.

"I don't think we're in Gonquin anymore, Robby," she said in a very small voice.

The Elf That Ate Cleveland

Chapter Nineteen

"See?" Aethelbricht Aethelthrythsson proudly announced. "I told you I could get you home. Great, huh?"

Glaia was undergoing culture shock, to say the least. We had managed to find a place on the side walk out of the mainstream of pedestrian traffic which was moderately heavy by my standards and must have seemed impossibly dense to Glaia. While she was trying to take it all in I was busily trying to figure out where the hell we were. The elf said I was home, but there were no cities this size in Southeastern Massachusetts. Still, the place did look familiar, and the people here did dress like they did back home. That brought up another point, of course. As warmly dressed as we were, our clothes didn't fit in here. Already we were attracting a few glances; if we stayed in one place long enough, however we'd attract a whole crowd.

"Must be in some play," I over heard one businessman say to another as they walked by.

"Well, that's not a bad temporary cover," I thought out loud. "We can use that until we acquire something a little more local."

"Freaks," a middle aged woman muttered as she walked past, staring at us.

"So I got you home," Aethelbricht said. "What do you think?"

"Robby," Glaia asked, "do you really live here? It smells awful." She was right. One thing I hadn't missed at all was the ever-present smell of hydrocarbon exhaust from passing cars, trucks, and buses.

"What do I think?" I addressed the elf first. "I'll tell you what I think. This may or may not be the right world. It's going to take a while to figure that out."

"But it's close, huh?" the elf interrupted.

"With what must be an infinite number of choices? The concept of close is a joke. No, Glaia, I don't live here, wherever we are. Aethelbricht, we weren't prepared for an extra-dimensional side trip and were in the middle of an assignment. How about taking us back until we can tie up the loose ends? Besides, I hadn't even decided that I wanted to come back, if I was ever here in the first place."

"You're no fun," Aethelbricht complained. "Oh, all right." The elf's expression changed from hurt frustration to puzzlement and started edging on anger after a few seconds.

"Well," I asked, "what are you waiting for? Let's go!"

"I'm trying, I'm trying," he said. "Nothing works." Terrific.

"He's right, Robby," Glaia said. "I've tried a few simple spells. Magic doesn't work here. Maybe you can do something." I tried conjuring up a Futaba light. Not so much as a glimmer. "No, hon," Glaia said. "I meant about figuring out where we are and finding a place to stay, and all that." Oh. Well, it would only be fair. Glaia had gone well out of her way to find me a place in Gonquin, even if we were still trying to figure out what it was, and that was when we were strangers. Could I do less for her? No way! Of course I'd also have to be relatively nice to the elf just when I was starting to understand the basis for Glaia's anti-elf prejudice.

"Okay," I said with a sound of confidence I did not quite feel, "our first step is to find out where we are." At that moment I realized that I had been leaning on a coin-operated newspaper dispenser. Assuming it wasn't USA Today, a quick glance would tell me where we were. I looked through the glass and saw, in an unadorned Times Roman sort of font, the words, "The Plain Dealer," staring me straight in the face. "Well, troops, that was easy," I announced dryly. "We're in Cleveland."

"I'm not aware of the meaning of that word," the elf said, "but I would guess from the context you used it in that it means something like 'deep trouble'. Am I right?"

"Not hardly," I replied. "We might be in trouble, but actually Cleveland is the name of this city, also known as the Forest City, Great Swamp Erie, and Mistake on the Lake, Ohio."

"Oh. Hey look across the street! A candy shop! I'll catch up to the two of you later." He was off like a shot.

"Hey, Aethel," I shouted, "We don't even know where we're headed."

"I'll find you," he shouted back at me. "Trust me." I hate when he says that. He was soon out of sight.

"Come on, Robby," Glaia said. "We're starting to draw a crowd, we'd better either move on or start some sort of entertainment."

"Good idea," I said, taking stock of our situation. "Let's walk this way, I think I know where we are now. You seem to be adapting quickly enough."

"I have you for a model, hon. Remember, I was there when you first came to Gonquin. You took to the place like a native and just went along with events. Most newcomers tend to be in a state of total confusion; half crazed, you know? But you were cool as ice. I admired that. I think that was what first attracted me to you. I like the way you think and react, so when in a similar situation, I'm trying to do likewise."

"Okay, I understand." Actually I thought she was giving me too much credit for rational thought during my initiation to Gonquin, but if this helped her to acclimate, I wasn't about to enlighten her until after she had done so. "Well, if the elf is going to run off on us, he's pretty much going to have to be on his own." Glaia agreed too. I didn't feel so bad about abandoning him in a strange city. "If I remember correctly, there should be a little coin and pawn shop around the corner and a couple of blocks from here, where we can exchange some of our gold and silver for the local currency."

"You don't use gold and silver here?" Glaia asked.

"Not in everyday transactions. The average person wouldn't know the exchange rates for this stuff. For that matter, transactions in gold need to be carefully recorded and accounted for. Where we're going,

however, the man will ask no questions. Of course, he'll rip us off."

"Rip us off?"

"I mean he'll probably only give us half as much as it's worth."

"I don't follow that," Glaia said, "Why won't he pay us what it's worth?"

"We can't show him any documentation proving where we got it, so he'll assume we stole it. Are you trying to say there's no black market in Gonquin?"

"Black market? That's a good name for it. Yes, I guess we have. The Agency does a little shady dealing from time to time, but there's a real criminal element, too. If you need or have to sell something illegally, or just without any records, you look there. If you need a loan but can't get credit..." she trailed off.

"Some things are the same all over, dear," I said. In response she gave me a crooked smile and a shrug. While we were moving very few people took much notice of us. I hoped that if we ran into any of the Cleveland Police they'd fail to notice our swords or if they did, maybe they would assume we were part of some historical re-enactment group. In any case, we would have to dump the heavy-duty cutlery when we found some more contemporary garb.

We found the place I was looking for; a small shop a few blocks south of Euclid Avenue. I don't know why, but I always expect these places to be dimly lit and crowded with all manner of things, especially musical instruments, hanging on the walls, used clothes on a rack near the back, and a selection of handguns and knives on display in a glass case behind which the proprietor worked. I had never actually been in here before, but a friend had mentioned it once some years ago back when we were both in college.

Walking in, I found that my mental image of the place was almost completely wrong. It did have a proprietor and a glass case for him to work behind. After that the similarities ended. The store, though small, was neatly arranged and well lit. Inside the cases were mostly collectable coins, with a 100 oz. ingot of pure silver, two ten ounce bars, and a few ounces besides on display. There were a few musical instruments neatly hung on the walls, but most were of Eastern European origin, Croatian, from what I remembered. My friend told me you could also buy switchblades and handguns here but that they were kept in the back, where the cops wouldn't have to see them as long as they got paid.

"Can I help you?" asked the elderly gentleman behind the counter.

"We'd like to sell some gold," I replied.

"Certainly," he said politely, "Coin or bullion?"

"Foreign coins," I replied, taking my pack off my back. I reached inside and pulled out the small sack I'd been keeping my gold in. I decided to leave the silver as it was for now. I estimated that the gold weighed nearly two pounds - we'd been very well paid and gold was not as valuable in Gonquin as it was here. I saw Glaia taking her pack off too, but signalled her to wait. She took the hint. I emptied about half of the bag's contents on the glass counter and dropped the bag next to the small pile.

"Very well made," he commented, "Nice and unusual designs on the reverse. Where's Gonquin? I thought I knew all the countries currently minting coins. These aren't antiques, are they?"

"No, they're contemporary," Glaia put in.

"Well, let me check my books." He reached under his counter and brought out two large loose-leaf notebooks. I knew what the results would be, but kept silent while he searched. "I'm sorry," he said at last, "but I can't find these listed anywhere. The best I can give you will be their metallic value, minus an assayer's fee and my usual agent's fee." I nodded. "You want to sell all of this?"

"As much as you can handle," I tried to sound nonchalant.

"I'll have to work in the back room, excuse me," he said. I expected him to take the gold into the back while we waited here in the front, but instead he put it back into the sack and headed for the front door. He locked it and turned the sign around so that it said "Closed." As he walked through the bead curtain across the door into the back he turned and beckoned us to follow him. "Most of my customers prefer to watch me," he explained. That fit what my friend had said about this place. I might get taken on the exchange rate, but he wouldn't try to cheat me on the weight.

He subjected my gold to various tests, and finally concluded that he was dealing with nearly pure gold. That, I felt, was a good sign. It hadn't occurred to me until then that Gonquin might have taken to using a gold alloy for its coins. On the other hand, considering the reaction my clad coinage got in the Cushna Guardhouse, I shouldn't have been surprised.

"I can only buy half of this right now," he said, "because of the recent fluctuation in the market. Come back in a couple of weeks and I might buy the rest." He carefully weighed out sixteen ounces on his scale and handed the rest of the bag back to me. He then took out a receipt book. "I'll need your name and address and some ID." I knew he would still buy the gold without that, but there would be an additional fee if I refused so I told him my name and showed him my driver's license. He wrote down some figures on the receipt and referred to the assayer's report he had prepared while checking the gold. Finally, "Six thousand four hundred forty-nine dollars and sixty-eight cents, call it Sixty-four fifty." That must have been some price fluctuation! He was offering me more for half of my hoard than I had expected for the whole thing. I commented on that. "It's the market," he said. "With the fighting going on down in Latin America, it may go even higher." He paid me and then let us out the door.

"Did we do well, Robby?" Glaia asked.

"Fantastic. Of course I'd hate to think about how much that stuff was really worth if he was paying us this much for it, but together with my credit cards, we're in very good shape. And if we need more cash we can always sell more gold or silver."

"I'm hungry," she said. "Let's stop for something to eat."

"Sounds good. Let's head towards Terminal Tower. It's that tall one there. There are several good places in the area and we'll want to get a room in the hotel, the building next to it, now that we can afford it, and then it's time I took you shopping."

"Shopping? Wonderful!" Glaia said delightedly. "I haven't been really shopping in ages."

"Well, I think this can be classed as really shopping, for starters you'll want a full wardrobe or at least several changes of clothing."

"Oh good!"

"Take this next turn and don't do nothing stupid," said a voice from behind us. The next turn was a narrow alley, barely noticeable from the street. "There behind that dumpster," the voice said, "Give me those packs."

Chapter Twenty

Once behind the dumpster we turned and faced our assailant. It was a man about my age with about a two-week-old beard on his face and several missing teeth. There but for the grace and all that. On the flip side I was close to losing more than a few teeth. In one hand he held a rather nondescript gun, no doubt one of those Saturday night specials I'd heard so much about on the news and in cop shows. Okay, it wasn't the preferred gun of Dirty Harry or John Rambo, but it would make us just as dead. We removed our packs and I dropped mine at my feet when I saw Glaia do something that only a person who had never even heard of the vaguest rumor of the concept of gunpowder would think of trying. In rapid motion so smooth and graceful that it seemed more dance than fight, she dropped her pack to the man's side away from the gun and then kicked the gun out of his hand while drawing her sword. She then completed the maneuver by slashing the blade at his throat. We grabbed our packs and did not stay to watch the man die a few minutes later.

"Glaia, my love," I said, still feeling a bit shaken from the encounter, "I think that maybe I should tell you a bit about guns." She looked confused, so I explained what a gun was and how it worked and how it was faster, longer range, and at least as messy as a sword, requiring a lot less training to use. "So, while it might not look like much," I continued, "That little hunk of metal packs a big punch and should be approached with respect. Your maneuver frightened me, it shouldn't have worked. In fact had you hesitated for an instant, it would be us back there."

"But, Robby," she protested, "it did work."

"I can't argue with that, but please be a little more careful. Anyway, I think we'd better change our itinerary a bit," I said, "Someone's going to find his body eventually, and the coroner will deduce that his throat was cut with a sharp implement. Then, eventually, someone here in town will remember two strangely dressed people with swords. We'd better find a place to stash them before anything else."

"Where?"

I thought about that a moment and said, "Actually, we're heading in the right direction already. There ought to be some lockers in Terminal Tower. There were, but I needed two quarters to use one and all we had was paper money, so I bought some junkfood from a store in the lobby and used the change to rent the locker. "There," I said showing Glaia the key. "We can come back for them later. How do you like the spudnuts?"

"These are great," she said. "You say they're made from potatoes?"

"Yeah. I haven't had them since I left Cleveland years ago. I guess coming here has a few good points after all. Do you still want to have lunch or will these hold you over until dinner?"

"Why don't we get that hotel room you mentioned and then we'll see."

The Sheraton was expensive, but given the amount of gold we were still carrying, I had no doubt we could afford it. Still, I decided against a large suite, but did get a room with a good view of the city. The desk clerk's attitude changed abruptly for the better when I flashed my gold card. I hadn't seen that reaction in years, since almost every credit card started offering a gold version, but then I hadn't tried to check in looking quite so unlikely to pay the bill in years either. We left our packs in our room. I took the roll of bills I got from the man we sold the gold to and after extracting two hundred dollars for myself, I handed the rest to Glaia.

"We can do most of our shopping with my credit cards," I told her, "but this way you'll have money to pay with should we get separated and you see something you want."

"Those credit cards sound wonderful, Robby," she said. "When can I get one?"

"When you have established some credit here," I replied.

"No problem, I've got plenty of gold, who do I show it to, to get a tab?"

"It's not that easy. For starters, you don't even exist on this world." She looked puzzled. "Well, okay you do exist, but there's no record of your birth here. This is an overly regimented society we have here and there are records of everyone. If we can't find a way back to Gonquin, we'll have to set up a legal identity for you, get you a social security number, and oh, I don't know, a lot more." She was only following part of what I was saying. "Look, for now it isn't a problem. Let's go shopping and then we'll go out for dinner. I'll try to explain as we go along. Okay?" She agreed and we were off. As we went I tried to give her a basic lesson in American history. She absorbed it quickly saying that, except for the names, it was, in many ways, similar to that of Gonquin.

I was starting to explain the governmental structure of the United States - ever notice just how silly it sounds when you try to explain it to someone else? Trying to explain the Electoral College alone can cause you to lose all your credibility. Glaia thought it hysterical that we vote for our kings - when we came at last to our destination, the May Company, a large department store, fortuitously near our hotel. Glaia's eyes opened in wonder as we entered the store.

"Oh my," she sighed. "I think I'm in Heaven. Then again, where do I start?"

"Tell you what," I said. "I'll go buy some clothes for me and meet you back here in, say, two hours?" She agreed.

I've rarely had too much trouble finding clothes that I liked, and this time was not one of the exceptions. An hour later, I had replaced my Gonquin clothing with more familiar slacks, shirt, and sweater, with back-ups for other days, a navy blazer, in case we decided to go out somewhere with a dress code, but only one tie, because I hate ties. I also bought about twenty times more underwear than I probably needed. I had never been comfortable in the Gonquin versions and welcomed to chance to stock up.

Finally, I topped my collection off with a winter coat. I must admit that I was going to miss using the cloak. There's a trick to wearing one for warmth that I had finally picked up out of sheer survival instinct. Before I had become accustomed to cloaks, my first reaction was that they were a primitive and less efficient substitute for a coat. But now I enjoyed the looser fitting comfort they afforded. I pondered this as I carried my purchases back to the hotel feeling stiflingly bundled up in my new coat.

As I returned to the store I paused to watch several police cars flash by with their lights and sirens on, headed out of Public Square and down Euclid Avenue. Something else I hadn't missed while away.

Thinking about it, I hadn't really missed all that much about my home world. True, I hadn't really had the time to get homesick, but now that I was back I found that I wasn't even interested in checking out my favorite TV shows. Let's face it, fighting for my life against dragons, witches, and punk fairies tends to hold my attention better than a sitcom. Good thing too! I've become accustomed to being in possession of a life expectancy of reasonable length.

I returned to where I'd left Glaia right on time, but she was nowhere in sight. After a few minutes I started wandering around hoping to find her. I eventually strayed into the electronics section. That used to be one of my favorite departments. Now, during the Christmas shopping season, I expected to find all sorts of new and exciting products, but there didn't seem to be anything really new this year. I did spend a little time checking out some of the new video games. They had improved over what I remembered. I caught myself taking notes so I could pass them on to Aldrick. Silly me, I'd probably never see Aldrick again. When I suddenly realized that another half hour had been wasted, I went back to where I was supposed to meet Glaia.

"Robby!" I heard her call me. "Over here." I turned in the indicated direction. I would recognize Glaia's hair and eyes in any universe. Her blue-green eyes would have captivated me in any circumstance, but now instead of a shapelier version of the same costume she had dressed me in, she was attired in a plaid woolen skirt and a loose-fitting sweater. It took me a moment to realize what else was different. She was also wearing some sort of make-up. I was instantly thankful we hadn't ended up in Mississippi, where the make-up tends to be fashionable when applied heavier and thicker than I personally found attractive.

"So," she asked, twirling around, "what do you think?" As she spun, her skirt and her hair fanned out briefly. As I stared in open admiration, she continued, "You know, you forgot to tell me how much your money is worth here. All those pieces of paper look alike, dear." Another amazing oversight on my part, had she just parted with our entire bankroll? "Oh it's not as bad as all that," she said seeing the look on my face. "The girl at the make-up counter assumed I was from some place called Ontario and explained it all to me."

"That's odd, Canadian money isn't all that different. They do use different colors for each denomination, though. I thought we were going to charge our purchases today."

"We are," she replied with a grin, "but I thought it might be a nice idea if I knew how much money I was spending." Which brought up my next question. How much had she spent? Well, let's just say that while she didn't break me, I'm glad I didn't leave home without a certain metallic colored piece of plastic. At least I didn't flinch when I saw the bill. I'm rather proud of that little bit of self-control. What I bought could all be fit into a shopping bag or two, and would go into my pack with a little room to spare. Glaia, however had stacked up several shopping bags and two hat boxes. I asked her about that.

"Don't worry, most of it will fit in our packs and the rest should fit into my new purse," she assured me. I must have looked skeptical. "Trust me." I was hearing that line a lot lately; it was doing nothing toward putting me at ease. "Robby, can we get something to eat now?" Glaia asked swinging her cloak on. She was lucky there; the cloak looked perfectly normal on her.

"Sure. Let's drop this stuff off in our room and the evening is all ours." On the way back I continued briefing Glaia on the basics of American civilization. She still had a hard time dealing with the concept of elected officials.

"But," she countered my latest explanation, "if you choose your leaders by popular vote, isn't there a danger of getting someone who just promises what the people want to hear with no intention of fulfilling those promises? Also, it seems to me the most popular candidate won't always be the best leader."

"That's true," I said in response, "but with a pre-set term of office we have a smaller chance of getting stuck with a tyrant."

"You also have a greater chance of getting a mediocre government. At least with an hereditary monarch, a leader can be trained from birth to his or her responsibilities."

"That's not the way it has worked here, at least not in every case. Look, the real key to any system, is in the finding of capable and responsible people to do the job. I suppose that if you have a good king or queen, then you are well off keeping them on the throne for as long as possible. But what do you do if you have a tyrant on the throne. You haven't told me the history of Gonquin, but I find it hard to believe that all your kings have been upstanding men of honor whose only concern is for their subjects."

"Well," she conceded, "we have had more than our fair share of scoundrels, but the current Royal Family takes its responsibilities very seriously, even going so far as to adopt in promising members when it becomes necessary and to make all members serve at least two years in the Agency. It's a system that has worked well for us for over one hundred years."

"Ours has worked for over two hundred years," I informed her with maybe a touch of smugness.

"But it hasn't kept you out of war has it?" she had me there. "Gonquin has been at peace with all its neighbors as long as the Agency has served as our civil service."

"Okay, so your system works better than ours. The point we're ignoring, however, is that we're both here now and unless the elf finds a way to get us back, we may be here for a long time."

"Oh, yeah. Okay, run over the three branches of the federal government again." I did so and by the time we got to our room she was asking intelligent questions about state and local governments. "What I really don't understand is why you have so many governments. Don't their interests conflict sometimes?"

The rest of the day was spent pretty much like that. I had to admit that the system I'd taken for granted all my life had a lot of problems. Glaia had all the characteristics of a political activist. I thought about that as we talked and decided that if she wanted to fight city hall, I'd support her all the way, not only for love, but because her system seemed to work. The only question was whether or not it would work here.

Meanwhile, however, I still wasn't certain we were in my own world. It was close, very close, but I intended to sit down and do some research into this world's trivia. We were busy spending money on my credit card. If there was another me somewhere around here, I was hitting him with a very unfair bill.

By the time we settled down for the evening, Glaia had a fair handle on the world I came from. It was late when I finally turned the television on to hear the news.

"Police report this evening that a body was found in a downtown alley," said a male announcer. "A spokesman said that while a switchblade knife was found nearby, the man was allegedly killed by a much larger weapon, possibly a sword. They are now investigating reports that a strangely dressed couple wearing swords was seen in the area earlier today."

"I think we're in trouble again, dear," Glaia said.

"Yeah," I said for want of some form of snappy patter. "I had hoped that we could stick around here for a few days, but I think we'd better check out in the morning."

"Where will we go?" she asked.

"Well there's always another hotel or we could just hop a plane for my place, but I still want to do some research into this world before we go blundering into a potentially weird situation. Also I still have a couple of friends who live here in town. I'll give them a call right now." I dialed a local number and listened to three rings before the phone was picked up.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Marty! It's Bob," I said, "Guess where I am."

"Bob! It's really great to hear your voice. What are you doing in Cleveland?"

"It's a really long story and it's late tonight, but if you have crash space for two, we'll tell you the whole thing tomorrow."

"We, Bob? Are you finally settling down? Charis will want to meet the girl that finally managed to catch you. How long are you in town for?"

"That all depends, Marty. Tell me, can you get me into the Freiburger Library?"

"It's not there any more, Bob. Replaced by the Kelvin Smith Library, but that's no problem. You're an alumnus, they have to let you in."

"Maybe, but I don't have my card with me."

"Okay, tell you what - meet me there at, say, Ten A.M.?"

"See you then." We said good-bye at each other and hung up. "All taken care of, hon." I told Glaia. We watched what little was left of the newscast.

"On a final note," said the female of the matched set of announcers, "there have been a series of petty robberies in the downtown area. It seems that a child with a false beard and dressed like a fairy-tale elf has been sneaking into candy shops and stealing a wide assortment of candies." The male announcer and the weatherman started making jokes at that point, but neither Glaia nor I were paying much attention as we just stared at each other.

"The elf's in trouble too," I said. Glaia nodded. "What's with the candy?" I asked.

"Elves love candy," she said, "so much so that they'll do anything to get it, and Aethelbricht hasn't shown us much in the line of self control and clear thought department yet has he?" No, he hadn't.

In the morning we checked out of the Sheraton and entering the depths of Terminal Tower we boarded the eastbound Rapid Transit and rode out to the University/Cedar Avenue station. From there it was a short walk on to the campus.

Chapter Twenty-one

Case Western Reserve University was, for a long time, divided into two autonomous schools; Case Institute of Technology and Western Reserve University. In the late 1960's they joined into a single university against the outraged cries of many alumni. By the time I matriculated there a few years later, the fence separating the two campuses had been taken down, but there were still a few vestiges of chain-edged walkways that marked the division between the two campuses. Since then the campus had been remodeled with the removal of some of the older, less stable buildings, and the addition of some of the oddest sculptures and fountains I have ever known.

"Robby," Glaia asked, "why is the water coming out of the bottom. Is the fountain leaking?"

"No, believe it or not, it was planned this way," I replied. "Although I remember a couple of times when someone put soap into the fountain and there were suds everywhere."

"Why?" Glaia asked.

"Why what?"

"Why did they put soap in the fountain?"

"Just to see how others would react when they saw how silly it looked. It was a joke, see?"

"I'll think about that," she said uncertainly. I nearly tried to continue explaining the joke, but stopped myself. If I had to explain it, maybe it wasn't as funny as I remembered.

"So where are we going?" Glaia asked.

"Well, there are several libraries on campus, or there used to be, A lot of them got combined. Anyway the one we're headed for is on the north side of Euclid Avenue near Severance Hall and the large parking lot surrounding it," I said, pointing out the landmarks as we approached. "There. See that building over there? That's Kelvin Smith. The field over there was where the old library I was looking for was."

"Robby," she said a few moments later, "You said this is a university, and by my standards it looks like a fairly large one, but where are all the students? I doubt we've seen more than a double handful of people since we left the Rapid."

"It's fairly late in the semester," I answered. "I suspect we're near the end of the final exam period. Those who haven't already finished and gone home for the holidays are sitting in various sized rooms, yawning uncontrollably from a lack of sleep, and praying that they remember enough to pass just one more test."

Glaia smiled, "Yes, it's that way in Gonquin universities too. Who is this we're going to meet?"

"Marty? He's an old friend of mine. He was a student at Case Tech when I went to Reserve. We met in an Anthropology class I was taking for a degree requirement and he was taking as his choice of elective. While I majored in Anthro, he majored in Physics but took Anthro classes every chance he got. Anyway, now he's sort of a professional student working on his doctorate while teaching and working as a lab assistant and showing movies for the campus film society."

Marty was waiting for us on the library steps. I hadn't seen him in several years, but he had the same curly, dark brown hair and beard and wore the same faded jeans - or at least they looked the same - as he had when I'd last seen him.

"Marty!" I waved at him. He charged down the steps and grasped my hand. Then, throwing inhibitions to the wind we threw our arms out and hugged. "Marty," I continued when I'd finally caught my breath, "This is Aglaia, Glaia for short." Marty turned toward Glaia's smiling face.

"Delighted," he said suavely, shaking her hand warmly, "Why don't we go inside where it's warm." Actually it didn't seem all that cold out today, but then Glaia and I had been spending a lot of time outdoors lately, so I probably wasn't the best one to judge. Marty showed his faculty identification to the student guard on duty in the lobby saying, "Doctor and Mrs. Jones are guests of the University. They're with me."

"Robby," Glaia whispered out of the guard's hearing, 'I didn't know you were a doctor.'"

"I'm not," I whispered right back at her. "Marty's just having fun."

"Okay," the guard acknowledged. "I'll need them to sign the guest register." We did so, only since Marty had seen fit to give me a spurious doctorate I decided to sign a false name to go with it: "Dr. Thomas Jones."

We entered the elevator and rode down one floor. Marty led us to a table in the stacks where we could talk as long as we kept our voices down.

"Bob," Marty said, "I've been meaning to ask why you didn't use the public library for your research."

"Two reasons," I told him. "I knew Freiburger better than Cleveland Public. I guess that's no longer an issue, but the stacks are still open here so I can work without having to wait for someone to fetch what I need, which is good as I may be going through several books at a time and may even find what I want by accident. And the second reason is that I thought it would be better for us to stay out of the downtown area for reasons I'll go into in detail for you later."

"So what are you looking up?" he asked.

"Actually, I plan to peruse the history books, especially regarding recent history."

"You came all the way to Cleveland to look up that? I know New Bedford's a small town, but it isn't that small."

"Not quite, Marty. As I told you, it's a very long story and I think Charis will want to hear it too."

"All right. It sounds like it must be worth the wait to hear. How about you, Glaia? Are you researching recent history too?"

"Oh no," Glaia said, "I'm just following Robby around, but I would love to read something on music theory." That was a surprise to me, I hadn't realized that Glaia was interested in that sort of thing. "Can you show me where the music section is?"

"I'm afraid not," Marty admitted. "I never studied music, but I can show you how to use the card file and how to find it for yourself."

"Actually," I said, "the best of that used to be in the Music Department's own library, but I seem to remember hearing that was moved here too, but since they use the Library of Congress filing system, the books you're interested in are right behind you." I got up to make sure. "Yes, here they are. Starting here and running down this short aisle and then partway back up the other side." I caught them giving me a matched pair of "How did you know that" stares. I told them, "I minored in Music and used those books often. The library might be new but the coding system is still the same. That and I happened to notice those books as I passed them. Anyway, before you start, a quick lesson on using the card file sounds like a good idea."

We went back up to the lobby where the files were and Marty showed Glaia how to use them, while I started looking up what I came here for. I had a bunch of notes a half hour later when Marty excused himself to go administer an exam. We agreed to meet him at the office he shared.

How do you check out the entire history of the world? I decided fairly early on that if this wasn't my world, it was very, very close. Marty was here and he knew me. My credit cards worked. I don't really know why I persisted in this search for differences. It was just a gut feeling, but something I couldn't identify felt wrong, and if there was a difference, it had to be in something very recent.

Glaia spent the first two hours happily reading up on the history of music theory in this world. Then, after seeing how I was doing, she moved on to various other subjects. I'm not sure what subjects they were, but every thirty to forty-five minutes she had moved to another part of the library and had a whole new stack of books out in front of her. I stopped to point out the encyclopedias to her in the hope of helping her find a wide variety of information, but she said that she'd already found them.

"They make a nice place to start from," she told me, "but they don't really go into enough detail and I'm looking more into theories and opinions. By the way, where's the philosophy section?"

"I don't know," I answered. "Sorry."

"Oh, that's okay. I'll check out the card files and the stacks map." She took off again.

The sun was low in the sky when I finally gave up for the day. So far I hadn't found any differences between this world and what I remembered as my own. I still wasn't convinced that I was home - that baseless feeling of wrongness again - but I had to admit that this could just be old-fashioned paranoia.

Then again, did I want to be home? I was really beginning to feel at home in Gonquin. Life here had become rather routine and boring in the last few years. The few weeks I'd spent in Gonquin had made me feel alive again, even with the constant blundering into and out of trouble Glaia and I had been making a bad habit of.

"Hey, Bob, wake up!" I blinked and found Marty standing across the table from me. I hadn't actually been asleep but I was somewhat lost in thought and hadn't noticed his approach. "I didn't want to interrupt you, but the library closes early tonight."

"Hmm? Oh yeah," I said, "I never did understand why the place closed early during finals. You'd think they'd keep it open all night."

"Simple," Bob replied. "The place is mostly staffed by students on financial aid who also need to study, which they can't do while working." Oh. "So, how did the research go?"

"I'm not sure," I answered. "I learned a lot about the last decade or so. It's amazing how much goes on that you never hear about." Marty nodded his agreement. "But I can't find anything to support my hypothesis."

"There's always the possibility that the hypothesis is incorrect," Marty pointed out.

"True enough," I conceded regretfully. The lights flickered twice then. "Well, I guess it is closing time. Why don't we find Glaia."

"I saw her in the copier room on my way here," Marty said. We went there and found her busily making a few last copies.

"Robby!" she said with enthusiasm. "This place is wonderful! I've learned so much today, and these copiers are great, too!" She had a pile of paper some three inches thick.

"Sure you have enough copies there?" I asked dryly. She stuck her tongue out at me.

"When I realized it was getting late, I started making copies to study later. Oh, Robby, thank you for bringing me here. I haven't had a chance to just meander through a library in years, and there's so much here that I could never find at home." I smiled warmly at her. At least one of us had a good day; that went some way to make up for my own lack of success.

Marty lived within walking distance of the campus, in Cleveland Heights, but he had thoughtfully brought his car down the hill after seeing the size of our packs. Glaia had been wrong about fitting all of our new clothes into the packs and we still had a shopping bag full plus the two hat boxes in addition to our packs to carry around, so I was quite content to ride up the hill.

After a short ride we turned into the driveway of a dull yellow duplex on Hampshire Road where Marty lived with his wife.

"Robert," she greeted me at the door. "It's been far too long. Please come in. You must be Glaia." She greeted Glaia by taking both hands in her own, "Please make yourself at home."

"Thank you, ah..." Glaia looked to me for a name.

"Oh, Glaia," I introduced, "This is Charis. I've known her nearly as long as I've known Marty. Charis, thank you for having us. I don't know who else we could have turned to."

"Nonsense, Robert," Charis disagreed. "As long as we've known each other I've never seen you fail to land on your feet. Now, please, sit down, have a drink, and tell us what you've been into now."

We sat around the living room and with the stereo playing classical music lightly in the background, Glaia and I told them everything that had happened since I suddenly found myself dodging dragons in Cushna. By the time we had finished the story we had not only finished our drinks twice but dinner and desert were long gone as well.

Marty and Charis listened patiently as we told the tale, occasionally nodding or saying "Mm hmm" as we spoke, but on the whole let us tell it in our own way without breaking our concentration with questions or side stories of their own. I appreciated that last; it's been a bad habit of my own to interrupt. I've been trying, unsuccessfully, to break myself of that for years.

"That's some story, Bob," Marty said. "Charis is right, though; somehow you always land on your feet. This time I think you've done even better than usual." Charis smiled her agreement.

"You mean you believe us?" I asked. I'd been dreading telling them the story. "I'm not sure I would have believed it so easily."

"Robert," Charis said with a smile, "we know you well enough to know you wouldn't lie to us about this."

"And besides," Marty put in as well, "we're old friends so I can tell you this without insulting you. You've never shown any signs of the sort of imagination capable of making this sort of story up."

"I think that Robby has a lot of imagination," Glaia defended me. "Just think of all the new and unusual things he did with what are basically harmless spells. A man with no imagination would never have thought up anything beyond the book-described applications."

"It isn't that he doesn't have an imagination," Charis said, "but rather that he's usually too lazy to use it until he's managed to get himself in a tight enough bind. No offense, Robert."

"None taken," I replied. "They're right, Glaia. I am a basically lazy person."

"Only until you're trapped," said Marty. "Don't forget, you're the one who came up with the idea to sneak into Freiburger at night, back when it was still a library and not a field, through the heating tunnels during finals week so you could finish that paper before the end of the semester. And you're the one who spent all night mapping the tunnels before you found your way there."

"Tunnels?" Glaia asked.

"Yes," Marty explained. "Much of the campus, especially north of Euclid is underlain with a system of tunnels. You can often see where they are when a light dusting of snow has fallen. Anyway, this maniac decided that when he needed to make up for the library time he failed to take during the regular hours, he would sneak in."

"I always did think the place should be open all night during finals week," I said.

"Well, for a few years after that students used your route to sneak in until one night they were caught by the Greenies - that's campus security, Glaia."

"How did they get caught?" I asked. I thought my entrance was undetectable.

"Idiots!" Marty replied. "They turned the lights on so they could see where they were going."

"The night lights in there weren't enough for them?"

"Evidently not. And when they turned on the interior lights, which really would have been bad enough by itself, they also turned on the lights out front. The Greenies couldn't have missed it if their eyes were closed. The access to the heating tunnel from the library was locked and bolted the next day."

"Another campus legend dies," I sighed. "It's probably just as well. It was only a matter of time before someone decided to vandalize the joint." We talked on for another hour, mostly about what had been happening to Marty and Charis since I'd seen them last. We finally stopped to listen to the news.

"The candy store crime wave continued today," said the announcer, "in the downtown area and west side suburbs. Katie's Kandies in the Colonial Arcade was found ransacked this morning with nearly ten pounds of chocolate missing. It is believed that this break-in is connected with the sightings of what was, at first, thought to be a child in an elf costume, but is probably a short adult. This so-called elf was seen today stealing various candies from supermarkets and candy stores in Lakewood and Rocky River."

"Sounds like your friend's been getting a little too greedy," Marty remarked.

"That's for sure," Glaia said with disgust. "Elves are not known for doing things by half measures, but Aethelbriht is in a class by himself."

"I sort of feel responsible, though," I said. "We should have kept him out of trouble, maybe bought him enough candy to keep him happy and given him the same introduction to this world I gave you, Glaia."

"The elf's a big boy now, Robby. In fact, he's a couple of centuries old if he's a day. If he hasn't learned discretion and control by now, I doubt we could have kept him out of trouble, no matter how closely we watched him."

"You're probably right, but I still think we should have tried, at least. Remember, like us he doesn't have his magic here either. That means his food supply is locked up in some dimension he can't reach. That's probably why he's stealing all that candy, though I really think he ought to work on a more balanced diet." I might have said more but another news story caught our attention.

"Police also report today that they are getting closer to finding an oddly dressed couple suspected in the slaying of a man found in a downtown alley yesterday." I shivered as I felt the emotional equivalent of a jolt of liquid nitrogen run through me. "They are looking for a male Caucasian, about five feet ten inches tall with thinning brown hair, eyes and beard, and a red-headed female Caucasian of average height and vivid blue-green eyes. If you see these people, please call..." Suddenly the problem with the elf became minor in comparison.

"You think, maybe Jonet had a point about us not being able to stay out of trouble?" Glaia asked.

"It's not as bad as it sounds, dear," Charis said. "This incident was the talk of the office today. It's generally assumed that you were defending yourselves against a mugger."

"We were," Glaia acknowledged.

"You see? It's a case of self-defense. At least half the people at the office think you ought to get a medal."

"But we blew it," I said, "by not turning ourselves in immediately."

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," Marty said. "For starters you were carrying weapons that are technically illegal, even if they weren't concealed. And then you wouldn't have been able to account for the gold that Glaia is still carrying."

"Oh my God!" I squeaked. "They have my name."

"How do you figure that?" Marty asked.

"I had to give it when I sold the gold. At the time I was just trying to get the best deal I could and we

weren't attacked until after. And from there, I checked into the Sheraton and we went shopping, all using my credit cards. I'm afraid I haven't been thinking very clearly. And to top it all off, instead of skipping town I spent the day in the library on a hunch. Terrific."

"Excuse me, Robert," Charis said, "but you never did tell us what you were looking for there."

"Well, ever since Glaia and I arrived here, I've had this feeling we were in the wrong place. Aethelbright was certain he had found the right world, but something just doesn't seem right. So I've been looking for some difference, just to make sure there aren't two of me here."

"Find anything?" Marty asked.

"No."

"So you are in the right place," he concluded.

"Isn't it possible that in an infinite selection of universes, I could be in one in which there is no detectable difference from the one I came from?"

"If there is no detectable difference then logically, it doesn't matter, does it?"

"I thought you were a physicist? What's with the philosophy?"

"There always were more philosophers on the Tech side of the campus than among the Liberal Arts, at least at this school. You didn't answer me."

"It matters to me," I said stubbornly.

"Then why did you take the long way around?" asked Charis.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"There's the phone," she replied. "Give yourself a call and see who answers." Of course. It was an easy solution. If I wasn't home, I might be out, but I could always try again later. I went to the phone and dialed my home number.

I heard it ring twice, then, "Hello?" I've heard my voice on a tape recorder often enough to know what it sounds like. I had a bad connection but even through the static, that was it. "Hello?" my voice said again.

"Sorry, I must have the wrong number," I said and hung up.

"Well," Glaia said dryly, "you found your detectable difference."

"At least we have an alibi if we can get out of town," I replied weakly. The news was over and the radio station had gone back to playing classical music. The reception, however, had gotten a bit fuzzy. "Distant station?" I asked.

"No," replied Charis, "It's local; WCLV. We listen to it most of the time. You know that. The tuner is getting old and might have drifted off frequency, however." I got up to adjust it but as I approached the reception got noticeably worse. I tried backing up and the reception cleared up by the time I was about eight feet away.

"That's odd," Marty said. He walked to the stereo and there was no noticeable change. Glaia, could you come over here, please?" The reception got worse again as she approached and then cleared up as she went back to her seat. "Let me check something." Marty said and went out of the room for a minute. We heard him rummaging around in the kitchen and then he went upstairs. We looked questioningly at Charis but she merely shrugged. While we waited I started pacing back and forth.

"Robby?" Glaia asked. "Why does that light keep getting brighter and dimmer? Is the battery running low?"

"Huh? No, these lights don't run on batteries like the ones back home do. We have electricity sent to us directly by wires from a power plant." I walked toward the light and it did get faintly, albeit noticeably, brighter. I walked away and it got a little dimmer. I went back and turned off the switch. The light stayed on until I moved a foot or two away and then it faded out.

Marty came back then. He was carrying an old Boy Scout compass. I felt rather odd as he walked around me while watching the compass. When he was finished with me, he gave Glaia the same treatment.

"Very strange," he said at last. "You two are having a slight effect on this compass."

"What would cause that?" I asked.

"Your magnetic personalities?" Marty suggested. No one laughed. "Okay, so it wasn't funny. The fact is that the two of you are centers of some sort of disturbance that is manifesting on the electro-magnetic spectrum. No, don't ask me what sort of disturbance or what is causing it. Not yet, anyway. I'd like to do a few tests before I tell you what I'm thinking."

"We already know that there are two of me in this world, could it have something to do with that?" I asked.

"It's a possibility, but I think it's something much more basic than that. Okay, so we'll discuss it now. My hypothesis is that since you don't belong in this universe, an imbalance is building up that will eventually disrupt a lot more than my radio reception."

"Sounds dangerous," Glaia commented.

"Yeah," I agreed. "If I see where you're going with this, are you sure you want to wait until morning?"

"You've been here a couple of days already, right?" he asked. I allowed that it had been nearly that. "Well, I could be completely wrong here - most of this is pure conjecture - but I suspect you have at least another two days before things start getting critical."

"Two questions," I said thinking it through. "First, how do you mean critical?"

"I'm not sure yet, but I think that when the, well let's call it the trans-dimensional potential builds up to a sufficient level you, Glaia, and the elf will be forcefully ejected back to Gonquin."

"That doesn't sound so bad."

"But if the three of you are too far apart the potential will have to build up sufficiently to take not only the

three of you but everything in between. Of course that sort of force might well be fatal to you and would definitely do some major damage to the Cleveland area."

"All right, let's try the second question. It's obvious we don't belong here, especially if the universe itself is treating us like illegal aliens. Why did I get to Gonquin in the first place and why didn't that universe give me the heave-ho? For that matter, there are other known 'newcomers' there, aren't there, Glaia?"

"It's true," she said. "There have been at least eighty known cases over the last hundred-fifty years. My father is one."

"I thought of that," Charis said. "Isn't it possible that you truly belong in Gonquin? It seems to me that in any world there must be one or two people who, by some criteria or other, ought to be elsewhere. Maybe this Gonquin is where those who don't otherwise fit in go." Gonquin is actually the name of the kingdom I was in, not the world, but I let that pass.

"You have a point there," I conceded. "I've spent a good part of the last couple days thinking about this. While I never felt out of place here, or rather in the nearly identical world I come from, in some manner I know that Gonquin is where I ought to be."

"You really mean that, Robby?" Glaia asked holding my hand.

"Yes, dear," I replied looking deeply into those eyes now made famous by an all-points bulletin. "I really do." After a long silence Charis and Marty excused themselves on grounds that it was getting late. Glaia and I decided that it was time that we turned in as well and followed them up the stairs.

"Robert," Charis said before we parted company, "when I heard you were coming I prepared the third floor bedroom for you. I assume you remember the way." I said that I did and led Glaia up

Chapter Twenty-two

I woke to a rainy morning and a half empty bed; Glaia was already up. I got washed and dressed and eventually found my way down to the kitchen where I found Glaia and Charis happily chatting away.

"Oh, good morning, Robby," Glaia greeted me. "Charis has been telling me about what you were like during your college days. She told me how you covered the Case Tech sign with a slide rule. I still don't understand the soap in the fountain, but the sign was funny."

"You know what a slide rule is?" It never occurred to me that there might be such devices in Gonquin. Heck! They're a dying breed here.

"Well, I had to explain that too," Charis said picking up and waving an old slide rule. "Here, Robert, have an English muffin and some coffee." I thanked her and started to eat. "Marty's already down the hill in his office. Do you remember where that is?" I nodded. "Good. I have to start getting ready for work but you may stay here as long as you like. When you've finished breakfast, though, I'm sure Marty will be getting antsy waiting for you."

"Okay," I said. "I promise we'll eat and run." When we'd finished, we followed Charis' suggestion and

walked back to the campus and found Marty's office on the second floor of the large, steel and glass Millis Science Center. The weather hadn't improved any, and while my coat and Glaia's cloak kept us reasonably dry, they were soaking wet by the time we got there.

"Come in," Marty said as he opened the door. Then he looked down and saw the puddles we were leaving on the floor. "On second thought, let's hang up those wet things downstairs in the furnace room." After that he led us back to the laboratory that doubled as his office. On one lab bench he had a collection of electronic devices lined up. He pulled up a couple of stools and said, "Here, have a seat. This may take a while and all you have to do is be present."

Marty started turning on electronic devices all around us, occasionally pausing to input something on his computer. He attached electrodes briefly to our wrists and foreheads, but soon removed them as whatever they were sensing was severely overloading their capacity. He eventually replaced them with sensors set about two feet around us. Things got a bit out of hand when he reached into his desk drawer and brought out a perfect replica of a Star Trek tricorder and pretended to take a reading.

"Oh come on!" I said, exasperated.

"I couldn't resist," he grinned sheepishly, putting the device away.

"Are you through then?" I asked. We had been sitting there for the better part of an hour. Marty had turned a radio on about midway through to the local all-news station. The reception was somewhat obscured by the same phenomenon we'd noted last night, but we could still make out what was being said. This morning the elf had been sighted in Parma several times and was evidently moving east. The Police were still looking for us, but that news was getting stale and no new leads had turned up, thankfully.

"Well, I'm through measuring the fields around the two of you, but there's a third attractor that my more sensitive devices are picking up somewhere to the west and south of here when I place them more than a few feet away from you. No doubt it's the elf. There's also a center of disturbance that I believe is at a point equidistant between the three of you." He paused to listen to the weather report.

"Against all predictions by the National Weather Bureau for fair weather," the station's meteorologist was saying, "we have a highly unusual storm brewing over the Cuyahoga County area. A stationary low pressure cell formed here last night and is showing no signs of moving. Since then the storm has intensified and has developed cyclonic tendencies, causing it to look like a tropical storm, complete with a rudimentary eye. I've never seen anything like this and it goes against all known weather theory.

"I expect the storm to continue to intensify over the next few hours dumping heavy rains or snow on the outer suburbs. Stay tuned for further developments."

"The weather too?" I asked, feeling another liquid nitrogen transfusion.

"I'm not surprised," Marty replied. "I'm only speculating, but I suspect that there's a lot more to trans-dimensional dislocation than radio interference. You have to remember that some form of power, magic I guess, was used to bring you here. An equal amount of power would be the minimal requirement to send you back. Well, you tell me that magic doesn't work here, so some analogous power must come into play. That power is obviously manifesting in several ways. I believe that by now there is enough trans-dimensional potential to spit the three of you back to Gonquin safely if we can get you close enough together. The problem, of course, is that your elf is out in the land of pink plastic flamingos." I nodded.

"I think you lost me there, boys," Glaia said.

"Well," I started, "some people like to put ornaments on their lawns; fountains, birdbaths..."

"Lawn jockeys," Marty inserted. "Then there are those ceramic kittens people nail to their houses." Glaia's face showed signs of incipient disgust.

"And one such ornament is a replica of a flamingo, usually in pairs set to look like the birds are just casually hanging about."

"In this northern climate?" Glaia asked. "Flamingos are tropical birds. This is a very silly world, Robby." I let that pass.

"Anyway, Aethelbricht was last seen where there are, according to the local jokes, a vast plenitude of such artificial birds," I explained. I think she understood as she repeated her comment about this being a silly world. "Marty," I changed the subject, "something has been bothering me about what you said about trans-dimensional dislocation, or maybe Charis said it. If I went to Gonquin because for some reason I belonged there, why did my clothing and everything in them go along with me? Just because I belonged in Gonquin, it doesn't stand to reason that my wallet should have gone with me."

"I think there must be some critical mass that would trigger the build up of trans-dimensional potential, so you could bring or leave behind relatively small items without a sufficient imbalance being created. It could also be that a single person is insufficient mass to trigger the reaction."

"But with all the known cases of newcomers," said Glaia, "wouldn't this critical mass have been reached long ago?"

"Not if that mass belonged there in the first place. Of course I could be completely wrong in this. I've only been studying the phenomenon for a few hours."

"You said that if the potential builds up to a sufficient level then not only the three of us will be expelled but so will everything between us," I said.

"That's right," Marty replied.

"That mass wouldn't belong in Gonquin, would it?"

"No," he answered me. "No it wouldn't and not long after its arrival it would be ejected with proportionately more force than it will take to move the three of you."

"What will that do to both worlds?" Glaia asked, seeing where my line of questions was headed.

Marty consulted his terminal and with a few keystrokes brought a resident calculator on screen. A few calculations later he had an answer for us.

"Boom," he said quietly.

"What do you mean, 'Boom'?" Glaia asked.

"The force required to return the piece that would go with you - should you transfer now - would be sufficient to destroy both worlds. Not only that, but if I'm anywhere near the mark on my calculations,

there will be sufficient potential approximately one tenth of a second after your arrival."

"How long do we have before that happens?" I asked.

"Oh, at least forty-eight hours, maybe more. But the longer we wait the more dangerous the transfer will be. If I'm right we have to get you two near the elf some time today if you don't want to take at least some real estate home as a souvenir."

"Short of listening to the news, how are we going to find Aethelbriht?" Glaia asked.

"I'm working on that. Look, why don't you two go up the street to the deli and get some lunch. By the time you get back I ought to have something a little more portable that this rig I've been taking measurements with."

"Okay," I said. "Can we get you anything?"

"Sure, roast beef on rye with mustard, lettuce, and tomato."

Outside the rain had stopped, the winds had calmed a bit, and there were clear spots in the sky overhead, but to the north and the east we could clearly see storm clouds and to the south and west I thought I could see still more. Living on the coast I had experienced this before, but had never expected to do so this far inland. We were in the eye of a hurricane.

When we returned, Marty had not quite finished working on the device he had promised, but he assured us that it would be ready soon.

"I have the thing actually built and working, but I need a case to mount it in so it can be portable. Let me eat and I'll pop over to Strosacker. I think I saw a box in the loft that might serve." He started in on his sandwich but continued to speak in between bites. "You know the storm's got sustained winds of hurricane strength now, but the weather bureau hasn't issued it a name yet."

"What's the problem?" I asked. "Wouldn't the next one this year be named 'Malcolm'?"

"Only if it had formed in the Atlantic Ocean," Marty replied. "I haven't the foggiest what name is next in line for the Pacific storms. Anyway, there are no recorded cases of such a storm forming over land. It's supposed to be impossible and they're still debating over what name it will be assigned, if any. My money's on no name at all. They'll never admit it's a hurricane."

"You name your storms?" Glaia asked. I explained that only the tropical storms and hurricanes were given names.

"As the first of a series it would be given a name that starts with an 'A.' Maybe," I said, "they'll give it your name; 'Hurricane Aglaia'." She wasn't at all pleased by the prospect.

"Well," Marty continued, "It's may not really be a hurricane anyway. It looks like one on radar, sort of, but I don't know if the full structure is consistent with a warm-core storm. It is weird though, isn't it?"

Half an hour later Marty was just bolting the last component into the case he had picked up in the Strosacker Auditorium movie loft. Actually it was more like a small trunk and was twice as large as we actually needed, but considering our time considerations, it would have to do. The end result looked like an old suitcase with indicator lights on top and with two magnetic-mount CB antennae at the ends of two

coaxial cables.

"What exactly is this telling us?" Glaia asked.

"You see these LED's? The red lights on top of the case? Well, the more that light up, the closer we are to the center of the disturbance. Since you two will be with me that center will move even if the elf stays still, but if we just follow the center we will eventually get close enough to send you home.

"Now you see these three lights? They are our directional indicator. When all three are lit up our antennae array is pointed directly at the center and none will light up if we are headed away. Of course if we're not headed directly at the center, only the lights on the side of the center will light up. I'll mount the antennae on top of my car."

"A bit primitive, isn't it?" I commented.

"Well, if I had the a day or two I would have adapted a video screen to display a map of Cuyahoga County with our location, the center of disturbance and the estimated position of the elf superimposed on it," Marty replied, "but I thought that saving a world or two was more important."

"But this rig looks like a refugee from a bad monster movie."

Marty grinned, "I always wanted to be a mad scientist."

"Now that's a distinction you've enjoyed for years," I chuckled.

"True," he conceded. "Very true. Well, time to get moving." We went to the parking lot, where he installed the locator in his car. He turned it on for a test. "The center is somewhere off to the southwest," he said. "I sure wish we'd had time to calibrate this thing, I haven't the slightest notion of how far away it is."

"Somewhere between here and Parma," Glaia commented dryly.

"Oh, yeah," Marty said, flustered. "Well that's still on the distant range of this detector. Let's get in, we still have to pick up your stuff."

We went back up the hill and got our packs and the other stuff down from the third floor, but before we could take them out to the car, Marty brought me a shoe-box that felt fairly heavy.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Look inside," he told me. I did and found a revolver and a case of ammunition.

I looked at the piece. "A gun?"

"A Colt .38 Police Special," he replied.

"Okay, so it's not much of a gun. Why?"

"Well, it's not a .44 Magnum, but then you aren't Dirty Harry or even Sledge Hammer either. This one will leave a fair sized hole in someone at close range and I figure that, from what you tell me, it will be the most powerful weapon in Gonquin. It should give you an edge if you get caught in any more tight

situations."

"Thank you, old friend," I said, "but I don't even know if it will work there."

"You'll find a way," Marty replied. "I'm sure of it."

"One more thing," I said, suddenly remembering we would be leaving soon. "Take this key. It fits a locker in Terminal Tower. Wait until the police forget about that mugger we killed before you use it, though. Inside are our swords. We can't retrieve them now, and I'd like you to have them as a thank you for your and Charis' hospitality." Glaia agreed enthusiastically. I was glad she did, since I realized belatedly that I didn't have the right to give away her weapon.

"Robby," Glaia asked, "what about the stuff we bought? Won't your other self have to pay for it?"

"Good point. Still have that money we got for the gold?" She opened her purse and produced the large roll of bills. "Marty, we'll need you to do us one more favor."

"Send the money to you in Massachusetts, right?" he asked.

"You got it. This bundle should cover the expenses we racked up on the credit card. He could probably claim that someone forged his signature and prove that he wasn't in Cleveland, getting out of it that way, but this might be simpler."

"He'll have to claim that anyway to keep from being arrested," Marty said, taking the money, "but he'll still be responsible for the charges on credit cards not reported as stolen. I'll call him tonight and fill him in."

At last we were ready to roll and, quickly loading up the car, we got in and took off in a vaguely western direction. We became aware of the basic limitation of our equipment right from the start. Just because we knew where the center of the disturbance was, it didn't mean the streets were going to take us there directly. In fact, most of the major roads we needed to use were either north-south or east-west, but our objective was to the southwest. Worse, as we moved, it moved too, so that unless we were heading directly we had to keep turning.

We kept the news station on as we drove. As we expected the eye of the storm was getting smaller as we approached the elf, but the storm winds were also getting more vicious. The National Hurricane center finally announced that they had named this storm 'Astrid'. Marty was a bit surprised, said he'd really expected them to just call it something else, like a "Super Storm" or something. But Hurricane Astrid was causing major damage not only in the outer parts of Cuyahoga County, but in Lorain, Summit, Lake and Geauga Counties as well.

There was no further news of Aethelbricht, but with the weather doing damage to trees, power lines, houses and the inevitable trailer parks, we shouldn't have been surprised. Nevertheless, we could tell from the way the center was moving relative to us, that the elf must be moving around at a good clip himself. Had he stolen a car? Bought a cab ride with Gonquin silver?

By the time we reached Shaker Heights, the center should have been nearly to our west but, instead, was still to our southwest, and our improvised range meter was now lighting three lights.

Marty had chosen to drive on the basis that if we suddenly winked out, somebody had better be at the wheel. I had quickly pointed out that it was just as likely that if we winked out while in the car we might

just take Marty and the car along with us. Marty said that he'd take that chance and be prepared to slam on the brakes to keep from hitting a tree when we materialized in the middle of a forest. Meanwhile Glaia and I were in the back seat together. She was watching the indicator lamps and I was trying my best to estimate where we were trying to go and to give Marty the best route to get there.

"I think the elf is heading east out of Parma," I said. "Continue on down Lee until we get to Maple Heights; by then we should be able to turn west and be heading almost straight on. Wait a minute."

"What's wrong?" both Marty and Glaia asked.

"Is there a supermarket on the way?" I asked.

"Bob, this is no time to pick up a few groceries," Marty chided me.

"Oh yes it is," I insisted.

"Robby, what do you have in mind?" Glaia asked.

"Trust me," I replied with a grin. It felt good to do that to someone else for a change. Marty took the next turn and in a few minutes, pulled into a parking lot. "Wait here," I told them. "I'll be right back." I ran in and bought two common household items; good thing I still had most of the two hundred dollars I had taken out when I gave the rest to Glaia. As usual the express register had the slowest line but with eternal hope I tried that line anyway. Finally, I was through the check-out counter and I ran back to the car. I had Marty open the trunk and I put my purchases away into my already over-filled pack.

The indicators hadn't changed noticeably during the ten minutes I'd been gone, so we returned to our chosen course and continued on to Maple Heights. My estimate turned out to be close and we turned west. By now the distance meter was over half lit up.

"I think that should put us within three miles of the center of disturbance," Marty speculated. "I also think your elf has stopped moving now. The center hasn't deviated from being due west of us for several minutes now."

Everything was going smoothly until we were within sight of Canal road. There the lights of the distance meter suddenly all lit up and the directional lights made a quick progression from pointing to the northwest to the southwest.

"Look!" Marty shouted. "There he is on top of that school bus." Sure enough the elf was lying prone on the top of a yellow bus headed south on canal. Marty put his foot down on the accelerator but instead of turning drove straight through the intersection.

"What are you doing?" Glaia asked. "You should have turned there."

"No way, Glaia," Marty replied. "We have to get ahead of the bus so that you two can be out of the car with all your stuff before you transfer, right?"

"Sorry, I forgot."

"S'okay," Marty replied. "I'm going to skip ahead to the freeway and cut down to the south. Just keep an eye on those lights and the map."

Marty's plan worked. The bus continued on down Canal Road making occasional stops, while we took the long way around, but finally we got ahead of it and found ourselves heading north on Canal not very far from the county line. We were just coming up on the bridge over Tinkers Creek when the distance meter lights all lit up and then suddenly blinked out.

"Marty," I said, "stop the car quickly. The electric trunk just ran out of batteries." He hit the brakes and as soon as we came to a stop opened the trunk for us. We unloaded our things quickly while Marty checked his device.

"It didn't run out of power," he said on flipping open the case. "I think I put in one too many batteries. It burned out. We're lucky it lasted as long as it did. Oh oh, here comes that bus. Take care you two." The bus was still a couple hundred yards away and he rushed over to shake my hand and hug Glaia good-bye.

"Thanks for everything, Marty," I said. "Please give my love to Charis."

"Same here," Glaia said quickly. Then we grabbed our gear and waited for the bus. It was then that I noticed that we were standing in the middle of the bridge. If we transferred here we were going to get very wet.

"Quick, Glaia," I said, "we have to get off this bridge." One thing I like about Glaia is that she's very quick of mind. She saw instantly what I was getting at and we ran toward the edge of the bridge nearest the bus.

Closer and closer, the yellow vehicle approached. I realized belatedly that we should have run the other way, we might have gained a few extra seconds to spare. At last we made it to the end of the bridge as the bus was bearing down on us. Time compressed and seconds became hours. As the bus seemed to take forever to pass us, I started worrying that maybe the elf wouldn't get close enough to us, being up there on the roof. Fortunately I didn't have to worry.

Aethelbricht leaned over the edge of the bus and shouted, "Hey, guys!" At least I think he was saying that. About halfway through the second word there was a blinding flash of light that was, if anything, brighter than the one we experienced getting here and before our eyes recovered we heard Aethelbricht scream briefly just before he fell into the creek.

Chapter Twenty-three

I looked around and said, "We're back." Glaia smiled her agreement.

Tinkers Creek cannot be characterized as a peaceful meandering river nor a cheerfully bubbling brook in either world, especially not at this time of year. No, I think the phrase "murderously raging torrent" is far more accurate. As my vision cleared I looked down over the steep cliff to see Aethelbricht clinging desperately to a dead tree that had fallen partially into the river. I started to laugh until I realized what the temperature of the water must be in mid-December. He was in grave danger of hypothermia unless we got him out of there quickly.

Glaia and I removed our packs and we made our way down into the ravine. We stumbled several times on our way down and while Glaia managed to stay on her feet, I eventually slid down in a more or less sitting position.

When we finally got to the bottom, Glaia shimmied out on the downed tree trunk to where Aethelbricht was. However just as she got there he let go and was washed further downstream. On the bank, I started running to keep up with him. We were only about two hundred yards from the confluence of Tinkers Creek and Gonquin's version of the Cuyahoga River. This far up stream the Cuyahoga would be even worse than Tinkers Creek. Fortunately, the creek's current slammed him up against a large sandstone boulder fairly near to shore, and I waded out in the shallow, frigid water in that part of the river, picked up his unconscious body, and carried him to shore. At least he was still breathing.

Glaia had started building a fire and I paused to take in our surroundings. Looking up I saw the sides of the ravine carved out of shale, siltstone, and sandstone. There were a fair number of trees growing in the river valley with various degrees of success; and then I noticed the sky. I'm not sure if Hurricane Astrid had followed us or whether it had its own counterpart in Gonquin, but with the balance between the two universes more or less restored, it was breaking up.

Before, the calm however, we would have to weather the storm. The eye wall was clearly collapsing as the storm lost its tropical characteristics. Being in the eye, we had enjoyed relatively good weather, but all that was about to change.

"Glaia," I said, "we can't stay here. We'll have to get back up to the top of the ravine. With all the rain from this storm we're bound to get caught in a flash flood if we stay down here. Besides, our packs are up on top and we'll need to erect a shelter until the storm passes."

"Good point," she conceded. "I should have thought of that myself. I'm glad now we didn't leave the tent back in Hoga. But how are we going to get Aethelbricht up the cliff?"

"I'll carry him up as far as I can while you go get the rope. We can lash him to the back board of one of our packs and we can both lift him up the cliff." I picked up the elf and got him about halfway up the ravine until the side got really steep. Glaia threw the rope down to me, but before we could start lashing the elf to the backboard, he woke up.

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Cold," he said. "Wet and cold."

"Think you can climb the rest of the way up?"

He looked up the cliff wall as I pointed out what would have to pass as a path and said, "Not without some help." We ended up tying the rope around him; Glaia pulled him from above while I guided him from his own level. When we were about half way up we heard a distant rumble over the increasingly howling winds, and a minute later the ravine was filled with flood waters up to about where we had stopped to tie the rope around the elf.

"Good thing we moved, hon," Glaia said, watching the water rush by beneath us.

"Yeah or by now we'd be heading for Lake Erie or whatever you call it here."

"Lake Erie," she informed me as we returned to erecting the tent.

"Really?" She nodded. Meanwhile Aethelbriht had produced some clean dry clothes for himself and had further wrapped himself in two blankets, all of which I assumed came from one of those little dimensions he normally manipulated with ease. He was still shivering but looked remarkably well considering what he had been through. I remarked on that.

"Elves heal fairly rapidly," he told me, "and this amulet I wear speeds the process along even more." We finished erecting the tent just as the rains crashed down on us and we scrambled inside. It was cramped inside the tent. It had barely been big enough for Glaia and me, and at that we had only used it for sleeping. On the other hand it was warm and dry inside even if we didn't have the room to change out of our damp clothes.

"Hey, Aethelbriht," I said, "how about something to eat? Do you still have something socked away?"

"I have some roast mutton and maybe some chicken soup," he replied, producing those items in the already cramped quarters we shared. "Ah," he said as we started to eat, "I am sick to death of candy."

"Then why did you steal so much of it while we were in Cleveland?" Glaia asked.

"What else was there to eat?" he countered.

"Well," I suggested dryly, "you could have tried raiding a salad bar. We had no trouble finding a wide variety of food."

"But I like candy," he said plaintively. "If I can get that, why should I settle for anything else?"

"You said you were sick of the stuff," Glaia said pointedly.

"For now," he replied. "Hey! How did you two know about the candy?"

"You know," I said, "you really should have been a little more discreet. You were seen stealing the stuff repeatedly and you got rather greedy in that store in the Colonial Arcade. You made the news and the police were after you in a big way."

"They were? I never noticed," he said puzzled. "I was just having a fun time." Oh well, I guess it does absolutely no good to talk self-discipline to an elf.

It was nearly dark when the rain and wind finally stopped. Aethelbriht went outside and erected, or rather produced, his already erected tent. We found a way to start a fire and settled down for the evening beneath the still cloudy skies. At least the storm had finally blown itself out; I'd had grave doubts about whether the tent could stand up to the winds for much longer.

Temperatures had dropped rapidly overnight as the skies cleared and dawn revealed that the remnants of Hurricane Astrid had been turned into an ice storm. Everything was coated with a quarter-inch thickness of ice. I'd seen much worse, but this would make packing much tougher.

"Glaia," I suggested, "why don't we leave the tent up while we go visit Gaius Hammersmith."

"Hammersmith? What do you want to see him for? I doubt he'll give us an extension on the thirty days, for that matter we still have to find the road."

"No problem, it's about one hundred yards that way," I replied pointing downstream."

"How do you know that?"

"Easy. The road followed the river, remember? Now when we were in Cleveland did you happen to study any maps?" She had. "Notice any similarity between the worlds?"

"Well, yes, the physical maps are identical as far as I could tell. Oh, I see. Hoga and Cleveland are in about the same place aren't they?"

"Right. We may have changed worlds, but our motion was through time not space. Each point in this world correlates to one in the other, so when we transferred we transferred to the correlative point from where we started."

"Couldn't the correlative point still have been elsewhere, even if our maps are the same?" she asked.

"Anything is possible, I guess. Good thing they weren't though, or we might have landed in the ocean or outer space. However, if we were able to study it scientifically, we'd probably be able to show what forces determine correlative points, but I don't think we're equipped to do that at the moment. But we're getting off the subject. By my reckoning we can't be more than a mile or two south of Hammersmith's place."

"Assuming we're back in Gonquin," Glaia pointed out.

"What makes you say that?" I had assumed that in correcting the imbalance our presence in Cleveland caused we would naturally come back to where we came from.

"Nothing," she replied, "but it is a possibility."

"Maybe, but I think the storm would have continued if we were in the wrong place. Well, we'll find out soon enough. Let's go. I'll need my pack but we can let the rest of this stuff thaw and dry while we're gone."

I was right; the road was only one hundred yards away and Hammersmith's circular house was a brisk fifteen minute walk away.

Just like our last visit "the master of the house" left us waiting for a good long time. This time he outdid himself, leaving us in the central chamber for over an hour. Finally, he made an appearance.

"Well, what do you two want now?" he demanded. "I warn you - I'll grant no extensions. A contract is a contract. Now get out of here!"

Glaia gave me a look that said "I told you so" squared, and got up to leave.

Some people just naturally make a bad first impression. Hammersmith was probably their king. I, for one, was tired of playing the humble servant that the Agency required on this sort of mission. So as soon as I learned that Glaia and I were headed back here, I devised a way to turn his nastiness back on him.

"All right," I drawled picking up my pack and heading for the door, "if you don't want the items you ordered, I supposed we'll be on our way. It's been a pleasure doing business with you, sir." If he refused

to accept the order when I was prepared to deliver it, the Agency would consider that a completed mission. Glaia was looking at me strangely and I realized belatedly that I hadn't filled her in on my plan, so she had continued to assume that I planned to ask for an extension.

"Wait!" Hammersmith said suspiciously. "Did you say you had my order?"

"That's right, sir," I replied, "but if you don't really want it, far be it from me to force it on you." I continued toward the door. "Oh, I'll need a statement from you, of course that we were here today with your order. Got a piece of paper?" I started rummaging through my pack. "Never mind, I have one."

"Don't act so stupid. You're up to something. If you have my order, produce it now," he demanded.

I casually opened the flap on my pack and pulled out a plastic pint jug of maple syrup and a small can of "3 in One" oil. "There you go," I said.

Hammersmith stared at the two items I'd purchased in that Shaker Heights supermarket. "What the hell kind of packaging is that?" he asked.

"That, my good sir," I replied, "is state-of-the-art, guaranteed freshness, tamper-resistant packaging."

Glaia finally got into the act now that she saw what I was up to. "So," she said, "you want it or not?"

"Yes," Hammersmith said. "Yes, I'll take it." He reached for the two items.

"Wait a minute," I stopped him. "Not so fast. You only ordered half of what I have here. If you have a container available, I'll be more than happy to measure out the precise amounts of both substances."

"That won't be necessary, friend." Hammersmith was trying to be friendly now, but he obviously hadn't had much practice at it. "I'll be more than happy to reimburse you at market value."

"Plus shipping and handling, of course," Glaia purred.

"Of course," Hammersmith agreed, his smile starting to crack. Let's just say that we got his money's worth of entertainment and leave it at that.

An hour later we were back at our campsite. The tent was dry and we were telling Aethelbright about our latest encounter with Gaius Hammersmith as we struck camp.

"Wait a minute," the elf said. "You charged him for shipping and handling. I got you to where you could buy it in the first place. Don't I get a share?"

"You'll do better than that," Glaia assured him. "You provided us with a unique transportation service. Tell me what are your rates for extra-dimensional travel?" For once the elf was at a loss. "Well, we'll work it out. We'll need a receipt, of course, but any scrap of paper will serve. Believe me, you'll be set in candy for life."

"Please," begged Aethelbright, "the very thought of candy causes my stomach to do a triple back flip with a one and a half spin, but I'll take the money. How much was that now?" It took another half hour to negotiate his fee. The problem wasn't that he was asking too much. Just the opposite, in fact. It took us most of that time to convince him to take more. It was a unique service, after all. I also warned him not to try it again and why.

"Robby," Glaia said after we had finished striking our camp, "I've been thinking and I'd like to go home for a bit and I'd like you to come with me."

"You mean I finally get to meet the folks?" I asked.

"You got it, hon. We have a lot of talking to do. Will you let me do it in my own way and order?" I said that I would. "Okay, I figure we can use Serta's token to get back to Hatten and then we can ride down to Gonquin City. It's a shame we lost the horses, but we'll have enough after we get paid to take a coach."

"Did Serta tell you how to invoke the token?" I asked.

"No, but I assumed it uses the standard invocation."

"A standard invocation?" Now that was a new one to me, industrial standard for magic. Well, it works for electronics, why not magic, hmm?

"Yes." She held the token before her and recited, "Tsamah Godah!" The token shimmered for a moment and then went back to its normal brass color as Serta's magical bus appeared on the street in front of us. The door opened and we saw the bus-driving nymph, Denise, inside.

"Well hi there, you two!" she greeted us. "I was wondering how long you'd be able to take this dump. Where to?"

"We're headed for Hatten," I told her as we stepped on board.

"Yeah?" she said. "Well, that's more like it! "Hatten it is. Just have a seat and we'll be off." Glaia tried to turn in the token. Serta had implied that we had one use of it coming to us, but Denise said, "Keep it. It's obviously one of her repeating ones. It'll disappear when you use it up. Until then I guess I'll be seeing more of you." She closed the door and when Glaia and I were seated the bus started moving off into the night.

High Society

or

Playing the Palace

Chapter Twenty-four

"Did you see the look on Jonet's face when we walked into her office?" Glaia laughed. She'd been gloating about this for days now. We hadn't been gone long enough to even get to Hoga yet by normal

modes of travel, and yet there we were boldly strolling into the Agency Headquarters building in Hatten like we owned the place.

Jonet, the Hatten area resident chief, was about to read us the Gonquin Riot Act until I said, "Mission completed, Madame Jonet. Here is your reply," I placed the receipt on her desk. "And here is a record of our expenses," I had prepared a quick spread sheet which then joined the receipt, "and here are the receipts that document those expenses." They also joined the pile. Jonet, in her surprise, just sat there, mouth open, staring at the pile of paper, so I drove in just one more spike. "Pay up."

"Pay up?" Jonet asked tightly. I had thought that would shake her out of shock. "Pay up? Now look, Jones! I will not be spoken to that way by a mere field agent."

"Sure glad she isn't a snob," I said as an aside to Glaia. Glaia winked. Jonet having finally wound herself up didn't even notice.

"If you ever want to work for the Agency again," Jonet was saying, "you will keep a civil tongue in the presence of an Agency superior."

"Don't you just love her egalitarian attitude, hon?" Glaia asked me.

"Just warms the cockles of my heart, dear," I said in reply.

"Shut up, both of you!" Jonet screamed. "Wait, what the hell is this? 'Extra-dimensional transportation - two round trip tickets on Aethelbricht Worldlines?'" Glaia and I glanced at each other and grinned. "That does it," Jonet continued. "I don't care how well you faked these receipts I will not reimburse your fictional expenses."

"Fictional expenses, dear?" Glaia said. By mutual agreement this subject would be hers. I sat back and watched the show; my turn would be next. "This is not a fictional report. Every last item is legitimate and documented. And our little trip to Cleveland allowed us to complete the mission in the most efficient possible manner. Now you have a choice to make. It is true that you can refuse to pay us until you have received confirmation from the Hoga office and from Aethelbricht Aethelthrythsson, but if you do that, you'll have to pay us double the going interest rate on the amount when the confirmation comes through, and it will come through. Go ahead, we can always use the extra money although we're not particularly short at the moment.

"Of course it will be a very black mark on your record, dear, but I suppose if you can take it, my conscience can too." Glaia sat back smiling with contentment.

"Very well," Jonet said through clenched teeth. "That works both ways, you know. I'll pay you, it's not my money anyway, but if the Hoga office won't back you up, you'll be paying it back with double interest, and the black mark will be yours. Are you sure you want to go through with this farce, dear?"

"Go ahead," Glaia replied maliciously. "Care to make a side bet on that confirmation?"

Jonet ignored that, instead saying, "And, of course, you will have to be officially inactive while we wait for that confirmation." Jonet seemed so happy with that pronouncement that I almost felt it was a shame to burst her little bubble, but now it was my turn.

"Oh yes," I said, pulling a pair of envelopes out of the pouch where I'd kept the rest of the pile of papers. "Thank you for reminding me; I nearly forgot. Here." I tossed them down on top of the rest of the

pile.

"What?" Jonet asked suspiciously.

"Official notice," I told her. "Effective immediately both Glaia and I are on an indefinite leave of absence. If you need us, we can be reached in Gonquin City."

"Get out of here, both of you." Jonet knew she was defeated, but she wouldn't accept it gracefully. "Pick up your pay and get out."

We got up to leave but at the door we turned to say, "Have a nice day!" in unison before closing the door as quickly as we could without actually slamming it. From inside we heard a shriek, but I couldn't make out any words; perhaps the heavy wooden door muffled them. Perhaps.

By Glaia's choice we had hired a coach to take us to Gonquin City. It was an expensive way to travel and I could see why we hadn't used it so far, but Glaia felt that we had earned this bit of luxury. I had wanted to use the bus token again and save a week of travel in cold weather, but she insisted, saying that we would finally have the time to talk about all the things she'd been avoiding up until now - her life story and our future together.

So far, however, from what she told me, I had confirmation of things I'd earlier suspected. She was a middle daughter of a relatively well-off family. I suspected that they were on the rich side from the way she downplayed that aspect, probably nobility since she occasionally mentioned relatives with titles in front of their names, although her folks were always just "Mom and Dad" and she mentioned her siblings by simple names. Aside from that, she spoke of various incidents in her childhood and her career in the Agency. I had promised to let her tell it her way, however, so I listened and waited.

Along the way, I returned to my magic lessons. The practice of magic, I found, is one of those things you never really forget once you learn how, at least if you can remember the proper incantation. However, I couldn't read my book while riding; a few too many bumps and I got car sick if I tried. We were up at dawn and often rode for some time after dark, depending on how soon after dusk we arrived at the scheduled rest stop.

I managed to practice in the coach and when I wasn't too tired, tried to pick up a new spell at night. My vacation away from magic seemed to have done me some good. I found that after some initial fumbling, I was casting spells with less effort and more confidence, and I mastered another spell on the trip.

Gabriel's Ventriloquism

Use this nifty spell to throw your voice. Make it seem to come from out of a box, from the other side of a door. Throw it around corners. Amaze your friends, fool your enemies, baffle your teachers...

Ventriloquism, terrific. I sometimes wonder why I continue using this book. On the other hand, it's the only one I have. Fortunately I'm over half through it now.

As I had done on other occasions, I forced myself to read on. I wouldn't need to acquire a dummy;

unlike the sort of ventriloquism I was acquainted with, this one really would cause my voice to be heard emanating from a point of my choice at a distance from my mouth. One of the suggested uses is to use it to talk to a friend at a distance easily, and if two people know this spell they can talk to each other at a distance in a magical version of two cans and a piece of string.

It's an easy enough spell, but its duration is only for a single, short sentence unless prolonged with the spell I'd learned earlier. There was the usual trick of maintaining an unfamiliar spell while casting a secondary one, but once I managed that I was casting my voice all around our coach until Glaia couldn't take it anymore and cast a quick silence spell on me. I was unable to speak either magically or normally for hours.

The journey was otherwise smooth and uneventful until we were one day out from Gonquin City. I was practicing my magic lessons and also annoying Glaia by making a Futaba light seem to speak as it whizzed around in and out of the coach. I had learned the hard way just how much I could get away with before she would cast her silence spell and shut me up for hours. Third time was the charm. I was just getting ready to shut down my flying, glowing chatter box when we heard the coach driver warn us he was about to stop.

"What's up?" I asked him as he pulled to a halt.

Our coachman was very efficient in his speech as though he felt the gods had granted him a set number of words at birth and he was afraid to use them up early. He said simply, "Dragon."

"Dragon?" I asked. He nodded. Glaia and I got out of the coach and sure enough, about fifty yards ahead there was a large, silver-green dragon lying down in the road giving us the answer to the old joke, "Where does a five-ton dragon sleep?" Actually, it was not immediately apparent that the beast was asleep until we got a little closer, which might not have been the wisest thing to do, but it made sense at the time.

"It isn't Glorn, is it?" I asked Glaia quietly.

"Not very likely," she replied. "Glorn's range is fairly well known. He very rarely goes beyond Cushna County and the Claw and never very far beyond when he does. Besides this one is a bit larger and I think his scales are somewhat greener." I took another look and saw that she was right.

"So what do we do?" I asked her.

"Not a clue," she replied. "We have a saying here about not waking a sleeping dragon. They tend to be cranky when disturbed."

"No fooling, huh?" I had clear memories indeed of my somewhat flamboyant entrance to this world. "So how does one wake a dragon without disturbing it?"

"One doesn't," she replied with a slight smile, "but maybe two can. Let's see, the critter is blocking the whole road and the woods are too close to the road and too dense for us to go around."

"Can we go back and take an alternate route?" I asked.

The driver had come up behind us quietly and answered my question, "Too far. Two days." We walked back to the coach to discuss the matter.

"The way I see it," I said, "is that we have to wake the dragon, and then provide some sort of diversion so we can get past."

"Sounds good so far as it goes, hon," Glaia said. "What's the plan?" Good question.

"Well could we try baiting him?"

"Her. Do you mean the three of us stand around her annoying her until she runs after one of us, and then before she can catch up another can jump in and distract her into running that way until she's too tired to keep up?"

"That was the plan," I said.

"It's a stupid plan," she told me. "Sorry, dear. Not all dragons behave like Glorn does. They're as individualistic as people. Just as likely, this one may decide to hold its ground and flash fry us one at a time. No, we need to be at a fair distance to be even vaguely safe."

"At a distance? Can we use that ventriloquism spell I just learned?" I asked. "How about using it to shout something to wake her. Maybe then she might just wander away."

"It might work," she allowed, "but judging from the bulge in her stomach, I'd say she just ate. You probably couldn't wake her with anything short of a club to her head. You did just give me an idea, though. Can you conjure up a Futaba light that looks like gold?"

"I can try," I said. The result looked more like brass to me, but Glaia was satisfied with the results.

"Good," she replied. "Now prolong it." I did so. She then cast a moderate length spell I hadn't heard before but using gestures similar to the ones in casting the levitation spell I learned earlier. When she was done, a fair sized rock, I'd estimate it weighed around ten pounds, floated up from the side of the road and stood between us at eye level. "Okay, now here's the plan. I'll need you to keep the rock within your gold sphere while we float it down there to wake her up."

"Why keep the rock within the sphere?" I asked.

"Dragons love gold; they hoard the stuff when they can find it. The rock should be sufficient to wake her up and sleepy as she'll still be, she'll see your light as a large hunk of gold. Leaving the rock inside the sphere will give the phantasmal light a semblance of solidity, so she'll think it's real gold and try to get it. That way we might be able to lure her off the road."

"Okay," I agreed, "but it seems to me that coordinating the movements of the rock and the sphere will be nearly impossible. Let's float them down separately and after you bop her, I'll leave the light in front of her face while you quickly move the rock behind that big tree in front of her. I'll use the light to lure her there and after that we can move both together in a straight line. That will be much easier." She agreed and we were off. The plan went along just fine. The dragon woke up rather bleary-eyed and saw the golden sphere in front of her. She was still groggy, but her love of gold was enough to impel her forward, albeit slowly. I kept the sphere just out of her reach until it approached the tree and Glaia neatly slipped the rock inside unseen by the big lizard. And then before we could move it any further the dragon suddenly lunged at the Futaba-covered rock and swallowed it whole. Then she curled up on the ground and went back to sleep.

"Well," Glaia said, "we got her off the road anyway. You think maybe they eat gold?"

"More likely she wasn't seeing too clearly and thought it was food. Unless dragons have gizzard stones, she might wake up with an upset stomach."

"Right. Let's roll while we can," Glaia agreed. The coachman was already back in his seat.

Chapter Twenty-five

I had my first glimpse of Gonquin City about mid-morning the next day. Gonquin City was every bit as large as Hatten and it would take the better part of what was left of the day to reach our destination. However it was a city rather lacking in imagination when it came to a color scheme, or rather what variety there was had been neatly segregated, each into its own part of town. The houses in the out-lying parts of town seemed to be built of a drab brown wood so dirty looking as to be mistaken for gray at a casual glance. Further in, we passed through sections of town in which all the buildings were built of red bricks that were stuck together with the most depressing shade of gray mortar. All this, I think, was to set the town center off in stark relief. Caesar Augustus had it backwards; we had found a city of marble and left a town of brick.

The entire city center, which Glaia told me included the governmental offices and thousands of monuments to all those things governments tend to erect monuments to - dead heroes mostly - appeared to have been built of white marble. Some of these monuments were large open buildings of various shapes and sizes. Others were small parks with statuary in them, so at least the pigeons were well taken care of. Still others were just plaques saying something along the line of, "On this site Saint Ecgbeorht the Unsteady, King of all Gonquin, collapsed in a drunken stupor during the Harvest Festival in the Twenty-first Year from the establishment of the kingdom. He never recovered."

Up until our arrival in Gonquin City I had always had a fondness for objects carved out of marble. Evidently the city planners here did too. They also had an unlimited budget and an astoundingly infinite lack of taste. But they kept it clean; I'll give them that. The city's center sparkled. It shone. It glowed with an inner light. Ajax was here. It was also tough on the eyes, and me without my sunglasses.

"How much further?" I asked Glaia.

"You see that big building up at the end of this street?"

"The one made of white marble?" I asked facetiously.

"That's the one. That's Gonquin Palace. We're going there." she answered.

"Nice digs," I said dryly. Imagine Versailles as it might have been had it been designed in the early Nineteenth Century by an American architect. It had lots of pseudo-Grecian columns, a couple of really impressive domes, acres and acres of neatly cut grasslands, and three floors in the space where any normal builder would have put five. Frankly I'd have preferred something by Frank Lloyd Wright. But beyond considerations of ostentation, the building, or rather the entire palace compound, was cold and imposing. I said as much, "You know, that place would look far warmer and friendlier if it had been done

up in a nice earth tone."

Glaia looked at me strangely for a minute or so, and then finally said, "You're right. That may be why I haven't been here very often since the university."

The coachman brought us up to the North Gate where two guardsmen dressed in livery of bright red and yellow vertical stripes met us.

"You're a bit early," one commented. "May I see your invitation?"

"Invitation?" I asked.

"Oh, I thought you were here for the New Year's Ball. If not, may I inquire as to your business here?" he asked respectfully. We weren't dressed in high fashion, but our arrival in a coach denoted monetary success at least.

"Sergeant Osketel," Glaia said, leaning forward in her seat, "have I really changed all that much since my last visit?"

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Highness. Move aside, man," he said to the other guard. "Make way for the Princess Aglaia." The coach started forward again.

"Princess Aglaia?" I asked, surprised.

"I didn't have much say in the matter," she replied. "Mom's the queen, you know. Does it really matter?" I thought about that for a quick moment.

"I guess not," I replied. I never have been comfortable around famous or important people. If I'd known, I probably would have put her on a pedestal well beyond my reach. "And at least this way I know that I love you for who you are, not what you are." She took my hand then and spent a long moment looking at me with those incredible eyes of hers. We were about to kiss when our coach came to jarring halt at the end of an incredibly long, curving driveway. We disembarked while the coachman unloaded our luggage. I don't believe I've ever felt more out of place than when Glaia and I climbed the white marble steps of the palace in our now very rough and tattered travel clothes and carrying our packs, a very battered shopping bag, and two hat boxes. An elderly, well-dressed man who greeted Glaia with extreme deference met us at the top of the stairs.

"Welcome home, Your Highness," he said. "Their Majesties will be pleasantly surprised."

"Thank you, Lord Saer," she replied. "Are they available at the moment? I should greet them formally if they are. Protocol and all that."

"They are not available at this time, Princess. Your mother is in council with the legation from the Fay Nation and will probably be closeted with them until the ball tonight, and your father is out of the castle with an old friend. It seems that Sir Degarre arrived today." Lord Saer did not sound as though he approved. Whether the subject of his disapproval was Degarre or whatever they were doing together or both, I couldn't tell.

"Oh well, if I can't do my duty to them, I guess we might as well clean up and get dressed for the ball. Are my rooms ready for occupation?"

"Of course, Princess," Lord Saer replied, "just as you commanded when you left for the university."

"It wasn't a command, dear Saer," she said kissing him on the cheek. "It was a request."

"Your requests are ever my commands, Aglaia," he said softly. "And shall I have the maids prepare chambers for the gentleman?"

"Oh, where are my manners?" Glaia said. "Lord Saer, may I present Mister Robert Phillip Jones. Robby, Lord Saer is the palace seneschal; he is responsible for running all non-state business in the palace and the seasonal royal residences. And separate quarters will not be necessary, Saer. Mister Jones will be staying with me."

"As Your Highness pleases," Lord Saer said in such a way that conveyed the impression that either answer would have pleased him so long as Glaia was happy with the situation. "If you leave your bags here, I'll have them delivered to your suite."

"Thank you, Saer," Glaia replied, "but that won't be necessary. We can manage." he nodded and left us to carry on. I followed Glaia down a long corridor, up a flight of stairs, down another corridor, up two more flights of stairs, and on to a small porch overlooking the inner grounds of the palace.

"I really hope this isn't your room, dear," I said to Glaia.

"No, silly. I just like to come up here as soon as I can whenever I return. This isn't a great time of year to see it, but directly below us is the garden. In the summer I used to just love to sit here reading while the scent of all sorts of flowers mingled and occasionally drifted up to me. Over there is the arena. The King's and Queen's Guards practice there every morning, regardless of the weather. See that statue over there?"

"Which one?"

"The one of King Wiscard on his horse," she said pointing at the only one with a horse in sight. "When I was a kid I found a little compartment in the back that I used to use for a secret hiding place."

"Why was there a compartment there?"

"Oh, I think it was where a dedication plaque or something was supposed to have been, but it was long gone by the time I found it. I suspect several generations of children had used it before me." She pointed to a few other things and places that had special meaning for her before we went inside. I feared that her suite would end up being at the opposite end of the complex from where we were, but fortunately it was only a few doors over on the same floor.

We bathed, we ate a light snack, we talked a bit, and finally it was time to get dressed. Sometime while I was washing off the last week's worth of road, Glaia had arranged for suitable garb for me: a dark green velvet tunic with gold and black bead-work trim, light green silk undertunic and hose and a pair of soft-soled shoes of brown suede that I might otherwise have called slippers. As with the other footwear I had found here, it was nice to know that the cobblers and cordwainers of Gonquin had discovered the concept of left and right feet. Still, one small thing bothered me.

"Glaia," I complained, "Are you sure I ought to wear the silk pantyhose? It seems so effeminate."

"Hon," she answered, "I wouldn't do that to you, believe me, especially not when I want you to make a

good impression on my folks. This is the height of fashion, but you know, it's missing something." She went to a closet and took out one of the hat boxes we'd been carrying around with us since our first day in Cleveland. Terrific, now on top of the pantyhose she'd have me wearing a lady's hat just so I could fit in with Gonquin's nobility. "There you go," she said opening the box. From it she pulled out a brown fedora, identical or nearly so to the one I lost on my arrival in Gonquin. I took it and examined it. Yes! It was a Stetson and the same model as my former favorite. "Yes that does look right on you," she said. "I suppose I should have given it to you sometime ago, but I wanted to wait for the right moment. I hope it was worth it."

"It was. Really it was." I kissed her. "Thank you. This is wonderful, but does it go with the rest of this costume?"

"I think so. It's not completely unlike the hats worn by the nobility of Northern Gonquin, and the style has been spreading south in recent years. I dare say that you'll see one or two like it tonight. Now if you don't mind waiting in the sitting room, I'll be getting dressed too."

While I waited I decided to take another look at the magic book Glaia had given me, The Junior Wizard's Book of Spells. In the last few days I had learned several new spells, although I still confused the incantations of two of the spells. One was for the opening of jars and the other for wooden boxes. Both spells used the same equipment and gestures, but the incantations differed by a single word. Glaia had told me that if you don't match up all the elements of a spell exactly nothing would happen, but this wasn't precisely true. When I accidentally tried the jar-opening spell on a box, it shattered trying to twist itself open.

The next spell was relatively harmless; it conjured flowers out of thin air, or so the book said. It did however call upon the power of the four classic magical elements; fire, water, earth, and air; the first spell in the book to employ more than the magician's personal power. The first ingredient was a bright white Futaba light, which symbolized fire. When I first learned that spell I hadn't realize how useful it was. Next I was to hold a piece of stone in my left hand to symbolize earth and place my right hand in a bowl of water. And so with the flower of my choice in mind, I recited the long incantation while bringing the stone together with my wet hand within the Futaba light. As soon as I was finished, the light disappeared and I was nearly buried in lilacs of various shades.

"Very nice, Robby!" Glaia said from the doorway as I did my best to extricate myself from the pile of branches without damaging my clothing. All I needed now was a run in my hose. "I adore lilacs, but don't you think you overdid it a bit?"

"I usually do, don't I? Ah well, here," I said offering her a particularly dark purple bunch. "For you." She smiled and accepted it gracefully. As she deeply inhaled the lilacs' scent, I looked at what she was wearing. It was a formal gown of medium green satin that set off the color of her eyes perfectly. On her feet she wore a pair of slippers similar to the ones I wore, save that they were a very dark green, and on her head was a delicate gold and emerald tiara that I assumed was her coronet, or maybe one of several. How many coronets does princess have to choose from? She also wore a jeweled collar of diamonds and rubies and a plain gold bracelet.

"Do you like the dress?" she asked. "I bought it in Cleveland."

"It's beautiful," I answered truthfully. "So are you."

"I suppose I should have put my hair up," she said, smiling at the compliment, "but I'd have needed help to do it, and after all these years on my own, I doubt I'll ever be used to servants again. Besides, I never

did like the formal hairstyles and usually avoided them anyway." She walked to the sitting room window and looked out into the night. "I think we're fashionably late enough, dear. The ball is well underway. See?" Looking where she pointed I saw a brightly lit hall that was maybe fifty yards away as the crow flies, but about a quarter of a mile or more as the turkey walks.

"Well then," I said, offering her my arm, "shall we?"

Maybe I've seen too many movies, but I somehow expected the entrance to the hall to be at the top of a long flight of stairs. It wasn't. The entrance we used was a large archway flanked by a pair of guardsmen and a herald wearing a tabard of the royal arms just inside.

"Good evening, Your Highness," he said. "Welcome back."

"Thank you, Sir Ranald, and belated congratulations on your knighthood," Glaia replied. She whispered something to him then and he turned to the hall, rapped his staff to the floor twice, and announced us.

"Her Highness, the Princess Aglaia Thirza Ameline Gisela," Glaia for short, indeed! "and Mister Robert Phillip Jones, Esquire!"

I kept the sort of half-bemused smile on my face that I find useful on formal occasions as we processed into the hall toward the thrones that had been set up at the far end. Barely moving my lips I said to Glaia, "I hate to mention this, but I'm not an esquire."

"You are now, hon," she replied. "Keep smiling, dear. There seem to be a lot of surprised people here." The hall, which had suddenly become quiet as Sir Ranald banged his staff had stayed quiet enough for us to hear our own footsteps. "I guess the old gossip mill isn't what it used to be. I honestly expected that by now everyone in the kingdom would know I was back in town. If I'd known it would be such a big surprise I might have planned something spectacular. So much for lost opportunities. I guess I should have suspected something when we went the last few hours without any visitors."

"Major question, love," I said. "How does one behave around royalty?"

"Normally - like with anyone else. We don't stand on formality often as it doesn't usually hold our weight. However, since this is a formal occasion, follow my lead. When I curtsey, make a better than slight bow without averting your eyes. If Mom offers her hand you may kiss it; if Dad does, shake it." Good enough.

When we were about ten feet from the thrones Glaia brought us both to a halt and as we paid our respects she said, "The Princess Aglaia greets her royal parents on her return; and if it pleases you, may I introduce Mister Robert Phillip Jones, Esquire, who has been my companion and partner in the Agency." The king and queen rose out of their seats and approached us.

"Welcome home, dear," the queen said hugging Glaia warmly. Then her father did likewise.

"Robby," Glaia said, "I present Her Royal Majesty, Queen Eulalia of Gonquin and His Highness, King Kenneth Martinson." We completed the ritual pretty much in the way Glaia had predicted; although I got the impression that the king was attempting to size me up. I remembered what Sir Degarre had said about having to run off one of Glaia's previous suitors. I'd better make the cut.

Their Majesties had many official obligations even at a party so we agreed to meet them for breakfast and started to make our way to the nearest refreshment table. We weren't very far along the way before

we were accosted by a lady in her late teens.

"Glaia!" she called out running across the floor towards us. She bore a strong family resemblance to Glaia and wore a similar tiara, but her hair was a reddish-brown and her eyes a sort of green-tinted brown. She was also an inch shorter than Glaia. "Oh, it's been years," she said hugging Glaia vigorously. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming home? I haven't heard from you in months. Where have you been? Why haven't you written? Where did you meet Mister Jones?"

Glaia quickly cut in, "Robby, my sister Lavinia. Vinia, I'm sorry I haven't written, but Robby and I have been on the move for the last few months and my mail never caught up with me. I'll fill you in as soon as possible, okay?"

"Sure, but I'm being called Nia now, please?" Glaia nodded. Then Nia turned toward me. "May I call you Robby too?"

"Robby, Robert, Bob, Bobby, whatever," I responded with a wink. For some reason she blushed. Nia was obviously a younger, more innocent version of Glaia and I warmed to her instantly.

"Nia," Glaia said, as much testing the sound of her little sister's new nickname as getting her attention, "how many of the family are at home at the moment?"

"Let's see," Nia stopped to think. "Kenrick and his family are still down south in Tenochca while he arbitrates the peace talks between them and Atahuallpa. Samantha is with her in-laws in Delphi. Alexander, Perdita and the kids are here somewhere as are Michael and his fiancé. And Talya's hanging out with her friends over in the far corner."

"I'd hoped the whole family might be together this time," Glaia sighed, "but we're a large family. Maybe next year. Oh excuse me a minute will you two, I must have a word with Lord Saer. Vin... sorry, Nia will you take Robby to the refreshment table?" With that she strode purposefully away to Lord Saer on the far side of the hall.

"C'mon, Robby!" Nia took my hand and dragged me at a slightly undignified speed toward the punch bowl. I opted for a dry sparkling wine over the sweet stuff and managed to grab a stuffed mushroom before she propelled me still further to introduce me to various friends, nobles and anyone else she could find to show me off to. Except for the few I've come to know since then I can't recall any of them very clearly.

When we approached Sir Degarre who was speaking to a tall man of my age or a little younger, who was wearing some form of coronet, Nia was about to introduce me as she had been doing for the past half hour or better, but Degarre beat her to it. "Robert! It's good to see you again. You and Glaia must have been close on my heels since I left Hoga, to get here so soon. How did you get Glaia to abandon her plans for Jonet? I wouldn't have thought she'd pass up that opportunity for the world."

"I didn't," Glaia said coming up behind me. "Hi, handsome. Did you miss me?" she gave me a quick kiss then locked her arm in mine as we both faced Degarre and the nobleman he'd been talking to.

"Robby," Nia said before someone could beat her to it, "Since you already know Uncle Degarre, I present my royal brother, Prince Alexander."

"Pleased to meet you, Your Highness," I said extending my hand.

He accepted it saying, "And you, Mister Jones, but please call me Alex." I thanked him, telling him to choose the nickname for me he felt most comfortable with.

While I'd been talking to Alex, Nia had rushed off and now had in tow a younger girl with hair the same color as Glaia's. "And this," Nia said, "is our sister Princess Natalya. Talya, this is Robby." Talya smiled shyly, obviously uncomfortable at being thrust at a total stranger when she'd been having such fun with her friends.

Remembering that I'd always hated being patronized by adults when I was her age, I treated her just as I had her older siblings. "Pleased to meet you, Talya," I said, offering my hand. She accepted it with her own hand palm downward, so I did my best attempt at a rusty but courtly bow as I kissed it. She giggled and then impulsively rushed forward and kissed me on the cheek before running back to where her friends were standing watching and likewise giggling.

"Little Talya always has been the shy one," Alex said, "but I do believe you've charmed her, Rob. I hope you all will excuse me. I see the Manche ambassador over there and I promised Mom that I'd spend some time with him this evening. I'll see you at breakfast? Good." He walked off.

"So," said Glaia, "have you met everyone yet?"

"No," Nia said. "I can't find Michael."

"I saw him earlier," Degarre offered. "When last seen, he and Zoe were sneaking out of the hall."

"He should have stayed here," Nia said disapprovingly. "He has the same responsibility that the rest of us have to be present."

"Learn patience, Nia," Degarre reproached her. "Yes, he is wrong, but the two of them haven't seen each other in two months and probably won't again until after their wedding. Besides the Fay refused to attend the Ball again this year and without their presence, we're not likely to have any real problems. Let them enjoy their engagement."

"Good point," Glaia agreed. "Nia, you make it sound like you've never gone off with a boy before. What's up? No one you like here tonight?"

"I broke up with Nathan a couple weeks ago," Nia confessed. "I guess I just..." She broke off as the herald's staff rapped on the floor twice and we heard Sir Ranald's voice ring out.

"The Ambassador from the Fay Nation, His Excellency Hans von der Wald!"

"Speak of the Devil," I muttered.

"Not just any devil either, hon," Glaia whispered back. "Check out his hand." His left hand was heavily bandaged and while the Fay normally had three fingers and a thumb per hand it was clear that he was missing his middle finger. "Look familiar?"

"All too!" I replied.

"You two know him?" Degarre asked. We nodded. "Nia, do you have any idea where Michael might be with Zoe?"

"He could be in any of several places, but it would be rather embarrassing if I interrupted them in mid..."

"Find him," Degarre said forcefully. "Tell him I don't care if he has to straighten his tights on the run but we need him here in two minutes or less, got it?"

"Yes sir."

"Wait a minute," Glaia said before Nia could run off. "Here he comes now, and it does look like he dressed on the run. He must have made arrangements in case something came up. We owe our brother an apology, Nia. You'd better join him and take that side of the hall."

"Right," Nia said and moved off immediately but without haste toward her brother.

Hans and his legation approached the throne and officially paid their respects to the Crown. The entire hall was a-buzz with commentary and we couldn't make out just what was being said; but after making a presentation that was, at least superficially, received with good grace by Their Majesties, the delegation turned to leave the hall.

Glaia and I, in our attempt to hear what was being said, had accidentally placed ourselves between Hans and the exit so that he walked directly toward us as he left. There was a flash of recognition in his eyes when he saw us and his hatred was quick to surface. The members of his legation began to hum and I mentally braced myself for action, but he wasn't stupid and realizing where he was, cut them off.

I smiled nastily and raising my glass of wine said, "Happy New Year, Your Excellency. Long time, hey?"

The scar on his face where I'd clouted him with the sword hilt blazed red as he fought to keep control of his emotions. Finally he forced his mouth into a smile, although his eyes didn't follow suit. "Yes," he hissed. "We must get together again soon." With that he brushed past us and left the hall.

As he left, Alexander came up to us as Degarre was saying, "You two sure have all the luck. Imagine the day you crippled just happens to be the new ambassador." I looked up and saw that Nia and Michael were closing in on our little group as well, and even Talya had suddenly materialized from behind Alex.

Alex remarked, "I think we're all going to want to know the story behind that interesting little encounter."

"At breakfast," said the king quietly behind me. "We've already brought more attention to the incident than we should have by bunching up like this. Now let's circulate and make like nothing of real note happened. Oh, by the way, Mister Jones, Her Majesty thanks you for the flowers." And with that he returned to the throne.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you, Robby," Glaia explained, "That's what I talked to the seneschal about. I figured we might as well use all those lilacs you conjured up to decorate the palace and while I was at it, arranged to have a large bunch delivered to Mom in your name. I didn't think you'd mind."

"Not at all," I replied. Glaia did want me to make a good impression; the flowers couldn't hurt. The rest of the evening was thankfully uneventful although I found myself guarding my tongue at various prompts from Glaia, Degarre, and Nia, whenever we weren't talking strictly within the royal family plus Degarre and myself.

Glaia and I returned to her suite not long after midnight. The sitting room had been cleaned up, which shouldn't have surprised me since Glaia told me it had been, but I still remembered it half full of flowers.

In their place a small vase with lilac blossoms sat on a coffee table. It seemed a fitting memorial to a fine spell gone only slightly wrong.

Chapter Twenty-six

The next morning Glaia insisted I wear a relatively simple tunic that was of very fine workmanship, but she allowed that the new jeans that I'd picked up in Cleveland were quite acceptable. I also chose to wear a pair of designer walking shoes. She, on the other hand, wore a sweater and skirt that were also from Cleveland. We were on our way to last night's oft mentioned "Breakfast." With the uncharacteristically cautious side of me coming to the surface for a change, I asked about that.

"Oh, breakfast is the one meal we keep in the family along with special friends. It's our way to keep in touch as a family and to prepare for the rest of the day. I imagine that we'll be telling our story fairly early on and Mom will brief us on the Fay situation as it stands. If there have been any recent communiqués from Kenrick on the peace talks that Nia mentioned last night, we'll hear about that as well. Anything that has been discussed previous to this morning, however, we'll be expected to catch up on by ourselves if we need to. Nia can probably fill us in and Michael might be available if he can tear himself away from Zoe. In fact, if I know my little brother at all I suspect that after your little exchange with Hans, he's going to go out of his way to make himself available."

"Any particular point of protocol I ought to know?"

"Good question. Unless someone is very late, Mom and Dad will wait until everyone is present before joining us. When they do arrive we'll all stand until they bid us to sit. Other than that, we're very informal at breakfast."

"Good enough," I replied. "One other question though. I've noticed that your mother's title is 'Her Majesty' but your father is 'His Highness' and that the main deference is to your mother. Your culture isn't normally matriarchal. What gives?"

"Well, the crown goes to the oldest surviving son; if there are no male children then the daughters may ascend to the throne. In Mom's case, however, she was an only child. Dad, legally, is just the queen's husband, with the courtesy rank of a prince. The kingdom of Manche has almost the same system, but instead, if the queen is the sovereign, her husband is called the Royal Consort, but here he's called the king, even if he isn't the sovereign. Here we are."

"Glaia, Robby!" We heard Nia's voice behind us. "Wait up!" Turning we saw Nia and Talya hurrying to catch up to us. "Glaia, I love the outfit. Where'd you get it? Do you think the palace seamstress could make one like it? It looks so free and comfortable." She and Talya were wearing long dresses that, while not exactly tight fitting, did not afford the free movement of Glaia's looser skirt.

"I don't see why not," Glaia replied, "It's a simple design. She may try to put in one too many improvements, though, if you're not careful."

"I'll speak to her right after breakfast," Nia said.

"Me too," Talya put in. We entered the dining room then to find that Alex and his wife and two sons were already seated. Glaia started to introduce me but when she faltered over the name of Alex's older son, Nia stepped in and finished for her. The next into the room was Degarre.

"Ah, such a beautiful morning," he said by way of greeting on his way to sit between Nia and Talya. "Where did all the lilacs come from?" he asked. Glaia pointed at me. There was a large bunch of the flowers in the center of the table and there had been various arrangements of them all over the castle on the way here. "I think I know that spell. Control, Robert, that's the key, unless you really want that many flowers. I hear it's going to snow tonight. Maybe we can get in some hunting tomorrow, eh?"

"Count me in," said a voice from the door. This was Michael. I'd only spoken to him passingly last night but when he sat next to me, he greeted me like a long lost buddy. His fiancée, Zoe, sat demurely on his other side. There was very little time to get comfortable as Queen Eulalia and King Kenneth entered through a side door and we all started to rise in their honor.

"No, stay seated, please," Queen Eulalia said. "There's too much going on for us to stand on even so little ceremony this morning." She and the king sat at opposite ends of the table and immediately servants entered and served up sliced fruit, fresh bread, cheese, milk, orange juice, two large omelets, muffins - all along with the usual condiments. They also wheeled in two large urns; one of coffee and one of tea with all the fixings. When they had finished bringing all that in, they left the room and we didn't see them again for the rest of the meal.

The queen gave us a few minutes to eat before saying, "Now, we'd better get started. Glaia, dear, we weren't able to welcome you back properly last night but I hope you and Mr. Jones can join your father and me tonight after dinner and we'll spend the evening together. Your last letter to Lavinia had you in Cushna indefinitely. The next thing we knew you were suddenly in Hatten with Mr. Jones and a day later on your way to Hoga. For that matter you should still be on your way there or maybe just arriving, but when Degarre showed up yesterday he said he'd already seen you there, and now here you are. I think you have a story to tell."

"We both do, Mom," Glaia responded. "My last letter was written just a few days before Robby entered our world. I was sitting up on the city walls taking in the view and pausing to sharpen my knives, when I noticed a flash of light below. When I looked down, I saw Robby leaning up against the leg of Glorn, the sort of pet dragon of Cushna. Well..." She went on to tell of my initial adventure in Gonquin. It was interesting to hear the tale told from her point of view. As the story progressed we started taking turns in the telling as we had on previous occasions.

The queen seemed content to let us talk but the king kept interrupting with questions about why we chose one course of action over another, often along with scathing criticism concerning our choices. I was feeling rather small and Glaia was downright contrite until the rest of the family rebelled.

Alex was first, pointing out two situations where, due to our lack of knowledge, we had made the only sensible decision. Michael agreed with Alex and pointed out that the king had done the same thing in a situation similar to our encounter in Wadir, according to the stories he had raised them on. Nia and Talya also objected, although theirs was based more on emotion than reason. Through it all, Degarre watched on quietly with an amused smile on his face.

But the Queen stopped the argument by saying, "Kenneth, children, please. We are not here to judge Glaia's or Robert's actions, and while I have never approved of her choice of career, even I must admit that she has excelled in it. Let's move on, or rather back a bit. You say that you first met the new Fay

ambassador a few miles north of Gansett?" Glaia and I then proceeded to answer a battery of questions from the queen in which we told her everything we knew about Hans, his sister Greta, and the incidents of our two encounters with him, including his actual words when we could remember them.

"Well," she said with some satisfaction, "Now at least we know where he comes from. Until last night, I'd never even heard of him."

"Are you sure his credentials are authentic?" I asked. "I mean, I have a hard time visualizing a punk fairy as an ambassador for his entire nation."

"That's a good question," Queen Eulalia replied. Her husband nodded agreement grudgingly. "However, I had Kenneth look into it as head of the Agency. Dear?"

"Head of the Agency?" I asked despite myself.

"Yes," replied King Kenneth, "You didn't know?"

"Now that I think about it, it was mentioned briefly in passing. I guess it didn't sink in. Sorry for the interruption."

"Strictly speaking, the Crown is the Head of the Agency, but Her Majesty has delegated that task to me since I was an active agent for some years, both in the field and in the civil service wing. But we're digressing. I checked out his credentials as soon as he left the hall last night. They're good. The bad news is that if the Tribal Council of the Fay Nation has chosen Hans as their ambassador, and if what you two tell us is true, then there has been a major shift in policy among the Fay elders.

"This racial superiority movement has, up until now, been held only by a few young bloods scattered around. But if the new ambassador is a leader of this movement, then we're going to have big trouble."

"Indeed," agreed the Queen. "They have a means of long-range communication that is much cheaper than our magic mirrors. We've been negotiating for the technique and negotiations were nearly complete until their last ambassador was recalled. Since then we've been patiently dealing with their complaints against the people of Gonquin, so as not to upset the standing of the communications talks. Now it looks as though we can toss that idea out the window."

The rest of the breakfast conversation centered around the Queen's audience with Hans later this morning. Glaia and I were instructed to stay away from Court today. Nia and Talya, who usually attended their mother during such sessions were given the day off too so that their resemblance to Glaia wouldn't be present to remind Hans of us. The three sisters were by no means identical but there was a strong family resemblance.

Alex had a public-service chore on the other side of town later that day and was taking his family so it would double as an outing. Michael's fiancée, Zoe, was leaving that morning and he planned to see her off, and Nia and Talya, not needed in Court, were ostensibly assigned to fill Glaia and me in on recent Court business, but I suspected it was mostly to keep the lot of us occupied.

Glaia, her two younger sisters, and I went back to Glaia's suite after the meal and for an hour or so, I actually got a briefing on Gonquin politics and recent court business. After that we played a few board games. A variant of Pachisi was popular at the moment and Backgammon seemed to be a universal constant.

In the afternoon, avoiding the Fay delegation, Glaia and Nia took me on a tour of the palace which eventually brought me to the semi-resident sage. Master Willibrord was not a kingdom functionary, but his distant relationship to the royal family and practice of dedicating his dry - or so I am reliably informed - philosophical tomes to the Queen earned him a sort of minimal patronage from the Crown. In other words, he was allowed to stay at the palace whenever he was in town, which was most of the time. Over the past twenty years he had been studying what he called the Newcomer Phenomenon, or people like me just popping in from other worlds. In his travels he had met almost every known Newcomer that arrived during his long lifetime and the girls figured that this was as good a time as any to have me talk to him.

We spoke for a long time as he asked me questions about the world I came from, how I was adapting to this one, how I perceived the change of venue, and so forth.

"Well, well," he said at last, "from what you tell me, I believe you come from the same world that King Kenneth did."

"Or one very similar to it," I said remembering hearing my own voice on the other end of the phone while I was in Cleveland.

"Quite right, Jones," he commended me. "I spoke in broad general terms, because most Newcomers seem to think that their worlds are unique, when in truth, given an infinity of choices, you might encounter an infinity of worlds virtually indistinguishable from each other."

"Truly indistinguishable?" I asked.

"Oh yes," he said. "I believe that every possible time line has some event on it that makes it truly unique from all others, but who is to say that such an event has already happened. Maybe such an event won't happen until the end of time. In my studies I have categorized the worlds we have known Newcomers to have come from. In all, I have identified five completely different sets of history. If you like, you may read my manuscript on the subject. The Queen won't allow me to publish it, but I am allowed to show it to certain people. I believe you qualify." I thanked him and agreed to come down and read it as soon as I was fully settled in.

"One important question," I asked just before leaving late in the afternoon. "I've noticed that everyone I've met here speaks my native tongue. With all the many differences in our histories, shouldn't that be highly unlikely?"

"If you had traveled randomly between the worlds, it would be as close to impossible as makes no difference," he replied. "You didn't, of course. My theory is that Newcomers have mostly arrived here because for one reason or another they belong here. Tell me, do you speak any other languages?"

"No, not enough to do more than order food in almost any restaurant in the world, anyway. I've always had a hard time learning foreign languages and almost never retain much of them."

"Then, along with everything else, one criterion for you to fit in was that you had to go to a world where they spoke your language."

"I can follow that, but how?" I asked.

"That's a bit more complex. I haven't been able to work out the mathematics to prove this, but my hypothesis concerns the nature of time. Now I think you'll agree that space has three dimensions: length,

width, and depth." I nodded. "Well most people see time as having only one dimension, that being length. Time began at the beginning of the universe - take the creation story of your choice - and goes along until its end. Now obviously, if there is more than one time line, then time also has width."

"Yes, that concept appears in some of the fiction of my home world," I said.

"And here too," he told me. "Now, what if time also has depth?" I thought about that, but he went on before I could respond. "I think the fact that we have Newcomers from more than just two neighboring worlds might prove that, although it could also be argued that you merely cut across an infinite number of world lines to get here. The real problem in which I lack proof is in the actual shape of time."

"Where I come from some scientists believe that time and space are inseparable parts of a whole."

"That would tend to suggest that time has the same shape as space," Willibrord hypothesized. "Do they have mathematical proof of that?"

"I believe so, but I couldn't begin to prove it myself."

"It doesn't matter," he said. "If it has been proven then it can be again. That would support my hypothesis that time is roughly a sort of expanding sphere, just as space is theorized to be, except I believe that it is the four-dimensional equivalent of a sphere, a hypersphere. In that way when you changed world lines, you followed a straight path in which the common spoken language remained the same. If my hypothesis of a hyperspherical shape of time is correct then you could have come from one of an infinite number of worlds, all of which are directly adjacent to this one."

"I'm not sure I follow you all the way, sir," I said at last "but parts of it have become clearer. Perhaps you can take the time to explain it to me again another day." He said that he'd be glad to, and I found my way back to Glaia's suite. Glaia was there with Michael, Nia, and Talya when I got there.

"Robby," Glaia said, "has old Willibrord finished boring you for the day?"

"For today anyway. He has some interesting theories I'd like to learn more about when I have the time."

"Oh, if you give him half a chance," warned Michael, "he'll talk at you for days on end." Nia and Talya giggled.

"I hope you don't mind," Glaia said then, "but I invited Michael, Nia, and Talya to dine with us here this evening. We should have time for a drink first." She poured a wine resembling dry sherry that I decided not to ask about for fear she might tell me it really was dry sherry. I noticed then that the gun I'd brought from Cleveland was sitting on a small table on the other side of the room.

"Glaia?" I asked. "What's this doing out?"

"Oh, sorry. I forgot it was there. I didn't know where you wanted to keep it and figured I'd wait until you got clear of Willibrord to ask."

"What is it?" Michael asked.

"It's a weapon from Robby's world," Glaia informed him. He wanted to know all about it and I proceeded to explain what I knew about guns in general and this revolver in specific. I showed him how the five rounds were loaded into their chambers. I mentioned speed loaders, but Marty hadn't supplied

me with any. After showing him how it worked, I promised to demonstrate it in the morning. Then after checking that the safety was still on, I put the revolver back on the table.

There was a knock at the door then and Glaia said, "Come in. Must be dinner." We heard a muffled voice on the other side and another knock.

"Must have their hands full," I noted from the table I'd placed the gun on. "I'm up already, I'll get it." I started to open the door when it suddenly slammed open in my face, and the world went a little fuzzy for a bit. I could hear a fight breaking out in the room and I got pushed around with alarming frequency. The struggle didn't last long and as my eyes cleared I saw that Nia and Talya were lying on the floor and Michael and Glaia were still fighting against six Fay. I wasn't far from the revolver and I reached for it with all possible speed as one of the fairies started back after me. Thumbing the safety off, I turned on the Fay and squeezed the trigger.

Click.

Time slowed to a crawl, at least for my mind. My body was still working in real time so as the approaching Fay thug closed in on me I had this fascinating mind-body conversation.

Body: Ah. Yoohoo, Mind!

Mind: Yes, Body. I'm here.

B: Mind, there's this rather nasty looking character out there, and ...

M: Yes, Body. Go on.

B: And he's about to hit us.

M: Hit us?

B: Yes, very hard.

M: Body? Do we have time to duck?

B: No.

At that point I was backhanded into that void with which I'd become all too acquainted since coming to Gonquin. I wasn't completely unconscious but my mind and body had stopped being able to communicate for a while. Unable to respond, I was dimly aware that the fighting in the room had ended although there was a fair bit of groaning going on and I'm fairly sure that while some of it was mine, I wasn't doing a solo.

Over the groaning, however, I'm fairly sure I heard, "Which ones did the boss want?"

"The red-haired wench," another voice responded. "He also wanted the brown-haired man. It must be this one, he was the better fighter." I must have lost consciousness then as I don't remember anything else until I opened my eyes to see Nia looking at me with great concern.

"Stay still, Robby," she said. "Let the healer have a look at you." She moved out of my line of vision and a young man with curly black hair and a slightly crooked nose took her place. He looked at me closely

and asked a few questions and eventually said that I was fine except for the obvious bruises. He was out of the room before I could sit up, but left a vile-tasting concoction for my pain that tasted like aspirin dissolved in water. I'd have to find out what they called it here so I could ask for it by name. I looked around and saw that only Nia and I were in the room.

"Where is everybody?" I asked, temporarily forgetting the conversation fragment I heard before my latest foray into Lalaland.

"Well, Dad and Degarre just carried Talya to her rooms. She has a concussion from when her head hit the floor. That's why the healer didn't stay to talk; he has a patient to attend. How do you feel? I'm sore in places I didn't know exist."

"The same. I didn't think I could stiffen up as quick as all that. How long was I out? And why am I so wet?"

"A quarter of an hour tops," she replied. "As for the wet, well, I poured a vase full of water on you. Uh, I thought it might wake you up."

"No, just made me wet," I told her. She tried to apologize but I told her, "Forget it. What about Glaia and Michael?" It came back to me then, like a coat made of lead suddenly draped over my shoulders. "The Fay took them, didn't they?" Nia nodded.

"Robert, the healer said you were all right," Sir Degarre said from the doorway.

"All right' is a relative term," I countered. "How's Talya?"

"She'll be very sick for a while," he told us, "but her concussion was a mild one. She'll recover." Nia and I both sighed with relief. "You two look a bit battered," he observed.

"Any idea where they took Michael and Glaia?" Nia asked.

"We're working on that. The Queen's personal wizard is out of town doing research and we're waiting for his stand-in to arrive. He should be able to cast a locator spell of some sort."

"He just did," we heard the Queen say as she entered the room. "Their location is being shielded by a power equal to or greater than his own, and there aren't more than a handful that qualify for that anywhere."

"Do the Fay have an actual embassy building in town?" I asked.

"I know what you're thinking," the Queen replied. "Yes they do, and their unique form of collective magic would, indeed, be powerful enough to shield Michael's and Aglaia's location from us. However, we have to tread carefully here. The Fay will not tolerate such an intrusion and to do so would be an act of war."

"The kidnapping of a prince and a princess was also an act of war," King Kenneth said grimly from the doorway. "So was the invasion of this palace and so were the injuries they inflicted on the people here."

"What do you suggest, Ken?" Degarre asked.

"You and I always made a good team, Degarre. We'll sneak in over the wall tonight and if my kids are

inside we'll get them out of there. We have the blue prints of the Fay Embassy compound on file in the Agency's library."

"All right," Degarre agreed.

"If they are there," said the Queen, "it will be war for the first time in living memory, but if any harm comes to my children, I'll exterminate the entire Fay Nation!" Gentler sex, indeed.

"I'll go with you," I said.

"No you won't, Jones," The King snapped.

"Why the hell not?" I challenged.

"Several reasons. For starters you're not in peak form, if you ever were. You're bruised and battered; you'll only slow us down.

"Second, you're still a novice here. You and my daughter may have scraped through a few tight situations, but I can guarantee it was her expertise not yours that got you through. What did you do for a living back home?"

"Well," I replied, knowing this wouldn't sound particularly impressive, "I was a sales manager for a gourmet shop."

"I was in the Marines, Jones, back around the beginning of World War Two. I have real battle experience. Did you ever serve?"

"You've been here a long time, sir," I replied, "and you've missed a lot since you left. Most specifically you missed Vietnam and the peace movement. There were two sets of heros that came out of that conflict; those who fought in a foreign country because Uncle Sam told them to, and those who fought at home against the very notion that our men should have to go in the first place. To my way of thinking, it took every bit as much courage to take a stand against the War - at the risk of arrest and a permanent blotch on your record, a beating by the police who arrested you, and the ruining of your life - as it did to risk losing your life thousands of miles away from home. Did I serve? No, I'm quite happy to say that when the draft lottery for my year was held, I drew number 319."

"Nice speech, Jones," King Kenneth replied, refusing to be impressed, "but right now we need action, not talk. Degarre and I have a lot of experience at this sort of work and too many people would only get in each other's way and increase our chances of discovery."

"Ken," Degarre put in then, "Robert is much younger than we are. You can't deny that we're getting a little old for this sort of escapade. Besides, given her long absence from the Court, he knows Glaia better than you do. He should be with us."

"No," the King replied. "I'll not hear of it. He doesn't have the experience. We have to get in and get out unseen. Especially if the kids aren't there." Degarre appeared to consider arguing some more, then changed his mind.

"If that's the way you want it, Ken," he said with resignation, "we'd better go have a look at those blue prints. Robert, I, for one, am sorry you won't be with us. Take care." He offered me his hand, which I accepted. I felt a piece of folded paper being exchanged between us and kept it hidden. They got up and

left the room.

"I must be going too," Queen Eulalia said. "My Captain of the Guard will be needing instructions, and if we are to go to war, I'd better have my generals fully briefed, at least those that are here in Gonquin City. Excuse me." Nia and I rose as she did and watched her leave.

Sitting back down, we looked at each other in silence until Nia broke the silence, "You're not going to take that, are you?" I didn't answer right away; instead I unfolded the note Degarre had passed to me. "What's that?" Nia asked.

The paper simply said, "Hoga."

"Hoga?" Nia questioned. "What does Hoga have to do with anything?"

"Degarre is reminding me of an order he gave me when I met him there. He said, 'Robert, take care of my little princess.' Hell no, Nia! I'm not going to take this. I'll let Degarre and your father make their attempt, but I'll be following along, just in case."

"I'm going too," she told me.

"Oh, no you're not," I tried to be firm. "You're too young."

"That's the same thing my father told you a few minutes ago, Robby. I'm not a child anymore. Next spring I'll be working with the Agency, in the field, just like Glaia." She shot me a look challenging me to try and deny her.

"You idolize Glaia, don't you?"

"Hey, she might be your fiancée, buster, but she's my sister, you know." She said that in such a flawless and unconscious imitation of Glaia that I had to relent.

"Fiancée?" Unless my memory had gone out along with my consciousness, I hadn't asked Glaia to marry me, not yet anyway.

"Sure, fiancée. You mean you aren't engaged? But she as much as said so when you entered the Ball last night."

"When did she do that?" I asked.

"When she had you announced as 'Mister Robert Jones, Esquire. That's the same way Mom introduced Daddy to her folks way back when. It was Glaia's way of telling them that she intended to marry you regardless of what they thought. I'm sure Mom thinks it's charming: she married for love and wouldn't begrudge any of her children the same pleasure, although we are under some pretty stiff pressure to fall in love with a noble.

"It's also why Daddy doesn't approve of you. He's a stubborn sort - we all are to some extent - and more conscious of his station than those of us who were born to it. He knows that nothing will stop Glaia, but he won't let that keep him from making you uncomfortable until you gain his respect." As I tried to let that sink in she went on, "So why haven't you asked her to marry you yet?"

"Degarre made me promise to wait until she's ready. Up until very recently she's been reluctant to talk

much about herself, never mind about us."

"Well, she's ready now, Robby."

"Then I guess we'd better spring Michael and Glaia from Fairyland."

"The Fay don't like being called fairies," Nia corrected me.

"I know," I replied with a nasty grin.

"So, what's the plan?" she asked. "Are going to use the gun? It's a shame you didn't have the time to use it when they attacked."

"I did use it," I said, looking around for the revolver. I found it under a table. "But when I tried to fire it, it didn't work. Maybe it was on an empty chamber, though I thought I loaded all five." I opened it up and dumped all five rounds into my hand. "I did, see?" I handed her the bullets and looked to see if the firing pin was still intact. As far as I could tell it was.

"What's this dent in the bottom of the bullet?" Nia asked, handing it back to me.

"That's where the firing pin hit the primer cap." She looked confused. "You remember what I told you and Michael about how this is supposed to work?"

"You said that there's a propelling charge of some explosive powder inside the cartridge that, when ignited, will propel the projectile," she replied. Smart girl, maybe even more so than her sister.

"All right," I said. "Well, when the firing pin hits the primer cap, it ignites the primer which ignites the propelling charge."

"Okay," she said, smiling now that she understood. "So what went wrong?"

"It may have been a dud. A defective cartridge," I replied. "Is there some place in the palace where we could try this out? It will make a lot of noise if it works, and I don't want to disturb everyone."

"Sure," she answered. "There's an archery range next to the armory. There probably won't be anyone down there at this time of night."

"All right," I said, "Just give me time to give this piece a good cleaning and oiling and we'll give it another try. Got any oil?"

Less than an hour later, Nia and I found ourselves in a large room with a line painted at one end and several archery butts set up on the other. On the far wall bales of hay had been stacked up to the ceiling giving arrows that missed their targets a backstop against which they wouldn't break their points. Behind the firing line there were several bows hanging up on the wall and a large can full of arrows standing in one corner.

Putting the gun down on a small table to one side of the room, I paused to inspect the box of ammunition that Marty had given me. They weren't anything special like hollow points or whatever and they all looked good. I picked out five and loaded up.

Archery targets are rather large for pistol practice, but there were two smaller targets set up that Nia

told me were for crossbow practice. They weren't so large as to make me feel that I was aiming for a barn door. I took my stance holding the gun with both hands - I'll leave one handed shooting to the cowboys of Hollywood - and squeezed the trigger.

Click.

Click. Click. Click.

Click.

"More duds?" Nia asked. "Are you sure your friend wasn't playing some sick joke on you?"

"No," I refused to accept that, "Marty wouldn't do that to me. He wouldn't do it to anyone." I walked back to the table and unloaded the gun. All five rounds had the characteristic dent in their bases that was caused by the impact of a firing pin. I'm no expert, but it looked to me as though they should have all fired.

There were tools in the armory next door and with a vise and pliers I opened one of the cartridges up and poured the powder inside on to the table. No matches were available so I used the ignition spell that Glaia had taught me and the powder flared briefly.

"That's it," Nia said. "You forgot to cast the spell when you fired."

"This isn't magic, Nia."

"The hell it isn't, Robby. Maybe these things work by themselves where you come from, but you need an incantation here." I shook my head in wonder.

"You really think so?"

"Hey, I'm majoring in Magicology. Trust me." She smiled then. Oh well, I've always been a sucker for a pretty smile. Besides, she was probably right.

We went back to the archery room and after reloading, I tried again, this time using the ignition spell. I didn't need the flint and steel gestures because the firing pin and the primer cap took their place. Still, I wasn't expecting it to work and the kick threw my aim way off, but the hole it left in the ceiling was a beautiful sight. I fired off the other rounds, and this time I hit the target all four times. Good thing it was an archery target; I doubt I'd have hit a pistol target. I'd have to try to get in very close range if I didn't want to just call attention to myself.

"That's neat," Nia said. "May I try?" I checked the box and saw that I still had over half the rounds unused. I didn't dare use the ones that were spent without magic.

"All right," I said. "You may try a couple of rounds, but when these are gone, that's it, so let's not get carried away." I showed her how to stand and hold and aim the revolver, and warned her about the kick. The first shot threw her off balance but she picked it up quickly and the second shot grazed the target. Given the time and ammunition to practice and she'd be another Annie Oakley. "That's enough," I said at last. "We still have to arm up and move on out."

We stopped back at the Armory and I chose a new sword for myself. It was a close match to the last two I'd lost. Maybe this time I'd be able to hold on to it. Nia, to my surprise, chose not only a slightly

lighter version of mine, but a long poniard. I hoped she knew what she was doing.

Chapter Twenty-seven

The Fay Embassy Compound looked like the fortress it was. There was a tall, crenelated stone wall attached to the keep and enclosing a fair-sized courtyard. Except for being faced with white marble, like everything else in this part of town, it would have fit in perfectly in the Welsh countryside of my former world.

Nia and I left the palace before Degarre and the King did and we had been sitting in an alley between two buildings across from the Fay Embassy for about an hour. Nia knew Glaia's survival warmth spell, so we weren't cold but the waiting was the hardest part.

"I still don't understand why we can't just go on in," she complained. "What if Daddy and Uncle Degarre don't show up tonight?"

"They will," I assured her. "They have to move tonight. This matter is too time-critical. Hans is a fanatic and he has a grudge against your sister and me. She and Michael won't be safe in his hands for very long. In fact, if they're still alive it's only because he wants to kill me at the same time he gets his revenge on her. But you know Glaia. She won't keep her mouth shut when he taunts her. Instead, she'll shout her defiance at the top of her lungs. Hans will start off by slapping her around, and from there it will progress to torture, eventually..."

"I get the picture," Nia shuddered. "Look, there they are."

I followed her gaze and saw King Kenneth and Sir Degarre skulking up to a particularly dark section of the embassy wall. Like us, they were dressed in dark leather clothing. We'd brought heavy woolen capes with us but would be leaving them behind when we made our move; I'm sure they had done likewise. Good thing they hadn't chosen the same alley we had.

"Okay," I said. "Sit back and watch. Maybe we won't be needed at all. We'll give them an hour before going in."

"But couldn't we go in now and cause a distraction for them?"

"No. Whatever plan they've devised, it centers on two men getting in and out without detection, just like ours. If we start some sort of disturbance we'll alert the whole embassy that something's going on. Rule number one, Nia. Never try to surprise an ally in a tight situation."

"Got it."

We didn't have long to wait, however. The King and Degarre tossed a couple of grappling hooks up over the wall and started climbing. When they had made it to the top, they started moving with stealth towards the keep. They had made it about half way when a light suddenly came on and centered on them like a spot light. Frankly, I probably would have tried to do a quick soft shoe followed by a "Shuffle Off

to Buffalo," but His majesty hadn't impressed me with his sense of humor so far, and this time was no exception. They were immediately surrounded by Fay guards who used their music-based magic to quickly subdue them.

"That was fast," I commented. Nia started getting up. "We'll have to wait a bit more, Nia. Right now they'll be looking for reinforcements. Give them a while until things quiet down. At least we'd better hold off until that spot light goes out." As Degarre had pointed out the night before, Nia had yet to learn patience, but she was bright; it would come to her.

Half an hour later I said, "It looks quiet now. We might as well give it a try. Sure wish we knew whether they were still watching the battlements."

"One moment," Nia said. She whispered an incantation together with some gestures with a glass rod. After a minute she told me, "It's clear."

"I'll have to learn that one," I told her. "Let's move." We moved across the open area between the embassy and us as fast as we could without making any undue noise. Nia was wearing a pair of soft-soled boots; I had the walking shoes I'd picked up in Cleveland. The ropes Degarre and the King had used were still in place and we climbed them to the top of the wall, or rather Nia scampered up one and I nearly fell down twice before managing to struggle up the other.

"Which way?" Nia whispered.

"They were going that way," I pointed at the keep. "and they had a map. I guess we might as well go that way, too." We made our way to the keep without incident. I carefully opened the door between the wall and the keep and found a poorly lit corridor behind it. There was a light on in a room about ten feet down and we could hear voices coming from inside.

"The boss ought to be happy now, I say," one voice was saying. "He's got half the royal family down in his private dungeon."

"Oh, you know him. He won't be satisfied until he has that Jones guy down there as well," another voice replied. "Too bad we picked the wrong one in the palace or we'd be at the party now ourselves. Your deal." Nia and I managed to sneak past the open doorway without being seen by the five card-playing Fay inside, but when we were near the end of the corridor a door opened and two armed Fay came through.

"Hey, you!" one of them shouted. "Drop your weapons." It was one of those commands that you know, even as you say it, it isn't going to be obeyed and Nia and I weren't about to surprise them that way. Nia drew a dagger from her boot and threw it at one of the Fay. It hit in the chest and the victim went down instantly with smoke pouring out of the wound around the blade. Then we heard the card players charging out of the room behind us and Nia turned to meet them leaving me facing the other Fay at our end of the hall.

Glaia had given me some small instruction at swordplay early on in our relationship, but I had been practicing my magic lessons more since then. Fortunately, I found myself facing an even greater sword klutz than I, and while I didn't exactly make short work of him, the fact that I'm telling this story should be an indication of who won. I then turned to help Nia and realized that I wasn't needed.

Three of her opponents were already down with smoking holes in various parts of their anatomy and the other two were on the ropes. I watched her fight for a while, realizing that while Glaia was good with a

sword; Nia was, at a relatively young age, a mistress of the art. Her moves were both efficient and graceful, and if it had not been for the gore, I'd have thought she was dancing. Her last opponent tried to run away, but I threw a dagger of my own and for once hit point on. I guess my practice had done some good after all.

When we had retrieved our daggers, Nia paused to see what she had done. She immediately looked sick.

"First time?" I asked. She nodded, trying to hold in her last meal.

"Daddy insisted that all members of the family learn to defend themselves. Until now, it was just a game."

"Nia, remember this; these are the same people who kidnapped your brother and sister and who also have your father and Sir Degarre in the dungeon as well. What you did to them, they would have gleefully done to you, although maybe not so quickly. It was us and the family or them. Got it?" She nodded again. "One other thing. Remember how you feel now."

"Sick?"

"Right. Killing is never a good thing and you should never enjoy it, just as you should never hesitate to defend yourself and the ones you love. Understand?" She nodded and some of the color started coming back into her face.

Our fight, fortunately, had not attracted any further attention. The door at our end of the corridor opened to reveal a circular staircase, which we followed down in silence. There was a door on each floor we passed. Two floors down we were on the ground floor and I heard the noise of a raucous celebration going on there. We kept moving down. The staircase ended another two floors below at the beginning of a small maze of halls and rooms.

The rooms were meant for storage, at least the first one we inspected was. Back out in the hall we heard footsteps approaching and we quietly closed the door most of the way so we could see who was coming without being noticed. Two Fay thugs were pushing an elderly Fay into the room across the hall. As the room was opened we saw that a large group of Fay were being kept prisoner there.

"That's the old ambassador," Nia whispered. "Why is he a prisoner?"

"I don't know. Want to find out?" I asked, miming the action of opening the door. She nodded and I shoved the door as hard as I could. One of the captors was pushed headfirst into a wall and the prisoners quickly subdued the other one.

Several of the prisoners had been badly beaten and their dark bruises showed clearly even in the dim light we had to see by.

"Thank you, honored sir, Your Highness," the old ambassador said.

"Your Excellency," Nia asked, "what happened? Why did your own people do this to you?"

"They didn't. It was this Hans. He showed up here yesterday with some twenty-five of his colleagues. Colleagues!" he spat. "Punks is more like it. Like any members of the Fay Nation, they have the right to stay in a Fay Embassy when they desire. But last night when we sat down to dinner, they burst into the dining hall and captured us. They put the entire embassy staff here in this room and from what they say,

started pretending that their leader, Hans, was the new ambassador from the Council of Elders. He has the King, Prince Michael, Princess Aglaia, and the King's friend in a large room down the hall that he has set up as his own private torture chamber. I was just brought back from there."

"How many of his supporters are there with him?" I asked.

"None. These two were supposed to come right back."

"Let's see," I figured. "We killed seven of them upstairs and there's another two here. That leaves only sixteen left. Do you think you're up to handling them?"

"My men will make short work of them," A young, tough-looking Fay in a security uniform said, "now that the surprise is against them."

"All right," I said. "You take them. Hans is ours." They nodded. The ambassador led Nia and me to where Hans and his hostages were. The rest went to take care of Hans' henchmen. The room had two open doors and we could hear Hans taunting our friends from outside. The hostages were each bound tightly in heavy wooden chairs. Hans had obviously been beating them as Michael's and Glaia's clothes were torn and all four were sporting bruises and welts over those parts of their bodies we could see. Glaia was in the worst shape of all. Both of her eyes were blackened and it was apparent that Hans had been using some form of whip on her. My blood was running hot and cold and it was all I could do to keep from indulging in a berserker rage, but one section of my being screamed for a cold revenge. It was going to get it.

"Human scum!" Hans screamed, slapping the King with all his strength. "I am a duke among my people, you will address me as 'Your Grace.'"

"Liar!" The king croaked out defiantly. "There are no such titles among the Fay." Hans had started walking away from the King, but now turned to rush towards him, no doubt to beat him some more but Degarre's left leg had some small ability to move and he stuck it out so that Hans would trip over it. Hans flew into a rage and started beating Degarre who stoically held up under the assault as best he could. I'll give him this much, he never gave Hans so much as the satisfaction of a groan.

While that was going on I gave Nia her instructions, "Okay, now wait until the ambassador and I can get to the door on the opposite side of the room. I'll signal you when Hans isn't looking. Then I'll need a distraction."

"What sort of distraction?" Nia asked.

"A noise, a stone thrown into the room, anything that will allow me to sneak up behind him. I need to get as close to him as possible before I use the gun. I'm a lousy shot."

"Got it," Nia acknowledged.

The ambassador then showed me the way to the other side of the room. We had to go through two other rooms to get there. By then, Hans had stopped abusing Degarre and was about to start in on Glaia again.

Nia leapt, on signal, into the room, blades drawn and shouted, "Yo! Fairy-trash!" To say the least, that

wasn't the sort of distraction I'd had in mind.

Glaia, looking in that direction gasped, "Nia, no!"

Hans, turning to face her, started humming and tossing spells at her. Nia had done her homework, however, and as I had done once by accident, she now did intentionally. She used her weapons to deflect his spells. As I walked quietly up behind him, it occurred to me that with all the noise he was making I could have stomped up with cleats on and he wouldn't have heard me.

Hans kept casting spells as Nia used her swords, in the same beautifully graceful manner she had fought in, to weave a protective wall of steel in front of her. Finally just before I was close enough, Hans conjured up a magical wind that blew Nia back out into the corridor and against the wall. She was stunned and fell to her knees. That only fueled my anger. I had intended to strike him from behind. Some might call it cowardly - I call it cautious. Now, however, I wanted him to see me. He had to know who got him.

Without any trace of humor I snarled, "Say 'Good night,' Gracie!" He spun around just in time to see me pistol-whip him with a backhanded swing in which I exerted every dyne I had in me.

The skinny bastard must have been eating his Wheaties. He was stunned, he was staggered, but he was still on his feet, moaning in pain and holding his hand over the fresh, steaming, cold-iron scar I'd just given him. So I hit him twice more and he went down to his knees.

I've since learned that along with the painful, burning effect, cold iron also saps the strength of a Fay so afflicted. Perhaps that is why he was unable to fight his way free as I grabbed him by his tunic and forced the muzzle of my revolver against the roof of his open mouth.

As white smoke streamed from his open mouth, I clearly incanted, "Tsamah ootah abarsh!" and pulled the trigger.

Epilogue

Get a Job

"I am more than happy to welcome you to the family, Robert," Queen Eulalia, soon to be "Mom" to me, was saying, "now that you and Glaia have decided to make your engagement official. But you must fully understand that being a prince of the realm, even by marriage, is no free ride. It has been a tradition for generations that no prince or princess of Gonquin be idle, whether working in the Agency, serving as an ambassador or on an ambassadorial staff, or in one of the many royal projects. We'll just have to see where you fit in best."

Two weeks had gone by since our assault on the Fay Embassy. Glaia, Michael, Degarre, and King Kenneth - I've gone up a bit in his eyes, but I still don't think he'd like me to call him "Dad" - are well on the way back to total health, although Glaia's broken arm will remain in its cast for a while yet. At least Gonquin's magic-based medicine, given enough time, is up to erasing the physical scars Hans tried to

inflict on her.

The Fay ambassador in his gratitude, combined with his desire to cover up the embarrassment to the Fay Nation created by Hans, instructed his negotiators to lessen their demands for the Fay long-range communications method in return for silence on the matter of Glaia's and Michael's abduction. It was generally agreed that this was far better than the genocidal war that would have been inevitable had things been otherwise.

As for Hans... Well, that's a matter for the philosophers and priests. The mythology where I come from teaches that fairies have no eternal soul. The Fay disagree most emphatically. Due to their incredible longevity, their religion doesn't really have a clear notion of Heaven other than being a good place to be, but they have many detailed cautionary tales about Hell. The ambassador had a Fay diviner look into the state of Hans' afterlife and was pleased to report that Hans' spirit would be reliving his last few minutes of life repeatedly for eternity or until he reaches true enlightenment, whichever ever comes first. The diviner's opinion was that eternity was likely to come first.

Nia is back at the University now that the holiday break is over, but she plans to be back here in a week. After meeting me and hearing about the odd-ball uses for common household spells I've come up with on the run, she intends to write her thesis on creative applied magic. I'd better come up a few more examples for her so that she can finish up this semester as she plans.

I asked Glaia to marry me as soon as I had her safely back in her own room in the palace, to which her response was, "Robby, of course I'll marry you. You sure did take your time asking, you know. I was beginning to think I'd have to ask you." So much for taking Degarre's council of patience too seriously, I guess.

Glaia and I intend to get married just as soon as the cast comes off her arm. That will be a few weeks; magic doesn't knit bones any faster than science does, although medical scholars are advancing their field all the time.

As for Degarre, in recognition for his most excellent service to the Crown over the years and especially due to his recent tenure in the Krawaiian Empire, he is now Earl Degarre. There are several fiefs in Gonquin that are vacant and are administered directly by the crown. Given his choice of fief, he chose The Claw on Glaia's recommendation. It isn't an overly-populated area and its chief cash crop is the cranberry, but there's a very nice manor house just outside the town of Panoag that will serve as his seat. He also intends to promote the area as a summer vacation area - on my recommendation.

That left the problem of what I was going to do with the rest of my life as a working prince of the realm. Both the king and queen are pleased to know that I am studying magic in my spare time. The family can always use another wizard, but I'm years away from mastery, although I just finished The Junior Wizard's Book of Spells this morning.

The last spell is a rather useless, in my eyes, divination spell. On using it I got the vague impression that everything was going to work out fine as long as I did the right thing. Great, huh? I can get more concrete advice from the I Ching.

With the conclusion of the recent Fay negotiations, the greatest outstanding problem at the moment involves complaints from the parents of Gonquin who want the Queen to outlaw the new video-game, Pong, charging that their children are spending all their time and money playing the game. I have assured Her Majesty that this is just a passing fad and that it wouldn't do to offend the gods, especially since the god in question was a friend of the family. We were discussing that this morning just before the matter of

my having a job to do came up.

"Now," Her Majesty said, "what are we going to do with you, Robert?"

"Your pardon, Majesty," we heard Lord Saer interrupt us from the doorway. It was rare that any emergency came up that would necessitate such an interruption at the daily Breakfast. "But there are two rather tall gentlemen who humbly request an audience with the 'Wizard Jones.'"

"Can't they wait until after Breakfast, Saer?" Queen Eulalia asked.

"They seem unassuming enough, but there is something about them. I found myself unable to resist doing my best to expedite their appointment." Saer's face was ashen. Up until now I didn't think anything could unnerve him.

"Lord Saer," I asked, "did either of them tell you their names?" I had a suspicion of who had come to call.

"Oh yes, Robby," Glaia put in. "It must be him."

"Yes, Master Robert," Saer replied. "One said to tell you that his name was Aldrick."

"Thank you, Lord Saer. Well, Your Majesty, regarding the video game problem, perhaps we should discuss it directly with the god of video games. May I have your permission to meet him and his friend?"

"A visit from the gods to this palace is unprecedented. Perhaps we should all go to greet our divine guests," she said after a moment's consideration.

Aldrick and another being who may have been a giant, but I knew had to be another of the Avant Gods were waiting for us in large, comfortable room reserved for semi-formal meetings.

"Robert!" Aldrick greeted me. "Wonderful to see you again. You too, Glaia."

"Likewise, Aldrick," I returned. I noticed out of the corner of my eye that those who had met Aldrick before were rather surprised by my casual manner with a being around whom a religion might be built. I introduced the rest of the family.

"And this," Aldrick said, "is my friend Conal. The Oracle says he is the god of 'Rock and Roll.' He has the same problem I had when we first met. Naturally, I knew you could help."

I smiled. Oh yes, could I help!

"ROBERT P. JONES, Advisor to the Gods." That's what my new business cards say. The job pays well, especially since my clients feel eternally in my debt. The hours are good too, although somewhat erratic. I rarely need to consult more than once every other month, but the gods have absolutely no concept of time and I find myself being on call at the oddest hours, but I can live with that.

