

The Wizard That Wasn't
Book One of Mechanized Wizardry
By Ben Rovik
Published by Ben Rovik Books
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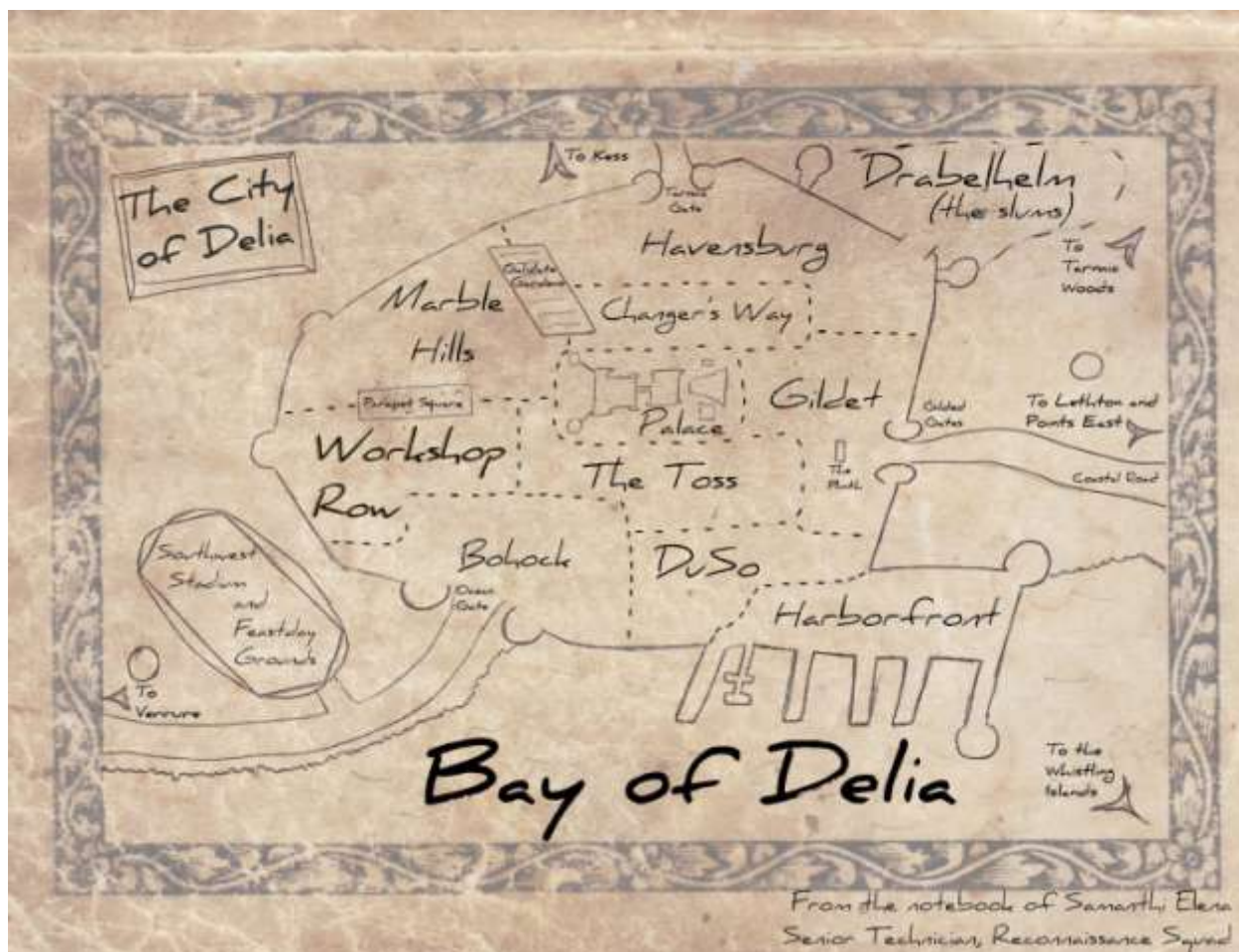
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Map



The Wizard That Wasn't

“These Petronauts are not just warriors in wondrous suits of armor. They are not just tinkers with marvelous machines. They are agents of progress for our city, and our human race.

A head of state controls the destiny of his citizens and his nation, but someday, a single Petronaut with an idea may change the entire world.

When that idea emerges, the question that interests me is not where it will end.

The question that interests me is: where did it begin?”

Remarks on Petronaut Independence from Tess Murante Haberstorm

Queen of the City of Delia

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Chapter One

The Black Disks

The soldier had half a spear sticking out of his arm. It was extremely distracting.

“—my report to the Viscount,” he was saying, his face ashen and his long blond mustache heavy with sweat. Horace Lundin nodded his head in a vigorous show of attentiveness, as his eyes stayed fixed on the piece of wood sticking out of the man’s arm. The soldier pointed with his unimpaired hand to the smoking buildings in the distance as he spoke. Lundin didn’t look, but even from this distance he could hear the clatter of horses’ hooves, the clash of swords, and a single strangled scream from time to time.

“We swept through the western homes with your masters; no sign of arcane symbols,” the blond man said. “Which makes the lake house the likeliest site for the target. I’m afraid getting there won’t be pretty.”

“Not pretty... much like the spear in your arm,” Lundin offered. *Aloud? I hope that wasn’t aloud.* The soldier was looking up at the time, gritting his teeth against the pain, with no sign of having heard anything. *Thank the Spheres.*

The man’s good arm gestured to the wide lake below, and the heavily forested island just east of its center. “Between the water, the archers, the tree cover, can’t get there fast,” he said. The soldier glanced up at Lundin. “Any tricks your masters can pull, now’s the time. Can Petronauts walk on water yet?”

“Depends how far,” Lundin said, making a note.

The man shook his head, wonderingly. “Glad you people are fighting on our side, that’s all I can say. I’d hate to see mechanical knights like you on the other side of the battlefield.”

“Like me?” Oh, I’m just a technician,” Lundin demurred. “Nobody’s scared of *me*.”

The muscular, bleeding soldier raised an eyebrow at Lundin, but had the good grace not to point out how self-evident that was. The Petronaut technician was fresh-faced, and trim enough, but “scary” was nowhere near the top of the list of adjectives the soldier would use to describe him. *Equine, maybe*, the soldier thought. The tech’s long face, bulging eyes, and gangly limbs reminded him of a horse who’d seen better days.

“At any rate,” he told Lundin, clearing his throat, “Unless you Petronauts decide to do it yourselves, the Army’s ready to storm that island. We’re lashing rafts together now. Tell the Viscount ninety minutes and we’ll be across the lake. Now, if you’ll excuse me, sir,” he said, standing to a remarkable height and throwing a calm salute with his unskewered arm, “I need to have this removed.”

“Of course,” Lundin said when nothing else came to mind, flinging up a salute of his own.

As he hurried through the disciplined chaos of the Delian base camp, Horace Lundin involuntarily scratched his shoulder and tried hard not to imagine twelve centimeters of iron and wood embedded in there. A soldier who could deliver a lucid report with that kind of injury, *before* seeing the master of physic? Why would these miserable peasants even think of resisting an army of soldiers like that?

He looked over his shoulder, catching another glimpse of the green lake, its forested island, and the now-smoking homes along the waterside. *If those houses were less on fire*, Lundin thought, *Verrure township would be a wonderful place to live.* What about this bucolic scene had been so intolerable to the peasants? Was paying taxes to the City of Delia so awful, given that Delian roads and markets were responsible for all that income they paid their five percent on? And why, by the eight Spheres, would they think attacking their tax collectors would be the way to accomplish anything? They had to have known that the Army would come riding out in force. *Third peasant village this year to make a fuss for us...*

He shook the distracting thoughts out of his head and pressed on, thin legs carrying him at high speed. There was a battle going on, and an urgent message to deliver.

The greatest of the red-and-black war pavilions was in view now, black-clad couriers coming and going like termites on a mound. The banner of Viscount LaMontina flew from its apex, a rearing bull in

silhouette. All through the base camp, the muddy ground between tents was chewed to pieces by boots and hooves, with only a few defiant tufts of grass remaining. Lundin sidestepped a burly woman with an armful of quivers as an armorer stuck his bald head out of a tent to bellow a final order after her. A master of physic, in characteristic light blue, was moving towards the battlefield with grim purpose. Her orderly followed at a snail's pace, carrying a great basin with both hands and focusing all his attention on not spilling it. A weathered sergeant-major in black and gold was overseeing a squad of grunting conscripts as they loaded a sledge with logs, ropes, and cakes of sticky daub; the materials for the rafts needed to storm the lake house.

This whole encampment had been erected only last night, and, given the way the campaign was progressing, it would be packed away victoriously within ten hours. But, for now, the bustle of soldiers, servants, and supporters was a miniature boomtown with a single industry: war. Lundin's eye fell on (and quickly darted away from) a wooden cage catty-corner from the main pavilion, stuffed with a dozen grimy, bleeding farmers in various states of misery. *Business was good*, he thought soberly.

Lundin felt uneasy in the camp. His squad—the tiny Reconnaissance squad, with two Petronaut knights and two technicians playing squire to them—had not been assigned to an active battlefield like this in the three years he'd been serving the Delian crown. There hadn't been any wars to fight, nor any other perplexing little rebellions to put down. Petronauts were outside any official chain of command, and generally had more dealings with the city guard than the Army. But the Petronaut Board of Governors recognized that volunteering their members as support staff to the Delian Army on occasion was one of the best ways to ensure continued good relations with—and continued independence from—military command. It was a fair trade, Lundin supposed; though working in the camp structure was confusing. He'd been informed that LaMontina's forces were considering him the equivalent of a 'staff sergeant' for the duration of the campaign, rather than think of him as a pure civilian. Lundin was fifty percent sure that meant he outranked the corporal who'd just reported to him. *But who can keep all these silly titles straight?* He shook his head, grousing. First priority, after he delivered the report, would be to get the squad's Communicator up and running so he could talk directly to Sir Kelley, the senior Petronaut on the front lines. None of this he-said/she-said chain of verbal reports and middlemen. One of Lundin's duties was to make sure communication stayed open between the 'nauts and the command pavilion where the techs were stationed. Talking to couriers and corporals was nice, and all, but it was time to start using the right tool for the job.

He thought about the caged peasants again and repressed a shudder. *If I feel this intimidated by all the military muscle on display here, and I'm a part of it, he thought, I can't even imagine what these peasants felt like during the fighting. Especially once Sir Kelley and Sir Mathias showed up...*

Whisp grunted as he shoved the table aside. Sweat beaded the thin black hairs sprouting just above his upper lip. It was his first mustache, and he was cultivating it with the obsessive pride of a rose gardener.

The table's legs clattered loudly against the dirt floor, and the boy stopped with a curse. He raised his head, listening for signs that he'd been overheard. The screams and noise of the battlefield outside the house still sounded far away. He had a few minutes, at least.

The adults of Verrure thought it was a good idea to rough up some tax collectors and stand up to Delia, did they? Well, as far as Whisp was concerned, those old fools could do all the fighting they wanted to. Each geezer who got killed or tossed in the dungeons left behind a hut full of possessions they'd no longer need or care about. There was no reason Whisp shouldn't come through and inspect what was left. He had a future to think about.

Besides, everything valuable that I take is one less thing Delia gets to confiscate, he thought, grinning. *We all join the battle in our own way.*

"Hurry up, Whisp," the tall boy standing by the doorway whined, fidgeting with his sickle.

Whisp ignored him as he snatched up the small hooked rug and tossed it away. Sure enough, there was a shallow pit hidden underneath it, just deep enough to conceal a plain wooden box with no lock. He showed his teeth in satisfaction as he swung the lid open. A tarnished silver locket, a pouch of coins, a pair of mother-of-pearl combs. *Who knew that Mr. and Mrs. Bailish were so rich?* he thought, stuffing the loot into his burlap sack.

Whisp stood. "Come on," he said, swinging the sack over his shoulder and drawing his knife. "Next house."

They had just stepped into the muddy street when a husky boy came squealing towards them. "Whisp! Whisp! It's the Petronauts comin'! What're we gonna do?" he screeched, sounding much younger than his fifteen years.

Whisp swallowed. "Hide in the big bushes by the lake, like we talked about. Tell the rest!" The fat youth turned and ran. The tall boy started to follow him, but Whisp put a hand on his arm.

"Just one more house," he hissed, pointing across the street. "And only you and me split it."

The other boy shook his head frantically. "And tangle with Petronauts? You're crazy, Whisp. You keep your—"

Suddenly, screams rose from the far side of the house, and the two boys whirled towards the sound. The rest of the gang came spilling around both sides of the house in full retreat, clutching their knives and clubs like security blankets, not like weapons. "What in the black flames are you doing—" Whisp started to ask.

Then a man jumped over the house.

The sharp smell of burning Petrolatum filled the air as the man appeared above the roof of the Bailish family hut, fire shooting earthwards from a cylinder strapped on his back. The flame cut off, and the armored man swung his legs forward as his trajectory turned down. He spun in midair and landed on his feet in the middle of street, his heavy boots leaving furrows in the dirt as he skidded to a stop. The boys froze in their tracks, their escape cut off, and stared up at the hulking black-and-silver knight facing them.

"You can drop those now," the Petronaut said evenly, his voice unmuffled by his beaked black helmet.

He pointed at their weapons, and they drew back. All the boys were well aware of the ominous weapon barrels affixed to each of his forearms. There was a faint whine of gears as the big man moved his arms, and a curling trail of smoke emanating from the fiery cylinder on his back.

Whisp stepped forward before his cowering friends could do what the 'naut said. "Come on, boys," he snarled, dropping the bag and raising his knife. "There's ten of us, and just one of him. And he won't be so tough once we get him out of that fancy suit."

"There must be a lot of loot in that bag to make you act so stupid," the Petronaut said, stepping forward calmly. The gang shrank back as he continued, shaking his head. "A bunch of fighting-age boys like you, stealing from your neighbors while your town's rising up in rebellion," he chided gently.

"Their rebellion, not ours," Whisp spat.

“The magistrates will sort that one out. Now,” he said, leveling his arm cannons straight at Whisp’s head, his voice suddenly hard. “Drop your weapons.”

Whisp was sweating profusely. He looked at a point over the ‘naut’s shoulder and gave a barely perceptible nod. The Petronaut saw the signal, and spun around just in time to see three more boys, with iron pikes and pitchforks, come charging towards him from their hiding place in the house across the street.

“Now!” Whisp screamed, slapping heads among his gang and pointing his knife at the mechanized knight. “Now, now, now!” The boys roared and charged the Petronaut from both sides.

Sir Mathias Mascarpone, junior Petronaut of the Delian Reconnaissance squad, just sighed.

He pulled a cord against his breastplate, and the bottom hatch of his thrust pack swung closed. The steam rose instead from three newly open vents about level with his shoulder blades. He braced his legs and pushed a button on a stick strapped to his left hip. Thrust flames shot straight out from his back, roughly at eye level with the knife-wielding boys behind him. Their charge collapsed before it even began as the gang screamed and recoiled from the flames, though only one boy actually took a lick of fire across the face.

The three charging in front of him, their polearms glinting wickedly in the sun, were still coming. One boy lunged at him wildly, stabbing the iron pike towards his chest. Sir Mathias leaned to the side and wrapped his arm around the wooden haft, tucking the pike under his armpit. He bent at the knees and swung upwards with every ounce of motor-enhanced strength he could muster. The pike lifted up high, nearly perpendicular with the ground, and the bewildered young man holding it found himself along for the ride. He let go unthinkingly just before the top of the arc, and momentum carried him, like a champion pole vaulter, face-first onto the Bailish’s roof.

Sir Mathias engaged the rnine coils in his boots and leapt straight up. The other boys stumbling at the target they’d been charging was suddenly two meters up in the air, launched skyward by the pressurized coils encircling his feet and ankles. They looked up as the wooden end of the pike cracked down against their heads with sharp, purposeful blows. Moans filled the air and they held their skulls as Mathias dropped heavily back to earth.

The Petronaut felt a sharp pain along the side of his ribcage and wheeled around, retreating several steps. Whisp’s knife had a few drops of blood along its rusty edge. The boy had found a seam in Sir Mathias’ armor. The Petronaut winced and lifted his arm, trying to take stock of the cut. If he hadn’t moved so soon, that knife would have made it a lot deeper.

Whisp tossed his knife from hand to hand, a knot of half-a-dozen boys still standing behind him with frightened faces and raised weapons. “Get the firebounder,” he shouted, leading the charge.

Two clods of earth exploded in quick succession in front of the gang, spraying them with filth. As they halted, confused, another armored Petronaut raced into their midst.

Sir Kelley was leaner than Sir Mathias, and several centimeters shorter, but he managed to radiate more menace through that sharp black visor than a whole squad of Mathiases could ever muster. The barrels on his wrist were smoking ominously from the lethal rounds he’d just fired, and he carried a long black baton with grim purpose. He whipped the baton into Whisp’s stomach, then, when the youth doubled over, slammed him into the ground with a blow to the back of the skull. The baton kept moving in vicious black arcs, blurring with speed as each blow led directly to the next one, exploiting openings with ruthless precision.

A few short seconds later, Whisp and four other boys lay on the ground, unmoving, and the last two were on their knees with their hands laced behind their heads, trembling with fear. Sir Kelley looked down at them coldly, sliding his baton into a sling low at his hip.

Sir Mathias clenched his teeth in pain as he stepped forward. “Looters, Sir Kelley,” he reported. “Thanks for your help.”

“If you really needed it, you should be ashamed of yourself,” the senior Petronaut said in his clipped voice. He pulled a flat disk from a pouch on his belt and tossed it in the air. It burst seconds later in a cluster of white sparks. The conventional troops they were traveling with would be here soon to cage up the subdued looters.

“Any sign of the target?” Sir Kelley asked.

“We’ve cleared the last of these houses. Still nothing.”

“Then that lake house on the island is the only one place left to look,” Kelley said, flicking his visor up. His green eyes were hard. “Get a messenger back to Lundin, and let’s put an end to this.”

Lundin was preoccupied with his thoughts as he pulled open the brocaded flap to the Viscount's pavilion. He ducked his head to enter, nearly bumping the thin-faced captain trying to exit. They both stopped short. Lundin waited for her to pass, and she expected him to plow forward; but when each saw the other hesitating, they started forward again simultaneously. This time, Lundin's muddy boot scraped the captain's foot, leaving a brown streak on her dark armor.

"After you, please," Lundin said, raising his hands and taking a huge, embarrassed step backwards. The tent flap, which he was no longer holding, swung into the captain's face. He lunged forward to catch it, overreached, and stubbed his fingers on her heavy shoulder guards.

After scrabbling for a proper grip on the tent flap, the captain swept the heavy black-and-crimson fabric aside and stormed forward, her helmet askew. Her blazing eyes judged him top to bottom in a single glance, and Lundin immediately felt ten centimeters shorter. "Sorry, sir," Lundin said weakly.

"If you people had a uniform, you'd be a disgrace to it," she spat. "Now salute your superior."

Lundin saluted frantically. The captain stormed away. Lundin followed her with his eyes, holding the salute with a wavering hand. When she was out of sight, he lowered his hand and very gingerly pulled the tent flap open, checking both directions before ducking inside.

A spherical oil lamp, suspended from the beams in the ceiling, cast orange light over the dozen men and women in the Viscount's pavilion. It was whale oil burning up there, and in the lanterns hanging closer to eye level. The meager supply of petrolatum requisitioned for this simple campaign was needed for more important things than light, like operating the man-sized computing box in the corner. Lundin was cheered up to see his fellow technician, Samanthi, in her usual sprawl at the base of the machine, unscrewing a defunct vacuum tube as the Abacus continued to whirl and click. A black-and-gold officer with a dark beard stood over her with his arms crossed, trying very hard not to look befuddled. Lundin smirked at the sight. *The Petronauts might not have uniforms, he thought, but we've got toys nobody else even knows how to play with.*

Lundin wrinkled his nose as a truly unique smell assailed his nostrils. The wizard—Jelma? Jilmat? he couldn't remember—was hard at work on the other side of the pavilion. 'Work' for a wizard, of course, involved drawing shapes on the floor in colored sand, kneeling inside your artwork, lighting some incense, chewing some suspicious mushrooms, and muttering to yourself for upwards of twelve hours. Occasionally, you might wail, stomp your feet, or remove an article of clothing. (Jellmap here was down to a filthy vest, tiny cloth shorts, and about six bracelets on each tanned, wiry arm.) A wizard's real work began when, after half a day of spellcasting with no concrete result to show from it, you had to feed your clients enough manure to convince them you still deserved your ridiculous fee. Fast talking: that was where the real magic was.

Lundin coughed from the incense, and frowned as he saw a series of four white disks hanging from the beams above the Viscount's table; more wizardly décor, no doubt. He didn't give the wizard another glance as he walked to the commander. Lundin understood perfectly well the need for 'protective spells,' since the peasants theoretically had some magic on their side in this campaign; but it was still damned hard to take the moaning Mr. Jailrat seriously.

"Mister Lundin, was it?" Viscount LaMontina looked up from his maps as Lundin approached. Half a dozen other serious officers stopped their strategizing to look at Lundin, and he had no trouble remembering to salute this time. The Viscount gave him a prompt salute in reply, and Lundin settled back down. LaMontina was a year or two younger than he, actually, though as far above Lundin in the social strata as Earth was from the eighth Sphere. But something about LaMontina put Lundin at ease, more so than anyone else in the camp. The man was broad-shouldered, a fine specimen of military stature, but with a babyish face and a smile that looked almost sheepish when it crept into view. Right now, LaMontina had his brows furrowed in a serious, commanding fashion, and the protective body language of the older officers betrayed only a trace of indulgence. Quashing this rebellion was his first independent campaign, an obvious test bestowed on him by the Regency Council back in Delia. Everyone here—including Lundin—wanted the earnest young commander to succeed.

Lundin arranged himself into a facsimile of parade rest and put on a serious face.

"What news from the Petronaut detachment?" LaMontina asked, his voice quiet and firm.

“Sirs Kelley and Mathias are doing well, Your Grace. A wounded, uh, corporal from the detachment reported that the peasants have been completely routed in the west, and the lakeside homes are clear.”

“Did they find a pentacle?” A balding commander with beaded grey mustaches interjected.

“No sign of enemy wizardry yet.”

All the officers murmured at that. LaMontina’s face fell ever so slightly, behind the façade of command. He tapped a finger meditatively on the rolled-out map, drumming on the green island in the center of the lake. “As feared, then, their wizard must be here.”

“Preparations to storm the island will be redoubled,” an officer said, gesturing to a black-clad courier, who bowed curtly and slipped away.

“The corporal said they’d cross the lake in ninety minutes,” Lundin reported, eyes flicking from face to face. Everyone looked so concerned; you’d think he’d just reported that the Army been routed, not the peasants. So what that there was a single wizard still unaccounted for? Were these hardened military men and women as superstitious as all that?

LaMontina traced a finger around the island on his map. “A great deal can happen in ninety minutes,” he whispered. “If only there was a way to make landfall sooner.”

Lundin wracked his brain, eager to offer help to the young commander. An idea struck him. “Your Grace? The Petronauts, Sirs Kelley and Mathias, might be able to thrust across the water before the rafts, depending on the distance and their ‘tum reserves,” Lundin offered. “Lead the charge, you know?”

“A kilometer from shoreline to this promontory,” LaMontina said, touching the northeastern edge of the island.

Lundin did some quick calculations in his head, and nodded. “They’d have to return on the rafts, but could almost certainly make it across.”

As the implication of Lundin’s words sunk in, the murmuring silenced. The Viscount stood, his officers giving him space as his wide eyes searched the technician’s face. “A one-way trip into the teeth of the enemy’s defenses,” he said, “in advance of conventional support. Would your masters consent to such an endeavor?”

Lundin looked back at the young commander. “If you say it’s necessary, Your Grace, to neutralize that wizard in time,” he replied quietly, “I’m sure you only have to give the order.”

“Thrusting that far over the water? Damned magical themselves, these Petronauts,” one of the officers said, shaking her head in amazement.

“What I wouldn’t give for a hundred like them,” the balding man agreed.

LaMontina chose his words with measured authority. “I, for one, consider it a privilege to command these brave two, and their technicians,” he said, extending his ungloved hand across the table, a smile in his eyes.

He clasped Lundin’s hand firmly. Lundin basked in the glow of his leaderly approval.

“You told him *what*?” Samantha hissed, minutes later, giving Lundin a shove.

Lundin folded his arms and leaned further back into the corner, away from the nearest black-and-gold officer. “The truth,” he whispered defensively. “Kelley and Mathias almost certainly have enough petrolatum to thrust across to the island.”

“Almost certainly?” So, you admit there’s a chance they run out of ‘tum halfway to the island and just plunge into the water in full combat gear. What about the chance archers take them out as they thrust? Or once they reach land with no fuel? Or once they reach the lake house? Or that they die at the hands of the deadly wizard? Any of these probabilities interest you, Horace? Why don’t we run ‘em through the Abacus?”

“You leave Abby out of this,” Lundin said, sulking.

“You leave me out of this,” she retorted, flicking his ear. He yelped. “You’re delivering the good news to Sir Kelley,” Samantha said.

“I’d like to point out that you’re the senior tech.”

“Right. And as the senior tech, I’m officially letting you take the fall for your own flaming screw-up,” Samantha Elena said, pulling her sandy hair back from her round face. She tied it back and turned to

the purring Abacus. "Consider it training. Put those there," she said to a courier arriving with the latest supply figures from the quartermaster.

The courier saluted and set the shallow crate, overflowing with tan cards, on the carpeted floor of the pavilion. The tan cards were dotted with shorthand and symbols in regular patterns, quick reports from officers across the camp on everything from the quantity of blackpowder remaining to the current condition of all the horses. Lundin grabbed a stack of cards and fed them into the waiting slot of the Congregator, a hissing machine with ferocious metallic prongs jutting upwards and outwards, like tusks. A column of blank pink cards was affixed to the side of the machine, contained by thin glass walls. The tan cards Lundin fed with lazy familiarity into the top had symbols designed for human eyes. The Congregator would translate them into the language the Abacus understood best—sequences of open holes and closed spaces. The needle-thin punching teeth hidden inside the Congregator would punch out pink card after pink card and spit them along the horizontal prongs, where Lundin would retrieve them. The pink cards, brimming with the same data in a new, Abacus-friendly format, would be fed into the great machine. And the techs could perform any number of operations on the newly encoded dataset. Once the process was complete, Abby would tell the Army the state of their inventory faster than a team of clerks ever could.

On the other side of the Abacus, Samantha grabbed a blank blue program card, several times larger than the tan data cards, and turned to the press. Lundin shifted his weight, not eager to make the call to Sir Kelley. "You know what?" he said instead. "I'd love to see what Abby has to say about the odds of Kelley and Mathias taking out some drug-addled wizard. What's your wager? 98 percent success rate? 100 percent? Margin of error of a big fat zero?"

"Don't underestimate magicians," Samantha said, shifting the miniscule type on the press.

"They are as far under as I can estimate them. I mean, Sam, look at the buffoon we've got here. What's his name, Jellmik?"

They briefly looked across the pavilion. Through a cloud of incense, they could see the wizard hugging his dirty knees to his chest and rocking back and forth. One of his bracelets was in his mouth. The two technicians shook their heads.

"His name's not Jellmik," Samantha said.

"What is it, then?"

"How should I know? It's hard to strike up a conversation with a guy who's eating his own jewelry."

"I just think," Lundin said, grabbing his own pile of figures from the crate, "that if this hypothetical enemy wizard is anything like our man here, LaMontina has less than nothing to worry about."

"Not hypothetical. Field agents scouted this place out, and it's documented that Verrure has a wizard, and she's on the side of the rebellion. And with the extra something she's got, Horace, if she's any good at all, she's a real threat to the Viscount."

Lundin made a face. Yes, LaMontina had undergone a leech treatment before beginning the campaign. Yes, traitorous conscripts had attacked the orderly on his way to dispose of the leeches, and had taken the bloodsuckers prisoner. Yes, the traitors most likely fled to Verrure with the leeches. So the wizard had a quantity of LaMontina's blood, and it was only a few days old. Even if you accepted conventional wisdom that magic was more likely to work if you had personal artifacts related to your subject, the chance some peasant wizard with a vial of half-digested blood could do any harm to Viscount LaMontina in his pavilion kilometers away was... *miniscule? Laughable? Negligible? Which word says it best?* Lundin considered.

"I don't blame His Grace for taking it seriously," he said, removing old tan cards from their slots on the other side of Abby, and replacing them from the crate of up-to-date cards. The used cards he tossed into a silver bucket full of liquid—the Pickle—where they hissed and bubbled gently. The cards would soften and disintegrate into pulp, ready to be reconstituted and pressed into blank, fresh cards as needed in the future. "He wants this campaign to go perfectly. But if Viscount LaMontina was really concerned for his safety? He wouldn't be this close to the front line!"

"A commander staying twenty kilometers from the front, on his first independent campaign. That'd look great to the Regents," Samantha said evenly from the press, setting the last peg in place. She laid the

blue card onto its plate and swung the type down, to the soft sound of fiber being punctured. The press inscribed a series of operations on the punch card, notated in line after line of holes and closed spaces. Each blue card had eighty lines, of which Abby's reader could process seventy-two. The last eight helped identify each card so the techs had a prayer of keeping them in order. A single misplaced card would throw off the entire program. For the techs, it was the stuff of nightmares to have to shuffle through an entire stack of cards to find out which one was out of place. So Samantha was painstakingly careful as she swapped the new cards for the old ones. When she was done, Samantha would get to pull a big, satisfying lever—the perks of being senior tech—and the program would execute. Nine short minutes later, the computing box would print a comprehensive, to-the-minute report on the state of supply in LaMontina's camp.

'Abacus' was a deliberately ironic name. The Petronauts knew that this state-of-the-art machine was as far from an abacus as a six-pounder cannon was from a sharpened rock.

Samantha looked at Lundin. "His Grace is taking a calculated risk. The danger here is real; small, but real; and he's doing his job regardless, because he's brave. And you, junior technician, are *not* doing your job right now because you're a gutless squab. Now put the damn cards down, call Sir Kelley and tell him what a fun mission you volunteered us for."

Lundin opened his mouth, then bit his lip. Samantha was right, of course. He had to call Sir Kelley now, just as surely as he should have kept his mouth shut when the risky idea had struck him. It was just that LaMontina had needed help, and for once in this campaign he'd wanted to feel like he was really contributing a new idea, a new strategy to the discussion—

"Behold—the disks! The *disks!*"

All eyes in the pavilion turned. The wizard was on his feet, gnashing his teeth, with tears pouring from his eyes. His voice was booming with rage and fear. One long finger was stretched as straight as a pike, pointing above the Viscount's table to the wizardly white disks hanging from the beams—

Lundin blinked. The white disks were turning black.

Like a fire nibbling at the edges of a sheet of paper, blackness was spreading from the outside in on each of the four disks. LaMontina looked up at the dangling circles, his eyes darting from one to the next. "Wizard! What does this mean?" he snapped.

"Peril, oh Graceful One!" the sorcerer wailed. "A spell approaches. Close your mind and make the Sign of Warding!"

After a brief hesitation, LaMontina curled his second and middle fingers into his palm and raised his hand to his chest in the half-remembered gesture everyone learned in childhood. One of his officers took him by the arm.

"Your Grace, we must remove you to safety now!"

"A courier horse has been waiting for this moment. Ride fifteen kilometers distant and no magic can touch you."

"No!" bellowed the wizard, falling heavily to the ground as if his legs had been swept from under him. He looked up, his face stained with the purple sand from his design, and raised two claw-like hands towards the Viscount. Everyone stepped away from the man involuntarily. "No time! Graceful One, Man-Child, He of the Rearing Bull, your life now rests in my hands. Room! Room!"

In response to the wizard's frantic gestures, and LaMontina's confirmation, the officers stepped away. Under the copper light of the whale-oil lamp, the Viscount stood alone behind his desk. The four disks ringing him were no longer white, but halfway obscured by crawling threads of black. Lundin stared at the transforming disks, mesmerized. *What's the trick? How's the wizard controlling his little decorations?*

A rough hand on his shoulder shook him back to reality. The balding commander in black-and-gold was pointing a finger in his face. "Technician! Are your masters in position?"

Two other officers were towering over him, with the urgent menace of strong men who feel helpless. "I—" he stumbled over his own tongue. "I haven't transmitted His Grace's order yet."

The officers swore. "Get the Petronauts to that island this instant. We need to find and kill this flaming wizard before the spell finishes."

Lundin threw a salute so sharply he almost brained himself. He staggered to the cluttered heap of Petronaut equipment and, with a mighty heave, lifted the Communicator out of its case. Lundin set the boxy device roughly onto the crate of paperwork. Two fluted tin speech trumpets stood up straight from the box like daffodils, and a curled crank near the base rose up like a squirrel's tail. Lundin grabbed the crank with both hands. He began turning it as fast as he could, seeing the dial spark with power. "Thirty seconds, at least, until you can make a transmission," Samanthi said, snapping her fingers as her mind whirled. "I'll get the booster antenna; this message *needs* to reach Kelley."

Lundin just nodded as she began assembling the antenna, trying to concentrate on each turn of the crank. But his eyes went back to the disks. What was that blackness?

Across the room, the wizard screamed, and kicked his bare feet through each line of his diamond design. Sand went flying in showers of black, crimson and purple. He grabbed the sticks of burning incense and snapped them in two, and then in two again, seemingly unconscious of the smoldering fire pressing against his hands. He flung the wooden shards to the ground and stripped off his vest. Nearly naked now, he lay down on his back atop the splinters of incense and screeched, "Stay strong, Graceful One!"

Lundin glanced down at the dial as he cranked. Ten more seconds. He raised his head, and caught sight of Viscount LaMontina looking back at him. Standing still with his hand raised awkwardly to his chest in the Sign of Warding, and his ornate black-and-crimson armor undented by battle, he looked like a statue. His youthful face, though, was alive with emotion; confusion, regret, concern, and at this point, a trace of fear. But then that sheepish smile Lundin had only seen once or twice before crept onto his face, almost as if to say he couldn't believe himself to be the center of so much fuss.

"Mister Lundin," the Viscount said, his voice quiet and calm. Lundin swallowed and nodded. "Have you called the Petronauts?"

The dial was glowing dully; a passably full charge, at last. He flicked the switch, snatched the telescoping stalk of the thinner trumpet and drew it upwards to his lips. "Transmitting now, Your Grace," he said. Samanthi stabbed the base of the antenna into its socket on the side of the Communicator, and handed the conical, corded earpiece to Lundin. He raised it to his ear, hearing only the grey, fuzzy sound of an incomplete connection. Who knew how much time would pass before Sir Kelley would respond to the signal.

He took a deep breath, and looked back into LaMontina's eyes. Time stretched out. "Don't worry, Your Grace. Help is on the way," Lundin said in a quavering voice, his emotions surprising him.

The young nobleman shifted his shoulders and stood to his full, proud height, his eyes clear. "I'm not worried," he said in a soft voice that filled the entire pavilion.

And then, as four black disks came fluttering down from the ceiling, Viscount LaMontina burst into flames.

Chapter Two

The Motto

“It didn’t have to happen,” Lundin said again.

The workshop was dim, with the clear white of a single frosted gaslight by the door shedding the only illumination. The crowded shelves loomed over the two workbenches, their shadows casting long black blades onto the far wall. A single carriage clopped by on the street below, outside the shuttered windows. Lundin hadn’t touched his beer.

“And what’s that supposed to mean, Horace?” Samantha said. She leaned back in her stool, pulling a loose thread out of her overalls with an impatient snap. “How does saying that help anything now?”

“There was something else we could have done.”

“You could have called us earlier, there’s a thought,” Sir Mathias Mascarpone said, sipping his beer. The hulking Petronaut drummed his fingers in sequence along his stein, making a sound like a galloping metal pony. “Maybe we could have thrust over to the island alone, like you wanted, and gotten ourselves killed too. That would have helped.”

“Maybe you would have found the wizard in time,” Lundin said.

Samanthi and Sir Mathias exchanged a look. “Not possible, Horace,” he said, more kindly. “All those fighters, and all that ground to cover? Even if you’d called us the instant you got to LaMontina’s pavilion, there’s no way we could have stopped the spell in time.”

“There was no way around this one,” Samantha said. “Now will you just get drunk already so we can stop talking about this?”

“No way around it, huh? Is that what Abby says?”

“Punch a few cards, Horace, by all means,” Samantha said, her color rising. “Play with the variables. Design a hundred scenarios where the Viscount survives. And then get over yourself, because this may have been your first time working a combat zone, but it won’t be your last. And you need to get used to the idea that sometimes people die.”

“But how often do they die through magic?” Lundin rose to his feet, unable to stay still. “Sir Mathias, you’ve seen plenty of fights. How often does a commander burn to death in his pavilion that far from the battlefield?”

“It’s a first for me,” Mathias admitted, sipping his beer.

“Why doesn’t it happen in every battle? There are plenty of people out there calling themselves wizards. If magic is real—“

“You still don’t think magic is real?” Samantha said. “Ask clan LaMontina right now if magic is real.”

“—which it is, obviously,” Lundin continued, “but then why does the battlefield need soldiers? Horses? Cannons? Petronauts? If a peasant witch can kill a guarded, Warded nobleman, why is war ever face-to-face?”

“Because magic fails,” Sir Kelley said from the doorway.

Sir Mathias hastily set down his beer as they turned to look at the senior Petronaut, just inside the doorway. T. Kelley Malcolm, Esq., wasn’t much of a drinker; nor had he gotten familiar enough with his team in three years to let them know what his first initial stood for. After the dressing down he had given Lundin for presuming to make tactical decisions in yesterday’s Verrure campaign, none of them expected Kelley to make an appearance at an informal gathering like this. But there he was, austere as ever in his high-collared black jacket, its polished silver buttons shining like filaments. The white gaslight was harsh on his pockmarked face.

“You could add and subtract a million externals from what happened yesterday,” Kelley said, “and you’d get new results. But you could also keep everything the same—have the same military strategy, Lundin’s same homicidal plan to send Petronauts to their deaths, his same inaction. You could have the same two wizards attempt to cast the same spell and counterspell, and you know what would happen? In almost every case, nothing.” His green eyes were hard. “Because that’s what magic does. It fails.”

“Point of order, boss?” Samantha said in the brief silence that followed. “Magic sort of succeeded yesterday.”

“One in a thousand odds.”

“But why?” Lundin said. “Sir Kelley, look, I’m with you that magic is usually only good for a laugh, but it’s a fact that yesterday magic killed a good man in a terrible way.”

“Yesterday was a fluke.”

“I don’t buy it,” Lundin said without thinking, thumping his palm against the workbench. He caught sight of Kelley’s face tightening and hastily added, “Not to contradict you, Sir Kelley; and can I reiterate again how sincerely sorry I am for yesterday?”

“Yes,” Kelley said, narrowing his eyes.

“But do you know what I mean? Any of you?” Lundin gestured helplessly. “Sir Mathias. What’s the least reliable piece of gear on your suit?”

Mathias tilted his head, oily brown curls of hair spilling towards his shoulder. “I’d say the fire douser,” he decided. “Thank the Spheres we set more fires than we fight, ‘cause that thing never works right in testing.”

“Great! Exactly! Let me think, what was wrong with it last time? The nozzle kept getting clogged...”

“The spread was uneven, one of the hoses leaked, on and on and on.”

“But did we stop there? Petronauts like us? Did we say ‘well, fire dousers just fail, so keep using it just as it is and maybe there’s a one-in-a-thousand chance you’ll be able to put out a fire someday?’”

“Do you like to hear yourself talk, Mr. Lundin?” Sir Kelley said.

“Oh, the opposite,” Lundin said, his hands fluttering with nervous energy. “But, so? Is that what we say, when the douser or anything else acts up?”

“Spheres no,” Samantha said, setting her empty beer down. “When something’s misbehaving, we find the problem and we fix it.”

“*Ultraexi Pillok Mentatum Est,*” Sir Mathias said, reciting a Petronaut motto. “The Mind is the Key to All Things.”

“Yes!” Lundin’s eyes lit up with gratitude. “So what if we could fix... magic?”

There was silence. The sound of a drunk throwing up in the alley across the street wafted through the shutters like an embarrassing smell.

“Get some rest, Mr. Lundin,” Kelley said, turning for the door.

“It must have rules, Sir Kelley! Everything has rules. If we could apply the Petronaut spirit of inquiry, of reason, of perseverance, to the study of magic, maybe—” Lundin’s voice caught in his throat. “Maybe no more good men would have to die from flukes.”

The evening air was warm and heavy in the workshop, and beads of sweat were visible on Lundin’s forehead. Mathias laid a gentle hand on the smaller man’s shoulder. Sir Kelley’s voice lashed out from across the room.

“You want to learn the rules of magic, Mr. Lundin? You want to fix it? You want to apply a spirit of order to the most atavistic, chaotic nonsense humanity has ever indulged in?” Kelley’s green eyes were lit up with a cruel private joke.

Lundin swallowed. “By your leave, Sir,” he said, bobbing up and down in what looked more like a curtsey than a bow.

Kelley was on the verge of laughter, but instead nodded once and turned smartly towards the door. “Well then. Mister Lundin, we shall meet outside your shameful hovel at first light. Be prepared to travel. We are going to meet my grandfather.”

“He has a family?” Samantha murmured to the others.

Lundin blinked. "I'm honored, Sir; but can I ask why we're going to meet your grandfather?"
The Petronaut grinned tightly before slipping out the door and into the warm night.
"Because he's a wizard."

Chapter Three

A Mind Like An Ocean

“It’s just that I’ve never seen so many eyeballs,” Lundin said, gulping for air. He had his hands on his knees, and tried to beat down the queasy lump in his throat with a series of shallow breaths. “All in one place, I mean.”

“Sometimes you need eyeballs,” the old woman said evenly, her knitting needles clicking faintly against each other. Archimedia’s face was lined with age, and her hair was white, but her hands looked unsettlingly smooth and youthful, flicking with agility back and forth as she fastened the strands of scarlet wool together. Lundin gulped again at the unwelcome thought that, in addition to the glass jar of eyeballs, this married couple might have a crate of lovely female hands down in the cellar, ready to be swapped in as spares should the need arise.

Lundin tried not to look too hard at the shelves looming on all sides of the small room, laden with racks of incense, candles, jars of multicolored sand, and earthenware pots of who knew what. But since the wizards had brought it out, he forced himself to crouch and look at the jar of eyeballs centered on the low octagonal table in the center of the floor. There were the square-pupilled eyes of goats, the huge black eyes of cows, and the villainous slitted eyes of cats, suspended in heavy golden syrup. His stomach was churning like a turbine, and he breathed through his mouth. The air made him cough. Between the lingering aromas of burnt offerings in the hut, and the fishy, briny air from the Harborfront outside, each breath was like a ladleful of rancid soup.

“So... what do you do with the eyeballs?” he said, concentrating very hard on the blank pages of his scrollbook.

Tymon sighed, visibly impatient with the interview already. Kelley’s grandfather—though the two men hadn’t exchanged more than a dozen words in the half hour Kelley and Lundin had been here, let alone displayed any outward familial feeling—was sitting on a pile of cushions with his legs crossed over each in an impossible manner. Tymon was deeply tanned, with a shaved head and the thinnest eyebrows Lundin had ever seen on a man, plucked into high, sweeping curves. Braids of coarse, colorful fabric hung around his neck and sank all the way down his bare chest (visible through the tight, dirty vest) to his navel. The old man might have looked laughable, had it not been for his air of bottomless confidence and the piercing eyes his grandson had clearly inherited.

“The eyeballs are not always necessary,” Tymon said slowly and clearly, as if to a foreign child. “And when a spell calls for them, one never knows beforehand how they will be used.”

“But... if a spell calls for them, how can you not know how they’ll be used?” Lundin’s stomach was settling down, but his head was pounding from too much breathing. *And from too much crazy*, he thought uncharitably. He tried to keep his demeanor reasonable. “I mean, when a recipe calls for flour, you’re not going to use the flour to— to light the stove. Right?”

“Don’t be closed to possibilities,” Archimedia said without looking up.

Lundin’s laugh trailed off, and he glanced over his shoulder at Sir Kelley, standing by the door with arms crossed over his chest. The senior ‘naut was grinning like a coyote, loving every minute of this in his completely unhelpful way.

“A recipe is a wrong-headed analogy. When I say a spell ‘calls’ for something, I mean exactly what I say,” Tymon said. “The wizard is speaking to the Mobinoji throughout the spell—”

“Mobinoji; the spirits,” Lundin clarified, scuttling back through his notes.

“—and the Mobinoji *call* to him, offering suggestions in the moment as to best command the streams of power and keep hold of the spell.”

“So. I’m sorry, where do the eyeballs come in?”

"Sometimes you need eyeballs!" Tymon snapped. He looked directly at Kelley for the first time since they'd arrived. "This is pointless. Your servant's mind is a pebble; small and inflexible. Understanding magic takes a mind like an ocean; expansive, and mutable."

"What did I tell you, Mr. Lundin?" Kelley said, his eyes dancing with pleasure. "Magic takes a mind like an ocean; sloppy and full of weeds. Ready to go?"

"A Petronaut cannot learn anything new. The best his clockwork mind can hope to do is spin in circles until it rusts. Good day." Tymon was standing now, and dismissed them over his shoulder in a flat voice. Kelley lost no time heading for the door, his boots muffled against the dirt floor.

"Mr. Tymon!"

Lundin was standing too, his fingers clenched along the edge of his notes. Slowly, the wizard turned his head to meet the technician's eyes, cocking his head with just a trace of interest. Now that he had the old man's attention, Lundin didn't know what to say, but he was sure if he let his emotions keep boiling something would come out through his mouth soon enough.

"I want to understand," was what finally escaped the stew of wounded pride, frustration, and curiosity in his belly. "I want to learn," Lundin said, discovering the words a few seconds after they emerged.

Tymon gazed at Lundin for a long moment. Then either a breeze blew through the drafty hut, or the old wizard nodded gently. "So I see." Tymon cradled his hands in front of his tanned, flat belly. "If my grandson can stand the sight of me a few minutes more, then, I shall explain it again. With fewer details, perhaps, this time."

"Whatever works," Lundin said, stylus at the ready.

"The crucial point you must understand is that magic happens only by the grace of the Mobinoji. We are vessels of their power."

"Okay."

"A wizard must do them due honor at the beginning of any spell; preparing the colored pentacles and designs that attract their attention; burning the sweet incense; making sure his or her own body is pure, unsullied by soaps and other modern travesties..."

"Soap and magic don't mix?"

The question was so impossibly foolish that Tymon, a trace of hauteur creeping back into his face, refused to respond directly. "Once these preparations are complete, the wizard commences the Invocation, the first portion of any spell."

"The Invocation.' So how do you do that?"

"A thousand and one ways," Tymon said, a tapping finger betraying his impatience. "Sometimes through chant. Sometimes through dance. Sometimes the Mobinoji may call for a totem. A statuette. A stick. A hand of earth. Even, yes, an eyeball. Each Invocation is utterly unique, and the wizard must be open to follow what the spell requires in the moment."

Each Invocation is utterly unique, Lundin wrote, his heart sinking. The more he talked to the wizard, the more he knew Kelley was right. Magic was pure chaos.

"Although..."

Tymon looked over to Archimedia as she lowered her work. Something in her tone made Lundin flip to a new page. She spoke to her husband as if reminding him to empty the chamber pots: "The *pingdu calabra* is always spoken."

"What's that?"

Tymon waved a hand dismissively. "Words of connection. A prayer for access. The, uh... details, details. Archimedia, do not confuse him, his mind is skittish."

"The words of the *pingdu calabra* are always spoken precisely in the Invocation, or the wizard will not bridge to the world of the Mobinoji." Archimedia said, swinging her clouded eyes over to Lundin. "She can channel no power and the spell will never begin. If that confuses you, I hope your mother is ashamed of herself."

"No, no, that—I think that makes sense," Lundin said. He tossed a glance back to Sir Kelley, who was frowning with old-fashioned sourness now. Lundin took that as a sign that he was finally hearing

something worthwhile. “Ma’am, do you mean to say there’s something about casting a spell that’s constant every time?”

“Several things,” Archimedia nodded.

“But they are the least interesting part of the ritual.”

“These are Petronauts, husband. They delight in the uninteresting.”

Tymon grimaced at his calm-faced wife. He raised his hands to the ceiling, thoroughly roused now. “To focus on what is constant, spell to spell, is to misunderstand the very nature of magic. Magic is about freedom; becoming one with the chaotic now; interpreting the wishes of the Mobinoji with passionate abandon in the moment.”

“And the constants keep you grounded in the middle of all that,” Lundin said, taking notes in earnest now.

“No!” Tymon literally jabbed his finger into Lundin’s face, and the technician squeaked in pain. *Who does that?* Lundin thought, leaning back and rubbing the red tip of his nose. “The constants chain us down! To be expected to remember and return to them in the height of magical exhilaration is ridiculous. Anti-magical. Unless the spirits specifically call for them, I, for one, omit them in my casting.”

“And how often do your spells fail?”

As expected, the room got deathly quiet and Tymon’s eyes narrowed so hard he probably gave himself a migraine. Lundin was sure he could have put the question more delicately, but his nose hurt so he didn’t feel like it. He looked at the old wizard with an upturned face and waited for the man to get over himself and answer, one way or the other.

“Spells never fail,” Tymon finally said. “But... sometimes spells succeed in different ways.”

“Ha!” Sir Kelley barked, utterly shameless. His grandfather ignored him. Lundin cleared his throat.

“What does that mean, Mr. Tymon?”

“Say you cast a love spell. You invoke the spirits, you name the woman or man to be acted upon, you describe the petitioner who longs for their love, you follow the calls of the spirits for six, eight, ten hours. At the end, maybe the subject falls in love with the petitioner. Maybe the subject falls in love with the petitioner’s brother, or someone who resembles him. Maybe the subject is overcome with self-love and retreats to a private room. Maybe a thousand other quiet things happen between two people and you never know what is magic and what is passion and what is destiny.”

Tymon looked sidelong at Lundin. “All these things belong to the Mobinoji,” he said. “A wizard appeals to the spirits with his whole heart when he casts a spell, and however they choose to respond, he accepts it. Success? Failure? These are Petronaut words, and they have no place here. A wizard honors the spirits the same—the *same*—no matter the result.”

The wizard was sincerely trying to explain now, and Lundin appreciated it; but it was beyond the technician’s power to avoid saying the question that was rising up from his gut like a ripe belch.

“Why?”

Archimedia raised a hand a few seconds later, and Tymon stopped swearing. The old wizard stomped off behind a curtain of feathers and beads and was gone from view. His wife set her wool-work down and folded her smooth hands in her lap. “Why what, exactly?” she asked.

“Why would you be just as happy with failure?” Lundin whispered.

“Who are we to decide what failure is?”

“Failure is when a blacksmith hires you to make the milkmaid fall for him, and apart from a naughty dream about anvils she has in the hayloft, nothing happens to her,” he said. “Ask any blacksmith; that’s failure.”

“Help me understand, Petronaut. What would you have us do?” Archimedia asked, her white hair catching the light. Lundin leaned in closer to her, desperate to make his case while her encouraging attitude lasted.

“Don’t settle so easily,” he said. “I know magic works. I saw it do something horrible, with my own eyes. And I saw how a good wizard felt when his magic hadn’t been strong enough to stop it.” The look on Jellmap’s face as LaMontina’s body was carried out of the tent had been unbearable. There was a man

who knew perfectly well what failure was. “If it works, there’s got to be a mechanism for *how* it works. And that means there’s a mechanism for how it fails, too. That’s just how the world is! Do you see? There’s got to be a difference—a measurable, substantive difference— between a spell that completes and a spell that fizzles.”

“The only difference is the pleasure of the spirits.”

“Okay; so how do you cast spells that please them more?”

“One never knows.”

“Then one isn’t asking!” Lundin slammed a palm down on the table impulsively, and the jar of eyeballs tipped over and started rolling towards him. His vision went black and somebody gave a little shriek.

Archimedia waited patiently, and Kelley not so patiently, until Lundin had taken enough deep breaths to be able to continue. “Thousands of wizards cast spells every day across the six continents, right? If we can figure out what’s constant between the spells that work, and the ones that don’t, we can start spreading the word! Improving the process. Increasing the success rate. We can *understand* magic, not just practice it. And wizards, their customers, and all the rest of us will benefit.”

“You like the idea of constants, don’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Lundin admitted. “That’s my world. But if, like you said, there are certain words that have to be said in order for an invocation to work; then, for all the chaos and all the variables magic’s got, I think it might be your world too.”

Archimedia stood, slowly. She was a small woman, and thin, like an upside-down broom with white straw for hair. Her fingers played across a woven charm on the wall. “Mr. Lundin,” she whispered, her eyes looking at something far away. “If you can, in fact, understand magic... improve the process... increase the success rate... what, exactly, makes you think we will all benefit?”

Lundin and Sir Kelley looked at each other. “I... I don’t understand, ma’am. How could we not?”

There was a long, heavy stillness. They watched as her too-young hands wrung against each other nervously. “How, indeed?” she murmured finally, her milky eyes unfocused.

With a visible effort, she brought herself back to reality. Archimedia clapped her hands once. “I have something I must show you,” she said, reaching for a dusty book on the crowded shelves.

Chapter Four

The Wizard's Path

Jilmaq was a mess. The wizard was curled up on the floor, whimpering, at the foot of his moldy cot in the moldy back room of his moldy, mushroom-shaped hut outside the city walls. His leathery face was streaked with tears, and his long black braid so caked with dirt and debris it would take a rake, not a comb, to straighten its tangles. A jug of pungent, nameless hooch was tipped over on his square bedside table. The alcoholic puddle it was creating on the dirt floor was probably the cleanest spot in the entire house.

The wizard was distraught, sniveling, one arm looped around the leg of his bed for stability. But he was also listening.

"Do you think they blame you for LaMontina's death?"

"I know it," Jilmaq said shakily, not looking at the figure standing over him. An expectant silence hung in the air. Jilmaq clenched his fist around the wooden leg, growing angry. "What more would you have me say?" he growled. "They blame me. I failed. Does it please you to hear it?"

"Does it please you to say it?" the other asked, softly.

The wizard shook his head, his brain thumping with drink and resentment. "The nobles, the Regency Council, the hoi polloi— they do not understand the fickleness of the Mobinoji. They know not the lengths to which I pushed my body and my mind that day. They know nothing of magic. All they know is that a bright young man was killed, and I did not save him."

"And so you are punished," the visitor said. "For matters beyond your control, you pay the price."

"Justice," Jilmaq said bitterly. "They left me a roof over my head, at least; my life."

"This is not your life, Jilmaq." The wizard raised his eyes at last. He took a look around his grimy two-room hovel and his stomach lurched with disgust. His visitor went on, in a sinewy whisper, "You deserve more than this. To be relegated to eking out a hardscrabble life as witch doctor to the unwashed, *outside* the city? You served the nobles of Delia for three dozen years. It was your magic that let the barren LaMontina woman bear children again."

"And it was my magic that let her nephew die, victim of a peasant witch."

"Suffer, then," the other said with sudden harshness. "Wallow. Drink. Gore yourself on the scapegoat's horns they gave you and bleed your life out in this stinking pit."

Jilmaq was weeping openly. His visitor watched him for a lingering moment, then shifted weight onto the other shiny black boot.

"Or," the visitor said, lifting the word like a treat for a hound, a scrap of delicious fat just out of reach.

Jilmaq looked up, his sobs subsiding. "Or?" His voice shuddered.

"Redeem yourself, in the eyes of men and spirits alike, by doing something truly exceptional."

The dirty wizard wiped his nose. "What?" he asked, hardly daring to believe his ears. "For whom?"

"For those who remember their friends."

There was a muffled clink on the earthen floor, and Jilmaq's eyes widened. A cluster of two-toned coins in gold and platinum lay at his feet; more money than a hundred peasants could have paid. He couldn't keep himself from scraping the coins up into his lap then and there, dirt embedding itself into his fingernails.

The other slowly lowered into a crouch, approaching Jilmaq's eye level. The wizard froze, staring into that face. The visitor reached a pair of gloved hands deep into a black robe. The hands emerged a moment later. "As for the task itself, it's really very simple," that smooth voice said.

Jilmaq's bloodshot eyes went wide. Bound with ribbon at both ends, draped across the visitor's upturned hands, was a shining braid of fawn-colored hair.

“For the last time, it’s fascinating. Now will you shut up and lift?”

“I feel like an explorer,” Lundin grunted joyously, shifting his sweaty hands for purchase along the smooth corners of the apparatus and heaving upwards. He was bent double with his knees locked and felt the agonizing pull as all the effort of the lift went directly to his lower back. Samantha staggered for balance on the other side, trying to even out her grip against Lundin’s over-zealous hoist. “It’s just that magic has literally never had this kind of analysis before,” Lundin panted, shambling forwards with the bulky machine resting partly on his thighs.

“I’m sure that’s true,” Samantha said through clenched teeth, glancing over her shoulder as she walked backwards, the cords in her arms taut from exertion.

“And it’s not chaos; not even close. There’s a formula. Like I told you, the Invocation starts—”

“Horace, watch your burning feet!” Samantha swore as the bulky generator wobbled towards her. Lundin recovered from his stumble, kicking the pair of calipers aside. The floor of the Petronaut warehouse was a minefield of discarded paperwork and loose widgets, as if the criss-crossing crush of busy, preoccupied techs and ‘nauts charging this way and that to prepare their gear wasn’t obstacle enough.

The city-state of Delia had eight squads of resident Petronauts; about ten dozen curious souls in total. The happy quartet of Malcolm, Mascarpone, Elena and Lundin was the smallest squad by far. Delia was a wonderful place to be a Petronaut, as the world went. While Delian nobles could hire the master machinesmiths for contracted work, the meddling patronage that allowed wealthy dilettantes to dictate what they should research was forbidden by a royal decree two decades old. Old Queen Tess had been a powerful advocate for the ‘nauts, arguing very convincingly to King Randolph that Delia was more likely to gain a technological edge over its neighbors by giving its researchers facilities, funding, and freedom, than by forcing them to kowtow to wealthy patrons for every coin, and waste time humoring their benefactors’ half-cocked ideas for this invention or that whirligig. Twenty-one years later, Delia’s influence stretched far beyond its city walls to every corner of the Anthic Thrust, the long thin peninsula the city called home. The success was thanks largely to the string of marvels that had emerged from Workshop Row, where ideas flowed freely between ‘nauts and private naturalists, merchants, dreamers and tinkerers. When the widowed Queen herself passed three years ago, the thought of a more heavy-handed state gave the ‘nauts many sleepless nights. But the Regency Council, established to rule until Princess Naomi came of age, stayed faithful to Old Tess’s promises, and researchers stayed at nearly the same levels of funding and independence.

Which meant, on the few occasions when the Regents did make an official request for their services, the Petronaut community fell all over itself to be obliging. Currently, the Council was tapping all of them to help provide security, logistical support, or (in the case of the Parade squad) entertainment for the royal feastday in two weeks. The Princess would go through the First Ordeals only once, after all, and marking this important step on her road to adulthood with anything less than the full resources of the state was out of the question. So tomorrow, the Council’s liaisons to the Petronauts, the earnest Baron and Baroness Quinish, would begin personal inspections of every piece of equipment to be employed for the feastday—a task made both easier and harder by the fact that neither of them had a clue what they were looking at. The best tactic to take with the Honorable Quinishes, the Petronauts had found, was to make any broken or unreliable equipment as shiny as possible, so it received an automatic stamp of approval, and to make any important, sensitive equipment look dingy and grimy to deter clumsy white-gloved hands. (Just because Petronauts spent more time with machines didn’t mean they couldn’t handle people, too.)

Lundin shifted the weight, his hands throbbing as they continued their crabwalk across the warehouse. “What was I saying?” he asked.

“Nothing. I was enjoying it,” Samantha said.

“Oh—right! So! So the Invocation is the first part of any spell. Real consistent. There’s this text, the *pingdu calabra*, that they always say. A few pages of text, tops. And it connects them to the spirit world.”

“How exciting for them.”

“Part two—now this is a much longer one—is called the Illustration, and it’s what you want the spell to do. It’s where you say, you know, ‘this is a spell that makes a person fall in love,’ or—well, ‘this is a spell that makes a person burst into flames.’”

“By the living spheres, are you insane?” Samantha hissed, glaring at him. “Don’t go throwing words like that around, magic man! There are drums of petrolatum everywhere in this place!”

“Don’t worry,” Lundin said, his face red from the strain. He really couldn’t feel his fingers anymore underneath the generator. “No danger in talking about this stuff. We aren’t speaking in Mabinanto—and, anyway, speaking one part of a spell without the other parts in the right order is a recipe for instant fizzle.”

They finally reached the wagon and, with a heave and a grunt, set the generator down in its place. Once inspected, it would be palace-bound, like the rest of their gear. Their little Reconnaissance squad had been assigned to assist the Palace Guard, making sure nothing unexpected came in or out of the royal wing while the Princess was undergoing the First Ordeals. A plum assignment if there ever was one. They’d be among the first Delians (outside of palace regulars, of course) to see the Princess in her newly grown-up state, with her hair cut back and dressed like a midling, not a girl. It would be strange to see her without the long, fawn-colored hair that shone through all her childhood portraits.

Lundin and Samantha caught their breath, leaning against the wagon bed. He looked at her as she watched other teams’ gear go by with an appraising eye. “Have you heard of Mabinanto before, then?” Lundin asked.

“If it’s not a type of alcohol I’m not interested,” Samantha said, absently.

Lundin smiled and raised his hands in a gracious gesture. “You know, we could talk about this later, if you want,” he said. He prided himself on his ability to read signals from other people.

“No, you know what? Let’s hear it all at once.” Samantha drummed a little rat-a-tat on the wagon with her callused hands. “If little Princess Naomi can take two weeks of Ordeals, I can listen to you blab about magic another few minutes. Please tell me, Horace, what Mabinanto is.”

“It’s really okay, Sam. I don’t want to bore you.”

“For fire’s sake—! Just bore me already!”

“Mabinanto, then! Language of wizards. It’s, uh—it’s kind of like Old Harutian; big compound words; straightforward grammar, thankfully.”

“I didn’t think anything about magic was straightforward.” Samantha tilted her head towards him, leaning back against the wagon.

Lundin started talking with his hands more, the way he did whenever his energy levels started to build up. Samantha stifled a snort, grinning to herself as he responded. “That’s what I’m saying, though! I feel like everything we all think about magic—wizards included—is wrong. Because when I looked through Archimedia’s... uh, Kelley’s step-grandmother... when I looked through her books, at the lines and lines of Mabinanto that supposedly make up a successful Illustration, you know what it looked like to me?” He leaned in closer. “Code.”

Samantha frowned, scratching her jawline with a fingernail. “‘Code.’ You mean, like our ‘code?’ Abby’s ‘code?’ How is that possible?”

“I’ve gotta show you the book.”

“We’ve gotta retool the fuel lines in Kelley’s suit, is what we gotta do,” she said automatically, but for once she didn’t feel like leaping back into the workshop right away.

“Say a wizard is doing the Illustration for a spell that—that makes hair fall out. You’ve got to see this language. It’s full of conditionals, it’s full of loops... ‘If the hair is coarse, respond this way; if the subject already has hair loss, discontinue at such and such point; hair on this body part should be treated this way, repeat until X occurs; and if the subject is being magically protected, go to ritualistic phrase 18...’:

“I don’t flaming believe this,” Samantha said, guarded and marveling at the same time.

“Maybe I’m crazy. Maybe I’m just...” Lundin took a moment to sort out his words. “Maybe, because I’m a tech, I only know how to see things in terms of what I know. I’m sure there’s nuance I’m missing, no doubt of it. But as I read the stuff, all I could think was, ‘this looks familiar.’”

A passing Bulwark 'naut, her visor down and her suit's heavy boots thunderous against the floor, looked down at them as she stomped by. They were the only people standing still in the whole warehouse. Samanthi crossed her arms. "What happens next?" she demanded fiercely.

"Next in the spell? So, okay. You invoke magical power; you speak exactly what you want to happen, and what you *don't* want to happen; and then comes the Enunciation. You name your target."

"Just like that? 'Horace Lundin,' and I'm done?"

Lundin shrugged. "This is the part I'm confused by. It sounds like it should be one line, right? But somehow the Enunciation phase still takes a wizard hours. It's almost as long as the Illustration, even in spells that succeed."

"How can it take four hours to say somebody's name?"

"Well, they say it again and again, and they'll say the name in different ways, and play around with it..."

Samanthi snapped her fingers, her eyes wide. "Remember that ratty little wizard who couldn't save LaMontina? He called the Viscount all sorts of stupid things... 'Graceful One.' 'Man of the Rearing Bull.' It was like he was trying new names on for size."

Lundin put his arms on his hips, thinking back to that dark tent. "Maybe he was still thinking in Mabinanto, or at least in that mindset. So, in the Enunciation, wizards might not say just a person's real name, but speak dozens or hundreds of permutations on it? Different titles and identities the person might have?"

"But why?"

"No idea. Absolutely none. But what I do know is that here's where having the personal artifacts comes into play. The blood from the leeches, in the Viscount's case. There's something about having that material on hand during the Enunciation that makes a wizard more connected to his target. However it works, from all accounts, it really makes a difference."

"Just ask LaMontina," Samanthi said, scratching her jawline. She looked at Lundin for a long time, her round face thoughtful and still. Lundin flexed the fingers on his still-hurting hand and watched her back, unsure what to say.

Finally, she raised a fist to the height of her shoulder, and extended her index finger. "First, a wizard speaks a rote Invocation," she said, in a tone that was half statement and half question. She extended another finger. "Then she talks through an Illustration, which is just a long, spooky program that makes people's hair fall out." Her thumb joined the other two. "Finally, she speaks the name of her target until the spell works, and they call it an Enunciation. It helps if there are leeches involved.

"You're telling me that that's magic?"

"That's my theory." Lundin nodded.

She let that hang for a moment. "What's your proof?"

"Well, nothing yet. I'll probably, uh, keep reading. Interview wizards. Observe them in action, see if it holds up."

"Awfully soft, junior tech," Samanthi murmured, her eyes narrowing. She got the predatory look she developed any time she was facing an especially intricate problem. "That's a recipe for squishy data. You'll get a lot of confounding variables if you jump right into the real world with real wizards."

"Sure, but it's not like I can do magic in the lab."

Samanthi nodded. Suddenly, she was on the move. "Walk with me," she called out, without looking backwards. Lundin trotted after her, startled. She was already answering his question before he could get his mouth open. "We're going to see Dame Miri and those other showboating lightweights in the Parade squad, and we're going to ransack their equipment."

"What? Why?" Lundin frowned, trying to keep up. "I'm not ransacking anybody without a good reason," he said.

"*Ulraexi Pillok Mentatum Est*, Horace. The Mind is the Key to All Things; but the right tool for the job helps too. And your job," she said, stopping sharply and turning to him, her eyes flashing with that predatory zeal, "you strange, bumbling, brilliant savant of a man—"

Samanthi slapped him in the chest with a resounding thump, and grinned broadly. "Your job is to build me a wizard."

"Ow," Lundin said.

Chapter Five

The Squawk Box

“Don’t you two have a job to do?”

Sir Mathias leaned forward, both palms on the surface of the workbench, his brawny arms in evidence through the light fabric of his shirt. Dame Miri Draker leaned forward as well, resting one hand elegantly on the table and tilting her head just so to make her blue-black locks of hair frame her face in the most striking way possible. The Parade squad was always composed of young, brilliant, ogle-worthy recruits who were the appropriate mix of showman and scholar. Every feastday or ceremonial event, they would be front and center with tricks and stunts, representing the promise of Petronaut technology to the masses. This made their ‘nauts de facto ambassadors for the entire community, and meant that their technicians were constantly called upon to make devices for ever-grander spectacle. Consequently, members of the Parade squad were as hardened as battlefield ‘nauts, and their technicians even more prolific and risk-taking inventors. Dame Miri was just about to finish her three-year stint as the squad’s senior ‘naut, and was looking forward to retiring into the Shock Troops.

“When you said you wanted to borrow a squawk box,” she said, piggybacking off of Sir Mathias, “I thought you said you were going to treat it gently.”

Lundin frowned. “I hope we didn’t say ‘gently,’” he said, tapping Samantha on the shoulder with his index finger.

“I didn’t say ‘gently,’” she said, inspecting the teeth of a gear with a gloved finger.

“If we said ‘gently,’ then that was an error and I take full responsibility.”

“Horace! Pliers!”

The two ‘nauts looked at each other as Lundin, after giving them a ‘wait here’ gesture, turned back to Samantha and the boxy, skeletal mess of a machine they had created. “Whatever they’re doing, they’re certainly excited by it,” Dame Miri said.

“My father always said that the more excited his technicians got in the workshop, the farther away he’d stand,” Sir Mathias told her under his breath.

“So, again, what are you doing with my equipment?” Dame Miri called out, her trained voice projecting effortlessly across the three meters she and Mathias had just put between themselves and the hard-working pair.

“Your *spare* equipment,” Lundin corrected, hesitantly. “You did say this squawk box was defunct, didn’t you, Dame Miri?”

“Pretty much. It didn’t need anything too complicated, but they’re so little in demand we never made the time to do it.”

“Well, we fixed it!” Samantha said, brushing her hair out of her face and flashing a grin across the room. She gestured proudly to the deconstructed cylinder next to her, its gears open to the air and a pile of pins and belts heaped around its base. “You’re welcome,” she said.

“Am I?” Miri said, watching the tech’s face and hands disappear back inside the cupboard-sized contraption.

“It’ll make music again, as per its original function,” Lundin clarified. “But, uh. We’re also in the progress of adapting it for, as I believe we explained earlier, arcane research.”

Sir Mathias wrinkled his nose. “You can’t be serious about making that into a wizard.”

“It doesn’t smell nearly bad enough,” Dame Miri said.

“We’ll add some dirt and sweat in the next upgrade,” Lundin said with a tentative grin. “As far as I can tell, verbal commands are the primary mode of delivery for magic. Spells are spoken in the arcane language Mabinanto, which is like Old Harutian; which is one of the many languages the squawk box can sing in.”

Dame Miri frowned. The Melodimax, or squawk box, was an ingenious upgrade to the music boxes inventors had perfected decades earlier. The squawk box began with great discs of perforated metal, whose downward-pointing pins would pluck against the tuned teeth of a metal comb as they rotated by. The sound would travel through an intricate network of resonators to an articulated mouthpiece, complete with wooden teeth, a pliable leather tongue, and mobile ‘lips’ made of sea sponge. The entire mouth apparatus was fiendish to look at, and was consequently kept hidden within a wide, ornate funnel on top of the machine, like the bell of a trumpet. A second metal disc, spinning at the same rate as the first, would translate its perforated code into minute adjustments to the configuration of the mouth, shaping the aperture as pitched sound passed through. The second disc also actuated a miniature bellows deep in the box, which would send rhythmic pneumatic bursts to the mouth to create sibilant sounds. The Melodimax was the first mechanical singer, capable of singing intelligible songs in any language a designer cared to code into its metal disks.

However, singing intelligibly is not the same as singing well, and the nickname ‘squawk box’ quickly caught on, for reasons anyone who had heard the Melodimax perform would readily understand. The exhausted Petronauts responsible for the invention found that once the novelty of the device had worn off, nobles and commoners alike would never choose to hear it sing over a regular songsmith, a griot, or an entertaining drunk. So back the machine had gone into the Parade squad’s storeroom at the warehouse; a specimen of stunning mechanical ingenuity designed to serve a need that didn’t exist.

“Have you ever heard one of these things sing?” Sir Mathias said. “I’ve heard dogs that sound better. Why don’t you have a dog try to speak your magic?”

“For starters, I’m more of a ‘bird’ person,” Lundin began.

“A squawk box would speak a spell the same way every time,” Dame Miri said, stepping closer to the technicians, her curiosity getting the best of her. “You’d need that consistency between trials to know if you were making any progress.”

“Exactly. Exactly! If we worked with human wizards right off the bat, like Samanthi said, we’d never have a prayer of isolating any variables.”

“That’s why I’m a senior tech,” Samanthi called out from inside the Melodimax.

“But what makes you think a machine making some sounds will turn into magic?” Dame Miri asked, her pale face thoughtful. “It doesn’t really speak. It doesn’t understand anything it sings. Even assuming that you punch in the right words for it to say, isn’t there more to magic than that?”

“Maybe,” Lundin admitted. “But if there isn’t, wouldn’t that be nice to know?”

Miri looked at him for a moment, then broke into a brilliant, wicked smile. “You might want to stand back, Sir Mathias,” she said over her shoulder to the wavy-haired giant across the room. “I think your technicians just got me excited too. Ms. Elena!” She swept past Lundin to crouch next to the visible portion of Samanthi’s body. “Do you know how to work the plate press for a squawk box?”

“No, Dame Miri,” Samanthi said, emerging with beads of sweat on her tanned forehead. “One of your techs—the tall one?—told me it just was a noisier version of the fibercard presses we use, but I think she was humoring me.”

“She was. Let me show you how it’s done.”

Lundin felt a hand on his shoulder and nearly jumped out of his boots. He turned to look up into Sir Mathias’ face, the big man’s features lined with concern. “When did you get over here?” Lundin asked.

“I’m fast,” Sir Mathias said simply. “Here’s the thing, Horace. You two have an interesting theory here, but there’s a feastday in two weeks and we have more than enough Recon squad work to do between now and then.”

“Samanthi and I are up-to-schedule on our preparations for the feastday, Sir Mathias,” Lundin said. He’d already prepared what to say for this part. “Any hours we put in on the mechanized wizardry project are on our own time.”

“You mean, like quarter to eleven on a night like this, when normal men and women are already three drinks deep.”

“After we finish this project, Sir Mathias, I promise we’ll have more than three drinks.”

Mathias grinned, despite himself. "I'm just saying, you two already had a bad workload before you decided to learn how to tame the raw energy of chaos in your spare time. So if I hear a single syllable of complaint about how busy you are, I'll fill your throat with foam from the fire douser. That is, if you've fixed it yet."

"The repair's ready for testing," Lundin said in a very small voice, nodding.

"Two more points," he said calmly, with one hand on the technician's shoulder and a thick finger in his face. "Promise me you'll sleep between now and the feastday."

"Yes, Sir Mathias."

"Two." Here, the big man's voice went low and grave. "Tell Sir Kelley what you're doing."

Lundin swallowed. Kelley had been extremely displeased with how their visit to Tymon and Archimedia had turned out. He'd wanted to see Lundin discouraged and humiliated, and instead the technician had come away with stacks of books and scrolls on loan from Archimedia, and a head full of exciting new theories on the nature of magic. Since then, the squad leader had been throwing himself into coordination efforts with the Palace Guard, and had been nowhere in sight at the warehouse or anywhere in Workshop Row. *Thank the Spheres for small favors.*

"He's the squad leader. What you two do in this workshop is his business—regardless of whether or not it's in your spare time. And if you don't tell him, someone else will."

Lundin nodded, crestfallen. Somehow, he'd hoped that Sir Mathias would help keep the secret; but, of course, the junior Petronaut's duty to his squad leader came first. "Understood, Sir Mathias," he said quietly.

Mathias blinked. "Wait... you don't think I'll tell him, do you? No! I was talking about some blabbermouth in the Parade squad leaking the news. Spheres! He'd flay me alive if he thought I knew anything about this and didn't put a stop to it immediately. No, Mr. Lundin; deniability is my only way out of this brewing fiasco. And to that end," he said, clapping the shoulder of a very perplexed Horace Lundin, "I'm off to have three drinks. Dame Miri!"

"Sir Mathias?"

"Will you accompany me to the pub like a civilized creature, or have you caught the work madness too?"

"Nothing about you at a pub is civilized," she said. "I'm just going to stay until we get the first disk punched."

"Well, since I won't see you before then, happy feastday. None of you saw me here." Sir Mathias nodded to each of them and was gone, stooping his head to fit through the door into the starlit night.

"Come on, techs," Dame Miri told them gleefully, pulling up her sleeves. "There's work to be done."

Chapter Six

A Journey Of Ten Thousand Paces

Ruched red drapery flowed across the ceiling in Princess Naomi's chamber, the billowy fabric gathered up every two meters only to spill downwards again in a series of elegant waves. The room felt lower than it was, as a result, and adult visitors found their heads naturally inclining downwards once they stepped inside. It was as if they were bowing to the child princess before they even saw her; a shamelessly premeditated trick of interior design Lady Ceres Mitrono and the other Regents had approved when setting up the heir's apartments after Queen Tess' passing. Also, the gilded furniture, in dark wood and velvet cushions, had been made child-sized to let Naomi receive supplicants in comfort. *Let the visitors adjust themselves to her. The poor girl needs every advantage she can get*, Lady Ceres thought, watching her young charge from the doorway.

The furniture was gone now, except for a single, severe black cabinet. Gone were the tapestries, the music boxes, the sumptuous chaise, and the soft, sculpted animals the princess had loved as a girl. Everything decorative, comforting, and familiar had been removed from Princess Naomi's chambers when the First Ordeals began. Had it been only six days? Ceres shook her head slowly. It seemed like it had been years since the ceremonial shears had removed Naomi's long braid, not quite blond and not quite brown; "Like a fine stein of lager," Mortimer had described it with irreverent bombast, she remembered with a smile. Now the beautiful hair was gone, safely installed in the Haberstorm family vault, and the spiky-headed youth sitting on the floor in silent isolation was no longer the girl she had been. Whether she would emerge from the Ordeals as a successful midling, that sober stage between girl and woman, remained to be seen. And whether she would navigate the Second Ordeals, six years later, to become an adult and claim the crown was so far on the horizon as to be beyond consideration. *Not worth worrying about*, Ceres thought, her square face creased with anxiety. *Not when there's so much in the here-and-now to fret over.*

"Her color seems good," Ouste said at her shoulder, with an air of accentuating the positive.

Lady Ceres looked down at the court sorcerer, her sturdy arms crossed over her chest. Ouste was older than she by a few years, a woman of willowy build—though, in Ceres's experience, a heavyset wizard was as rare as a two-headed goat—whose silver robe clung tightly to her body. Ouste's head was shaved to the skin, and her ears were bejeweled from lobe to auricle with an array of glimmering stones, some black, some clear and prismatic. She looked up at the regent with pale blue eyes.

Ceres exhaled through her teeth. "Her current pallor becomes her, I suppose. Whether I would call that good is another matter," she said, gazing again at the Princess across the room.

"She bears the fast well, for a child of her constitution," Ouste revised her comment evenly.

"Eight more days." The regent tapped one finger against her arm, keeping her face calm.

The two women watched the heir in silence for a moment. A servant's footsteps on a lower floor echoed faintly in the air. Finally, Ouste said in a quiet voice, "I would not wish it on my child."

"Yes, well," Lady Ceres said, clearing her throat, "what we wish and what we must do are distant cousins, at best."

"We're only enforcing a tradition from a darker time. It is Naomi who bears the cost."

"As I am perfectly aware," Lady Ceres said, her temper mounting. "Generations of Haberstorm children have undergone the Ordeals. An heir cannot ascend to the Throne without enduring them."

"Does Naomi want to ascend to the Throne?" Ouste's voice was flat, her blue eyes fixed on the girl.

Ceres shifted her weight, her trouser legs rustling against each other loudly in the still chamber. "Princess Naomi is the heir. She will be Delia's queen."

“If she succeeds.” The sorcerer turned to face Ceres, folding her hands together. “If she survives,” Ouste whispered.

“Bite your tongue, wizard.” Lady Ceres would not look at the other woman, her throat growing suddenly tight.

“Lord Torvald nearly died.”

Ceres frowned, thinking back on the golden-haired youth. “Lord Torvald underwent the Second Ordeals and was found lacking. Custom dictated he be removed from the succession and banished, along with his shame. Her brother’s failure is immaterial to Naomi’s journey.”

“A strong, hardy boy like him, with every virtue a king might crave: banished.”

“A necessary action.”

“Necessary.” The wizard tasted the word dubiously, like a bad piece of meat. “So Delia may be the center of technology, the center of progress, the center of experimentation and advancement. But when it comes to our monarchy, all that matters is tradition, no matter how barbaric. Maybe the peasants would not be testing their might in rebellion if they knew their government was willing to change with the times.”

Lady Ceres stomped forward, not trusting herself to respond. Ouste’s thin hand on her arm stopped her, and she whirled around. “Tell me, Lady Ceres,” Ouste said, with new urgency, “that you truly think this child—*this child*—can endure where her brother could not.”

The weary lines deepened on the regent’s face as she gently pulled her arm away. “She has no choice,” Ceres said.

Ouste watched as the towering woman made her way across the bare room, approaching the Princess with surprisingly delicate steps. Naomi looked up at Lady Ceres from the floor, her thin legs curled over each other in a meditative pose. *Thirteen years old*, Ceres thought sadly, bowing as the too-pale face turned up to her. Ceres raised her hands. “Step by step, a journey of ten thousand paces,” she said, her voice catching on the ceremonial language. Her fingers fluttered along with her words. “A waypost in a barren field; the earth cracks for want of rain.”

Princess Naomi’s brown eyes fell, and her head drooped. Her golden hair stuck up in jagged peaks where the shears had hacked their way through. Lady Ceres, despite herself, shot a quick glance back to the court wizard. Ouste stood with her arms crossed over her silver robes, her pale eyes revealing nothing.

Naomi’s hands began to move in her lap, almost imperceptibly. Ceres squinted to make out the words as the girl made the signs of her reply, fingers flicking in the only language she would ever speak. <<*As does the cracking earth, so let me thirst,*>> Princess Naomi gave the traditional response in hand language, not looking up at her regent.

Ceres set her jaw. She walked to the tall black cabinet and slid open a drawer half-a-dozen centimeters across. She removed a black leather pouch and slid the drawer closed. Lady Ceres turned back to the Princess before her quick mind could estimate just how many drawers were remaining in the Cabinet of Ordeals.

Naomi’s head was still hanging against her chest. Ceres pulled the drawstring on the pouch and, gingerly, with gloved fingers, removed a translucent circular disk bigger than a two-sestari coin. Reflected sunlight against the red ceiling cast a troubling, bloody shadow on the disk of salt. There were four others like it in the pouch.

“Your Royal Highness,” Ceres said, getting the heir’s attention as gently as she could. “Are you ready?”

After a painful pause, Princess Naomi looked up at the regent. She nodded, once, and opened her mouth.

“Everyone has a moment,” Lundin elaborated, tightening the knot, “when—I suppose—a switch gets thrown, and suddenly you’re *on*. And whatever your function is, you start doing it; you start blasting forward, full speed ahead. You’re like a machine, finally put to work. And you just do the task you’re made for. You don’t know how it’s going to turn out, but you trust that whoever put you together knew what they were doing, and that they made you good enough to do what you have to do.

“It makes you wonder what you were doing with yourself beforehand, though. What is a machine doing before it’s turned on? Nothing—well, except gathering mold and falling apart. So if a person—hypothetically—can look back at his life and see the moment where he switched on, does that mean his previous thirty-one years were spent amassing a world-class mold collection? That everything up to this new point was a total waste?”

“But you wouldn’t say a *machine* was wasteful, or aimless, or lazy, just because it was turned off. After all, it wasn’t the machine’s idea to be switched off in the first place. Machines love to work; that’s what they’re for. So this hypothetical person can’t be blamed either for having been ‘off’ for a few decades, while he waited for the powers-that-be to flick a switch.

“Or maybe he *can* be blamed, because he’s not a machine. He’s a man; a mediocre man. He came to academy late, floated through the middle of his class, watched opportunities pass by in front of his nose because raising a hand to grab them felt like too much work. Maybe the powers-that-be didn’t switch him on because he was finally ready; maybe they turned him on because they were sick of waiting for him to flick his own switch. So to speak,” Lundin revised hastily, coughing.

“But does it even matter exactly why it’s happened? Why worry about the past, when there’s so much in the here-and-now to focus on? All our Mister Hypothetical knows is that being switched on makes him feel good.”

The tarnished copper cone on top of the Melodimax gaped blankly at Lundin. He looked down at it from his perch on the stool, suddenly feeling the silence of the otherwise empty workshop. “And a little chatty,” he said, scratching the stubble on his chin.

He hopped down from the stool, looking up at his handiwork. Archimedia had invited him back to the Harborfront hut yesterday to discuss his progress and give him some new resources, including a rough fabric sleeve with a pair of *ojing* inside. The technician had immediately recognized the pale circular disks he’d last seen hanging in LaMontina’s unhappy tent, eleven days ago. They weren’t bone-white now, but a neutral tan, like kid leather. “The *ojing* respond to magical change,” Archimedia explained. “The spells you weave in their presence will color them white. Magic from external sources, whether drifting by in passing or there to compete with your spell, will appear as patches of black.”

“How do they work?” Lundin asked, inspecting the *ojing* with what he hoped was the proper reverence.

She actually patted him on the knee. “You are very enthusiastic, and thoroughly incapable of understanding the answer. Right now, that is,” she added, softening the blow.

“What are they made of, at least?”

“Something precious.” Archimedia lifted the other *ojing* up, showing him its surface. It was smooth, but not featureless; gentle whorls and lines crisscrossed its face. “If you insist on studying them further, first draw your attention to the patterns created during a spell. What appears pure white is in fact alive with motion.”

The two *ojing* that Lundin had hung from the low rafters in the workshop were not alive with motion now; their leathery surfaces were static in the absence of magic. *But when the magic happens...* Lundin turned to the Melodimax, with its scuffed wooden case and its side panel swung wide open to the air. *If the magic happens*, he thought more soberly.

With Dame Miri’s help, and Archimedia’s notes, he and Samanthi had adapted the squawk box’s mouthpiece to speak Mabinanto instead of Old Harutian. At least, so they thought, none of them having a damn idea what they were really playing with. Lundin was seized with a pang of anxiety as he looked at the stacks of perforated metal disks they’d run through the presses over hours and hours of painstaking labor. Would any of it work? When the disks were inserted into the squawk box, they’d speak some words, all right—theoretically, the entire *pingdu calabra* was ready to test. They’d even completed about

two-thirds of the Illustration for a spell of friendship; one of the simplest, least invasive spells he'd found in searching Archimedia's journals. It might take four or five more hours to lay out and press the remaining disks they thought they needed, and that was if no major errors happened. And then they would test the spell on one of Dame Miri's dogs, an old, blind, neutered curmudgeon named Cort. The dog was not long for this world, and after a good deal of deliberation she'd agreed to volunteer him for the enterprise. The dog was sour-tempered, and hated new faces. If he showed any signs of a sunnier disposition after the spell, there would be beer and Kessian bubbly all around (surreptitiously, where Sir Kelley wouldn't be able to find it.)

That was the plan; a small chance of modest success, and a thousand and one ways to go completely bust. They didn't even know if the squawk box worked yet, or if it really could speak Mabinanto. Archimedia was dubious, to say the least, that a mechanical being could ever channel magical energy, or that the verbal component of a spell would suffice to create an arcane result. The whole notion of mechanizing this process hinged on Lundin's premise that the contortionist showmanship magicians practiced was extraneous to the business of magic. But maybe magic was, by nature, a chaotic, full-body, spur-of-the-moment process utterly dependent on inscrutable spirits. Maybe a hundred generations of magic-using humans the world over were right, and Horace Lundin was completely wrong.

His eyes were stinging, and he felt lightheaded from lack of sleep. He looked around the empty workshop, dark except for his one gaslight. Lundin tapped a finger against the half-dozen cold metal disks that made up the *pingdu calabra*. "I need to know, I need to know," he muttered.

Samanthi had finally gone home to get some sleep about two hours ago. (Lundin had slept for about ninety minutes in the morning, before stumbling from his apartment in the Toss down to the warehouse to deal with gear for the feastday.) Before leaving, she'd specifically given him her blessing to try the *pingdu calabra* without her presence. Rather, she'd told him, "A program never works the first try. If you can't wait until morning to get started poring over six square meters of metal to figure out which little perforations need re-punching, you're a bigger masochist than I took you for."

"I guess I am, Sam," Lundin said aloud as he took the first pair of disks in hand. He crouched down by the open Melodimax and gingerly dropped the pitch disk onto its needle, balanced over the long comb that would pluck the perforations and produce sound. Below the pitch apparatus was the second drum which controlled articulation, the movements of the mouthpiece, and the timing of the bellows to modify the pitches into speech. Lundin set the companion articulation disk on its needle, and used a stick, held to notches on the edge of each disk, to line up the two up at their appropriate starting points. With a degree of trepidation, Lundin swung the side panel of the Melodimax closed. It latched with a click, hiding the intricate gearwork and painstakingly pressed magical disks from view. The squawk box didn't look like much from the outside; just a bulky red-brown cabinet with a wide, weathered trumpet emerging from its top like a piece of unfortunate sculpture.

There was a single, yellowing switch on the near corner of the box. Horace Lundin held his breath and flicked the switch.

"*Pingdu h'leth dagriss ith m'navei*," a voice blared out, far louder than he'd expected. Lundin recoiled and caught himself against a table, his heart pounding. He listened, fascinated, as the voice continued at an even pace over the audible whir of the squawk box's generator and the muffled click-clacking of the wooden teeth hidden within the trumpet. The squawk box was either a very high tenor or a middle-of-the-road alto, with a clipped, percussive quality. Phrases of what may have been flawless Mabinanto filled the room in a high drone, punctuated by higher pitches and unexpected drops. Lundin leaned back against the table, catching his breath and staring at the motionless, unhurried machine.

"Well then," he said, uncertainly, as the words kept spilling out.

By Dame Miri's reckoning, each of the pairs of Mabinanto disks would take about five minutes for the squawk box to recite at a normal human pace. So Lundin would need to swap out these disks for the second part of the *pingdu calabra* in just a few minutes—and would have to do it quickly, or risk letting the magical energy invoked by the first part of the spell dissipate from an overly long gap in speech. Or would he? Archimedia said that sometimes wizards would meditate or dance in silence for long portions of a casting, if that was what the spirits called for. So maybe going too quickly would ruin the spell. But

if there was a middle ground between too fast and too slow, how was he possibly supposed to know what it was? Thirty seconds? Forty-five minutes? *How do wizards have any idea how to do this?* he thought, fingers resting nervously on the next disk.

“—horask h’ins sh’mai destaravi calabra ith gorunda—”

Maybe wizards start gesticulating just to have something to do while they say the words, Lundin thought. He found his canteen and took a long swig of water, swishing the liquid back and forth in his mouth. The Melodimax kept intoning away, the rise and fall of its words becoming increasingly hypnotic. Lundin tried to stay focused, but between the relentless pace of the speech, the language barrier, and his sleep deprivation, it was almost impossible to stay attentive to the individual words. *Wait,* he thought suddenly, *even if I wasn’t falling asleep standing up, how am I going to know if this works or not? There’s no way for the squawk box to print an error report. If it hitches up, we won’t have the foggiest idea why or where.* Lundin cursed under his breath, rubbing his eyes. He was getting ahead of himself. There was no point in running the disks if they hadn’t figured out how to measure the results yet. He should follow Samantha’s example and go get some sleep. He set down his canteen and shambled over to the squawk box, a flicker of motion up in the rafters briefly catching his attention—

Lundin stopped dead in his tracks. The *ojing* were turning white.

But not just pure white. He dragged a stool noisily over across the floor and leapt up on it quick as a monkey to get a look at the leathery circles. Each *ojing* was still about three-quarters tan, the neutral color they’d been when he hung them. But playing across the center of each circle was a blot of white, like a splash of spilled paint, identical on each face of the disk. And the blots were shifting before his eyes, like the amorphous creatures a naturalist might find in pond water with her microscope. Now a tendril would reach out this way; now a curve would contract on that side; now the odd shape would lurch a centimeter towards the ceiling or floor. The white patches were forever in motion, and even the area covered by white was not static but rippling, like the surface of a saucer of milk bumped by a clumsy foot. Even more exciting, Lundin was certain that the area covered by white on each *ojing* had grown in the brief moment he’d spent watching.

“—liki a’tiel havir im shorea pinth—”

Lundin looked down at the squawk box, blandly reciting the words of arcane creation. “You’re magic,” he whispered. There were tears in his exhausted eyes. “We made you do magic.”

“Mister Lundin.”

Lundin looked to the doorway, where Sir Kelley stood with his arms across his chest. Nearly midnight, and Kelley still looked as crisp and precise as he did at midday, with his jacket pressed and his boots blacked to an onyx shine. Lundin scrambled off the stool with a hasty bow to the squad leader. “Sir Kelley; glad to see you. Can’t believe you’re up so late! You’ve got to see this—”

Kelley cupped a hand around his ear. “What? I can’t hear you, Mister Lundin,” he said, theatrically.

“Sir, please come see! It’s the *ojing*, the, uh. They’re turning white!”

“—arvoreala ith pingada em sh’mai tronn doptari—”

The Petronaut shook his head and shrugged his shoulders, though his pockmarked face was tight with anger. “You’d better turn it off!” he shouted, pointing at the Melodimax.

Lundin hesitated, looking up at the *ojing*. “Sir Kelley—”

“Turn it off, Mister Lundin,” he said, dropping the sarcasm.

The single gaslight over Lundin’s station cast long shadows on the walls of the workshop. The silhouette cast by the trumpet of the squawk box seemed to reach out forever, touching the shutters to the outside world. Swallowing hard, Lundin flipped the single off-white switch. The androgynous voice abruptly stopped, though the thrum of the generator took several seconds to wind down into silence.

He looked up at the *ojing*. There were still patches of white on each disk; the magic hadn’t faded away instantly. “Sir Kelley, look, look up here,” Lundin said, with hands outstretched, as the Petronaut strode across the workshop towards him. “Now, it’s not necessarily conclusive, but those white patterns suggest that a mechanized Invocation seems to gather magical energy just as a—”

“You’re fired,” Kelley said flatly.

Lundin looked back at his superior, slowly lowering his arms. The senior 'naut stared right back. "Sir Kelley," he began softly, "I know I've been—"

"Insubordinate. Deceitful. Obsessive. Irrational. Negligent. Seditious. Self-serving. The list goes on, Mister Lundin, but the primary thing you've been, since this magical mania first blew up your skirt in LaMontina's tent, is *wrong*."

"It's okay to be wrong, Mister Lundin. Not recommended, but unavoidable from time to time. But to be undeniably, jaw-droppingly, humiliatingly wrong; and *then* to shirk your duties and badger your fellow Petronauts into shirking their duties too, wasting valuable equipment and manpower in comprehensive exploration of your wrong-headed wrongness, during a feastday season where the failure of one individual in the Petronaut community would reflect that failure on all of us in a very public way? That, *Horace*, is a new species of bad behavior."

"I've kept up with all my tasks," Lundin said, his voice thick in his mouth.

"Save it. I'm not about to praise you for doing a sloppy job on the bare minimum. Especially when you've still got six sleep-starved days before the feastday, which is ample time for someone like you to make an error that puts lives in jeopardy." Kelley's voice was light, like a green birch switch whipping against a child's bare back. "Did I give you permission for this project of yours?"

"No, Sir Kelley."

"Did I authorize the requisitioning of a squawk box?"

"No, Sir Kelley."

"Did you think you could hide this project from me? Do you think I was pleased to find out about this project from a passing flunky in the Parade squad?"

"No, Sir Kelley."

"Did I not tell you specifically, after our visit to my family homestead—an act of kindness I regret extending to you more and more with each passing day—that you were not to waste any more time fiddling with magic while you were in my service?"

"You said 'while I was on duty,' Sir Kelley," Lundin corrected, eyes downcast.

Kelley's black-gloved hand flashed up, and he slapped the technician across the mouth. Lundin staggered, cradling his jaw with both hands.

"I will escort you back to your filthy home, Mister Lundin," the Petronaut murmured after a long moment, "where you will sleep for six hours. You will report directly to the warehouse at seven. You will spend the entire day preparing our equipment for inspection and installation in the Palace. If you find yourself with extra time, you will work harder on your assigned checklist or ask the senior technician for assignment. At ten o'clock at night, you will return to your pigpen, where you will eat a nourishing meal and fall asleep. You will report directly to the warehouse at seven the following morning. Is this pattern relatively clear to you?"

"This pattern will continue until the feastday is behind us, at which point I will bring you before the Board of Governors to ask for your expulsion from the community of Petronauts. They will say yes, and you will leave. Then, and only then, will you have leave to give this idiotic pipe dream of clockwork sorcerers another solitary burning thought."

Lundin straightened up, rubbing his mouth. Kelley's green eyes were pitiless, radiating an unspoken "*do I make myself clear?*" "Sir," Lundin said quietly, with a single nod.

Sir Kelley looked over Lundin's shoulder at the Melodimax. His fists clenched at his side, and for a moment Lundin was certain the senior 'naut was going to take an axe to the machine. "Parade squad will reclaim their gear first thing in the morning," Kelley said instead, controlling himself with obvious disappointment. He looked up into the rafters. "Take those things down and follow me."

Lundin looked up at the *ojing* as Kelley indicated them. They were a neutral, unblemished tan from one edge to the other. He clambered onto the stool, unsteadily, and stretched to his full height to undo the knots he had just tied a few minutes earlier. The surfaces of the *ojing* were smooth to the touch as he brought them down and carefully bound them up in the fabric sleeve Archimedes had given him.

Kelley was waiting by the door, arms akimbo. "Ready to go, Mister Lundin?"

He gave the squawk box one final look as he loaded up his satchel. The stillness of the mechanical cabinet gave it an odd sense of potential energy, as if a torrent of words and sound could come pouring out of the fluted trumpet at any moment. And all it needed was somebody to switch it on.

Lundin turned to the Petronaut, his eyes bleary and his jaw hurting. "Ready," he said.

Chapter Seven

The Smiling ‘Naut

Samanthi crept up the staircase cautiously, her satchel held by its straps in one hand and her awl in the other. It was the closest thing she had to a weapon, and even though it was better at etching planks of wood than slaying ne’er-do-wells, hopefully the intruder would run away as soon as he saw that Samanthi was brandishing something. If that didn’t work, she would poke the intruder in the eye with it and brain him with the satchel full of books. If that didn’t work, this was likely to be a rough morning.

But somehow, as she reached the landing to the second floor, she couldn’t bring herself to be afraid of the miscreant who had broken into the Recon workshop. She was just plain mad. *Not enough time in the day as it is, with the feastday work and the damn squawk box to tend to after hours. And now some idiot squatter has broken a window and climbed into the shop, probably relieving himself all over everything as he decides which bolts and gears to steal.* She tightened her grip on the awl. *I hope he doesn’t run,* she thought, clenching her teeth. Draping the satchel over her wrist, she put her key in the doorknob, raised the awl high, and took a breath.

The sound of a heavy snore carried through the door.

Samanthi Elena swung the door open and swept through, makeshift weapons at the ready. “All right then, sleepybones,” she shouted, twirling her satchel in an intimidating manner. “On your feet, and let’s see you cough up the coin to fix that window. Get up! Show yourself!”

Early morning sunlight was streaming through the far rear window, glinting along the jagged edges of the broken panes of glass. The hefty rock used to break the window had landed on her work table, of course, scuffing the surface badly. There was the squawk box by the other table, flanked by tall stacks of those damnably tedious metal disks. The Melodimax was closed; and those stacks of disks were awfully high; and the disk presses were there on the shelf like they’d been recently used; and what were those little things hanging from the rafters?

“Morning,” Lundin said, standing up and scratching his chest.

“Sweet spheres, you’ve lost your mind,” Samanthi said, looking at the junior technician in bewilderment. His face was a mass of black stubble from his sideburns down to his adam’s apple, and his hair was folded crazily from sleeping with his head against a hard surface. His clothes were a mess. His eyes were still half-closed with obvious exhaustion. He had a bruise on one cheek, barely visible below the unfortunate proto-beard. And yet, somehow, he was smiling.

“Were you here all night, Lundin?” She put down the awl and satchel with some reluctance.

He yawned, shaking his head. “No—Sir Kelley took me home a little after midnight. Then—”

“Kelley took you home? You mean you told him about the project?”

“No, he found out. I’m fired, after the feastday. It’s been a pleasure working with you. Is it seven yet?”

“A few minutes after. What did you say, before ‘feastday?’”

“I’m fired. Well, probably. He took my workshop keys, so I had to break back in. Not an easy climb. Seven o’clock already! That means that, very soon, something will happen!”

Samanthi blinked. “You’d better lay this out for me a little more linearly, junior tech, or I’m gonna start thinking you drank your breakfast this morning.”

Lundin sat down on a stool and exhaled sharply, putting his hands on his knees. He opened his eyes as wide as he could and took a long moment to compose himself. “Senior tech,” he said finally, looking across the room at her, “I have some incredibly exciting news, and some arguably mutinous news. Which would you like to hear first?”

“Spheres help me, it’s too early for this,” Samanthi grumbled.

“Do you remember these?” he said, pointing upwards. Samantha took a closer look at the circles of light leather hanging from the ceiling, dangling just above eye level.

“Wait—are those like the white circles that wizard had at LaMontina’s tent?”

“They’re called *ojing*,” Lundin said, nodding. “They turn white when there’s magic in the air. And that’s how I know that the squawk box can cast magical spells.”

Her eyes widened, and she advanced about five steps into Lundin’s area of personal space. “You’re kidding me! But they’re tan now,” she said with fierce excitement, right in his face. “How do you know the box works—unless you tried out that *pingdu calabra* last night. You tried it?”

“I tried the whole spell,” Lundin said.

Samanthi furrowed her brow. “The whole spell? You mean the whole friendship spell we were going to try on that dog? But there were hours of work left to do to get the Illustration stage in place.”

“About three hours,” Lundin leaned back on the stool, leaving only two legs on the ground.

“Lundin! You pressed all the rest of those disks last night? You probably made a damn mess of it too, trying to go that fast. Why? Why so impatient to cast a spell on some dog?”

“I didn’t cast the spell on the dog,” he said, an edge of typical Lundin nervousness creeping back into his voice. “You understand, Samanthi, right? I just couldn’t let it end like—”

“Facts, then blubbering. Who did you cast the spell on?”

“Mister Lundin!”

The technicians both turned to see Kelley framed in the doorway. His stark black-and-silver ensemble was clean and crisp, as always, and his green eyes were fixed on them with a hawk’s focus. But their jaws dropped when Sir Kelley’s mouth opened in a broad, gleaming, un-sardonic smile.

“Ms. Elena, good morning to you as well,” Kelley said, stepping towards them. “When I didn’t see you two at the warehouse I started to get worried. Mister Lundin, we did talk about a seven o’clock start time, didn’t we?”

“Yes, Sir Kelley, sorry, Sir Kelley,” Lundin mumbled, his eyes wide.

Kelley waved off the apology, his craggy face wrinkling with distaste. “Please! Please, don’t *apologize*! I was only asking because I’d forgotten. You know me; the only way I get anything done is if my fantastic team keeps me straight. Say, senior tech,” he said, approaching the squawk box with his hands clasped behind his back, “Remind me what this apparatus is, will you? I feel like I ought to know; but I just can’t remember!”

“Uh.” Samanthi looked at Lundin, who was just as wild-eyed as she was. “Well, Sir Kelley, this is the... This is the squawk box we requisitioned from Dame Miri for, uh. For that side project.”

“Aha! For the magic!” Kelley wheeled on them.

The technicians sputtered helplessly. “Yes, sir, for the magic,” Samanthi said.

Sir Kelley reached out and gave each of them a firm squeeze on the shoulder. “I need to tell you,” he said with serious eyes, “that I feel absolutely privileged to be in a squad with such visionary thinkers. And I want you to know that, even though the feastday’s coming up, since this project’s so important to you, I’m going to make the time and space in your schedules to free more hours for your research. If that means Sir Mathias and I go to the warehouse and refurbish some turbines ourselves over the next five days, then that’s what it means. Because you two are important—to me.”

The Petronaut looked at his team-mates with pride glowing out of his face. Impulsively, he bent towards Samanthi and gave her a noisy kiss on the forehead. “So, Horace,” he said, his arm still crooked companionably around Samanthi’s neck, “speaking of magic; does this thing work yet?”

Lundin turned slowly to look at the still, impassive Melodimax. He turned back to Sir Kelley and the quivering senior technician locked in his arms. “I think it does,” he said, swallowing.

“Spheres alive, it’s a breakthrough,” Kelley said, grinning broadly. “Say there, techs, if your box is in shape for a demonstration, let’s add it to the equipment we’ll bring to the palace! We’ll be set up in the Princess’s wing, interfacing directly with the Palace Guard and the court sorcerer. Our squad will never get a better chance to show Petronaut ingenuity at its finest to the powers—that-be.”

“Sir Kelley, I don’t know if that’s a good idea—” Samanthi began.

Sir Kelley held up a hand. “No, no, no; I’m sorry, Ms. Elena. I don’t like to make decisions unilaterally, but I know that the two of you are too modest and conscientious to worry about anything but working. You’ll never put yourself forward to ask for a little acclaim, a little recognition. Well, not this time. You’ve made something wonderful happen, and doggone it, I won’t rest until Princess Naomi herself puts medals around your necks. We’re bringing your wizard box to the palace, and that’s final.”

Lundin had to sit down. “I don’t know what to say, Sir Kelley.”

“Well, first off, you can cut it out with all that ‘Sir Kelley’ stuff. Doesn’t anyone call me Tymon anymore?”

Their jaws dropped. “Tymon?” Lundin asked.

Kelley nodded slowly, like confirming something to a pair of kids. “Tymon Kelley Malcolm, Esquire. Named for my grandfather. Speaking of which,” he said, frowning, “I haven’t paid him a visit in more than a week. Shameful, when he lives so close by!

“See you at the warehouse, techs! I’ll get started; come by when you’re at a stopping point with the old side project.” Kelley flashed them a final bright smile, tapped his hand twice on the doorframe, and was gone.

A sparrow flew into the room through the broken window and landed on the rock on the table. He cocked its head at the two humans in the workshop, who were being unusually quiet for the big, bumbling behemoths they were. *Well, if they want to just stand there staring at an open door*, the sparrow thought philosophically, *who am I to judge?* He flew into the rafters and ate a spider.

Samanthi and Lundin finally overcame their paralysis and looked at each other. “I actually guessed that part about ‘T’ standing for ‘Tymon,’” Lundin said in a sudden burst of words. “That’s what I had the squawk box repeat over and over again for the Enunciation—Tymon Kelley Malcolm. I think that’s probably why it worked so well.”

“In your head, this counts as something ‘working well,’” Samanthi said, staring at him.

“I don’t see what else it would count as.”

“You ensorcelled our squad leader to avoid getting fired.”

“In my defense, I was extremely tired.”

Samanthi punched him in the chest as hard as she could and he tumbled backwards off the stool. “Sometimes having a junior tech is way more trouble than it’s worth,” she said, pressing her fingers against her temples.

Chapter Eight

Feastday Eve

“Master Volman?”

Davic Volman, royal steward to the Haberstorms and the Delian crown, pursed his lips in annoyance. The gaunt man had been overseeing preparations for feastdays since the early years of Queen Tess and King Randolph, decades before Princess Naomi was ever conceived. The household typically ran like Petronaut clockwork thanks to his logistical expertise. But for all that, the chaos surrounding this feastday was unparalleled. For whatever reason, Princess Naomi’s emergence from the First Ordeals was like no other event he’d ever managed; Volman couldn’t turn around lately without some crisis leaping into his lap like a muddy dog. At least with the feastday finally coming tomorrow, life would return to the way it should be at last.

All he had to do was make it through tomorrow. He made a genuine effort to mend the frayed edges of his patience, though he was sure his face betrayed some of his irritation as he turned to face the mop-headed serving boy who came trotting up to him, flushed from running.

“Yes, Fermi? Speak quickly,” Volman said, continuing to inspect the latest bundles of greenery brought in from the gardens. The branches were ragged and irregular, less like they’d been deliberately pruned and more like a storm had blown them out of the trees. *Does anyone in this palace know how to do their jobs anymore?* he thought as he measured out a length of wire from the spool and cut it with the shears, preparing to make a sample arrangement.

Fermi brushed his sandy hair out of his eyes and gasped for air for an infuriating length of time.

“Begging your pardon, Master Volman, as I know you’re awfully busy,” he said.

“Very astute of you, Fermi,” Volman said, frowning at a leaf between his fingers.

“I’ve just been down in the vault, Master, to fetch the heraldry, the ancient heraldry.”

“I am familiar with the Haberstorm heraldry, yes, Fermi. Did you deliver the hangings to her Royal Highness’ apartments?”

“No, Master, I ran right to you when I saw it.”

“I don’t need them here in the south wing, boy! Take the hangings to the royal apartments, and quit wasting time!”

“But, Master,” Fermi cried, “when I saw it I had to come to you first. It’s her Royal Highness’ braid, Master Volman. Her hair? I think it’s gone.”

Volman’s long fingers stopped their exploration of the cut branches. He slowly removed his hands from the table and lowered them to his sides. The tall man turned to face the boy head-on, and the youngster quailed before the intensity of his gaze. “Now why would you think a thing like that, Fermi?” Volman said, very softly.

Fermi gulped, following his master’s lead and speaking in a whisper. “Well now, Master, there’s the great marble box in the vault with all those drawers? Where the keepsakes from the Ordeals past and present go; the hair, the robes, the collars—”

“Yes, Fermi, the Shrine of Ordeals. I am well aware.”

“Well, as I was fetching the heraldry from the same room in the vault, I noticed that the drawer for Princess Naomi’s things was open a crack.”

Volman shook his head. “That’s not possible. The drawer was sealed shut when the Princess’ hair was removed and placed therein two weeks ago.”

“I know, Master, I know it was you who locked her Highness’ hair up personally, turned the key yourself.” The boy leaned in closer, sharing a terrible secret. “But it was open. A little chip of stone was broke inside so the drawer couldn’t slide back on its track all the way, I saw it.”

“You opened the drawer,” Volman said, his eyes narrowing.

Fermi nodded. “Yes, Master, seeing as it was so strange it wasn’t sealed. And that’s when I saw Princess Naomi’s pretty hair was nowhere to be seen. Master Volman—I think somebody’s stolen her braid.”

Volman laid his hands on the table, shifting the great spool of black wire slightly to one side. He looked down into the branches, his eyes unfocused. Fermi looked around to make sure no one else was listening. “If you’ll hear me out, Master,” he hissed. “I think there might be wizardry afoot. You know how those traitors stole Viscount LaMontina’s blood from the leeching last month, and then the cowardly witch killed him without even looking him in the eye? What if somebody’s trying to do the same thing to the Princess? Right during the Ordeals, when her Royal Highness is already so weak! If they’ve got her hair, that means they can do horrible things to her! Doesn’t it?”

“Fermi, my boy,” the steward said at last. “Have you told anyone else what you’ve seen, or what you think?”

He shook his head, his light hair flopping from side to side like a rabbit’s ears. “No, Master. I didn’t know who else to trust but you.”

Volman’s eyes searched the table for a moment; then, with a brief inhalation, he nodded and picked up the length of wire with his dexterous fingers, once more inspecting the cut stalks with an appraising gaze. “You’re right, my boy,” he said, not looking up. “It can be hard to know whom to trust. Fermi, can you... ah...?” As he worked, Volman pointed absently to the far wall. Fermi turned to look for whatever the steward needed.

The old man whipped around and looped the coil of wire around Fermi’s soft neck, pulling backwards with all the strength in his wiry arms. The boy flailed against the wire at his throat, his fingertips coming away bloody as Volman tugged harder. The only sound was the scuffing of Fermi’s tattered boots against the stone floor as he spasmed more and more frantically for air. Volman clenched his teeth as the wire dug into his own fingers.

Moments later, court sorcerer Ouste looked up from her reading as five rapid knocks sounded against her chamber door. She gathered up her robes and opened the heavy portal. Her eyes went wide at the sight of the old steward, breathing heavily and clutching his hands. “We must speak,” Volman said, his face burning with urgency.

The door swung shut behind him.

“Step by step, a journey of ten thousand paces,” Lady Ceres said with a faint smile on her face. She held the cup to Naomi’s lips as the girl drank another swallow, taking in the day’s sweet water with obvious relish. The Princess smacked her lips noisily as Ceres drew the cup away, and the regent couldn’t repress a snort of laughter. Naomi looked up at her with mischievous eyes, wagging one of her hands back and forth in an open-palmed gesture of giggling.

Ceres brushed the silver hairs out of her eyes and made her face stern. Princess Naomi made an equally stern face, squaring her jaw and sticking out her lower lip just like the regent. Lady Ceres just sniffed, refusing to rise to the bait. “A waypost on a mountaintop; the hermit sheds no tears for the setting sun.”

<<*As does the hermit, so let me embrace the day’s passing,*>> Naomi said, her small fingers moving with smooth, clear gestures. Then she practically leapt up off the carpet and dashed to the bay window overlooking Delia and the plains beyond. She rested her hands against the windowsill and settled in to watch the orange horizon behind which the sun, nearly ninety minutes from now, would be vanishing.

Lady Ceres shook her head in amazement, watching the girl’s back. Granted, the Ordeal of the Setting Sun was bound to be preferable to the Ordeal of the Torches, or of the Razor’s Edge, each of which posed potentially lethal challenges. But it was not without its tension. A truly worthy heir, it was said, would be able to notice an uncanny green flash at the very moment of the sun’s setting. This green light was a glimpsed reflection of the celestial spheres beyond Earth’s sun, and a very auspicious sign. An heir who passed every other Ordeal brilliantly and still failed the Ordeal of the Setting Sun could never hope for greatness, or for a peaceful reign. The pressure to perform was as enormous in this task as it was in every other for the past grueling thirteen days.

But Princess Naomi seemed possessed of even more energy now, on the eve of her emergence from the Ordeals, than she did at its beginning. Ceres had watched a marvelous transformation from the day a terrified young girl’s hair was chopped off, to this moment, where a spiky-headed midling stood framed in the window, taking obvious pleasure in her duty. Let naysayers like Ouste doubt Naomi’s fortitude; let them question the validity of the Ordeals themselves. The fact was that, in this case, a Haberstorm heir had entered the process as one person, and would emerge as a different one; wiser, stronger, and more fit to rule. If Naomi was not living proof that the Ordeals still could serve their purpose, Lady Ceres thought, nothing would be.

“One more day, Princess,” Ceres whispered to herself. “One more day, and you’ll have your life returned to you at last.”

“But when?” the peasant woman whined. Her stringy hair was tied in tresses that flopped on either side of her narrow head like the drooping ears of an old hound. Jilmaq couldn’t look at her face without a tight bubble of disgust rising in the back of his throat. If it rose all the way to his mouth, he wasn’t sure if would come out as a snarl or a dry heave. Consequently, he kept his back to her and, once again, thrust a hand towards the doorway. And once again, she didn’t leave. *Spheres, but this woman is thick.*

“Look here, wizarder,” she said, insulted and terrified. “It’s two days gone since I petitioned you to help cure Our Justen’s eyes. We scrounged you that money so he might have the chance to see her Royal Highness pass them Ordeals. Well, now it’s the feastday eve, and you say you ain’t even cast your magic for him yet?”

“Leave,” Jilmaq barked.

“Ooh! The nerve of you! Takin’ money from a mother of a blind boy. You’re a common thief, you are.”

“I cannot cast a spell if the spirits are not ready.”

“And what they been doin’ two full days? Ain’t they ready now? Go on, get started!”

Jilmaq hissed over his shoulder at her, narrowing his bloodshot eyes. “Do you think you’re the only petitioner I have? I have many other, far more important spells to focus on before tending to your crippled whelp. Now *leave.*” He gave her his back again.

The woman’s jaw clenched with anger. She reached down with her weathered hands, dug up a handful of earth from his dirt floor, and threw it at the back of Jilmaq’s head. He turned at an inopportune moment, and the clod struck him mostly on the right ear. The wizard yelped, his head ringing and his ear burning as he dug a nail in to clean it out. “You’re a right fraud,” the peasant spat. “I been to two other wizards afore, and they started their spells right away. Done before sundown the first night, they were. Harder spells than this, too.”

The wizard scowled, scraping his ear clean. “As if you’d know, you ignorant—“

“You keep lazin’ about, stealin’ money from folks like me, and we’ll run you out of here, wizard. See if we don’t! You cure my son this very night or I’ll have every able-bodied soul in Drabelhelm at your doorstep, club in one hand and a rock in the other.”

She kicked the ground at him ineffectually, sending dust into the air and peppering his bare calves with bits of dirt. He said nothing, keeping his hand outstretched with a long finger pointing the way to the exit. Finally, the peasant woman stormed out of his hut, knocking something over in his yard with a spiteful clatter once she went out of his view.

Jilmaq lowered his arm, drained by the encounter. The LaMontina clan may have thought it merciful to exile him from high society rather than taking his life, but an eternity of service to people like this coarse woman was worse than any torture; worse than any fiendish execution. He wiped his face, sweat and dirt mixing on his fingertips. *One day more*, he thought as he went to the door.

He pulled his door closed by the central ring, taking care to avoid touching the splintered boards. He lowered a sturdy wooden brace into place, ensuring that he would have no more unwelcome visitors entering his space. He couldn’t afford any distractions; not with so much riding on the next twenty-four hours.

Jilmaq opened his trunk and looked down at the small black bag resting on top of his faded clothes. The wizard swallowed, but his throat stayed dry. He lifted the bag by its drawstring, and the light braid inside raised up with no effort at all. *Such a delicate weight*, he thought. His heart began to race in his chest. There was no denying that he was about to commit a great crime. The fact that it was for a great reward was an explanation, not an excuse; and certainly not an exculpation. Was the reward worth it? His visitor had promised him wealth, and a new life outside Delia where he could weave spells for the worthy people in society again. But what if the Mobinoji abandoned him for so great a sin? What if they denied him their power, barring him from ever harnessing magic again? The spirits were not known to be especially moral beings, but there were tales of wizards with far cleaner consciences suddenly finding themselves bereft of magical ability. A momentary windfall was hardly compensation for a lifetime of impotence.

Jilmaq exhaled through his teeth. Even as he ran through the same uneasy thoughts one more time, he knew that the time for making decisions was long past. When he'd taken the visitor's money, and accepted this black bag, he had cast his lot. Any hope of survival now lay in his ability to do what he'd been paid to do, no matter how ill the thought of it made him.

The wizard reached into the black bag and grabbed hold of the silky hair within. He let the bag drop to the floor, cradling the braid in his hands. His bloodshot eyes grew wet with tears. "Forgive me, Princess," he whispered.

As the last of the sun's rays was filtering through a gap in his barred-up window, Jilmaq moved into the back room of his hut to begin casting the most important spell of his life.

Chapter Nine

Beneath The White

The royal apartments gleamed so brilliantly they made Lundin squint. He and Samanthi had just been in the bright dawn sun, traversing the trellised open-air breezeway from the main body of the palace to the west wing where the Princess lived. Looking down from the marble walkway, spacious enough for five people to walk side by side, their eyes had been dazzled by a riot of colors from the blooming garden below and the vibrantly painted city buildings outside the palace gates. And then, ushered through the ornate double doors by a pair of footmen, Lundin and Samanthi found themselves enclosed in a world of white.

White upholstered furniture. White silk wall coverings with off-white satin stripes. White marble sculptures portraying the chiseled features of generations of Haberstorm rulers. A white staircase with an elegant white wooden railing. And, naturally, a flock of servants bustling in every direction in white jackets and skirts. Morning sunlight pouring through the arched windows reflected off these pale surfaces in an assault of radiant white beams. Lundin felt his eyes start to water. *Or maybe they're melting*, he thought with sudden concern, narrowing his lids so much he could barely see through his eyelashes.

"I heard," Samanthi said, blinking furiously, "that once a Haberstorm passes the First Ordeals and becomes a midling, she gets to decide on new colors for the royal apartment."

"One more reason to wish Her Highness all the best," Lundin said, wiping his eyes.

A hulking, blurry shape appeared in front of his eyes. "You two should get sun visors like we have," Sir Mathias said, tapping what was either his helmet or his ear. It was hard to tell. The Petronaut put a hand on Lundin's shoulder, rotating him gently towards a corridor on the right. "Come on; the carters already delivered all our squad's equipment.

"Samanthi—you and Horace will be stationed in an anteroom just outside Princess Naomi's personal chambers. Palace Guard says you'll be fairly centralized there. I don't need to tell you that if you go sneaking into her chambers without permission, I'll lop your idiot heads off to save the Regency Council the trouble of doing it themselves."

"Don't look at me," Samanthi said. "Or... were you looking at me? I can't see a damn thing in this place."

"Any changes to the timetable?" Lundin asked, his eyes finally starting to adjust. They were heading down a long white hallway with white pressed metal ceilings. There was no direct sunlight hitting the windows on their right, so at least the environment wasn't so blinding. "Is Her Highness still coming out to the main balcony at three?"

"As far as I know," Mathias said, adjusting his bracers. He was in his black Close Quarters armor, burnished to a steely shine and nearly silent, except for that one impossible-to-fix popping gear in his left knee on which the technicians had sworn undying hatred. The CQ suit didn't have the bulk to stand up to a hail of longbow arrows or musket balls, though grapeshot at long range would be very unlikely to break through. It also didn't make use of the bulky thrust packs he and Kelley had deployed in the Verrure campaign. But the lack of that extra weight meant the ranine coils in the legs could work that much more efficiently. In CQ armor, even a huge warrior like Mathias could leap six meters in any direction as easily as a fencer might sidestep. He'd also be able to sprint as fast as a racing horse, though the ranine coils had a tendency to go into spasm during a prolonged run, sending the wearer either toppling to earth or jumping unexpectedly skyward. A Petronaut in such a suit was a match for six swordsmen. Not that there would be any swordsmen to battle today, of course; but the CQ armor had the additional advantages of being much sleeker and easier on the eyes than the Recon suit, and without the extra bladders of highly combustible petrolatum that the thrust packs in the Recon suits required. The Palace Guard wanted as few caches of explosive 'tum as possible in the vicinity of Princess Naomi, for reasons the 'nauts fully understood.

Sir Mathias looked over at Lundin as he walked, frowning. "From what we've heard, the schedule isn't being changed. But I wouldn't be surprised if a delay crept in. From the few glimpses I've caught of Lord Potikal and Lady Ceres talking, I think something's making the Regents nervous."

"Why wouldn't they be nervous? Princess Naomi's not out of the Ordeals yet," Samantha said.

"It wasn't your standard case of jitters. Lady Ceres looked whiter than these walls when I saw her talking to Portikal, and he kept wringing his hands. Deep worry lines across their faces." Sir Mathias sighed, shrugging away the memory. "I just hope Princess Naomi is doing all right. People like us with incredible hair have to stick together."

Samanthi snorted as they rounded a corner. The techs had just enough time to catch a glimpse of an armored Sir Kelley in earnest conversation with a thin, bald woman in silver robes before Sir Mathias groaned and spun the techs around to face him, one meaty hand on each of their shoulders. "Spheres help us all," he said through his teeth. "I have another assignment for you. If you have any spare time from palace business today, I want you doing everything you possibly can to put Sir Kelley back the way he was."

The techs looked at each other, then back at Mathias. He waved at them impatiently, saying, "I know, I never thought I'd be asking that either. But we can't get anything done with him like this. He has to shake every passing servant's hand and tell them what a valuable contribution they're making to the day. He's bowing and scraping to the Regents so hard he's going to pull something. And he keeps asking for my opinion on what the squad should do next." He shuddered. "It's just not natural."

"Lundin's fault," Samantha said simply.

"Maybe, but it's your problem too now, senior tech," Sir Mathias said. He looked down at Lundin. "What was the spell you cast on him again?"

Lundin scratched an itch on the back of one hand, his eyes flicking to the ground. "Just a simple spell of friendship; something to make him warmer to me, Samantha and the mechanized wizardry project. I tried to adjust the Illustration so he'd only feel friendlier to the squad."

"Great job," Sir Mathias shook his head. "He loves everybody. And, today, he's got this strange thing he's doing with his face."

"That's new. What kind of thing?"

"It's... you'll see. It's noticeable."

"Spheres, Horace," Samantha said. "You broke Kelley."

Lundin swallowed. "Well, since Sir Kelley insisted we bring the squawk box and all our disks to show off, we'll have everything we need to work on making him better."

"Good. 'Cause much as I hate to say it, if you've permanently ruined his mind, I'm going to have to turn you over to the disciplinary board. And you know the penalty for a tech who knowingly causes harm to a Petronaut within his squad."

"Did I mention that, at the time, I was extremely tired?" Lundin said desperately.

"Who is Sir Kelley talking to, anyway?" Samantha said, looking across the room.

"Ouste, the court sorcerer. Kelley's probably telling her what a revolution your fancy box is."

His squadmates blinked in surprise as Lundin crossed the room in a few dozen lightning-fast steps, in an awkward gait that was four parts sprint to one part nonchalant saunter. "—don't need to tell you again what a revolution it might be," Sir Kelley was saying. The wizard was still, polite, her hands perched lightly on her hips; but the upraised curve of one thin eyebrow said it all. Lundin's heart sank as he plastered a dutiful expression on his face.

The senior 'naut brightened at the sight of his favorite technician. "Mister Lundin! The Guard finally got you and Samantha cleared for duty, I take it. It's my great honor to introduce you to Ouste, the distinguished personal sorcerer to Her Royal Highness, and the noble Queen who preceded her."

"I'm thoroughly honored, Lady Ouste," Lundin said, bowing deeply.

"Just 'Ouste,' with no title," she corrected. "It's not my custom to over-reach, and pretend that I'm something I'm not," the wizard said to the technician with a thin, glacial smile. Lundin did his best not to quail too visibly under her pale blue eyes.

Sir Kelley went on blithely. “I’ve been telling Ouste about the tremendous potential of the magic box you and Ms. Elena have made. Imagine a world where spellcasting machines work alongside traditional wizards!”

“Imagine,” Ouste said in a voice like a candle being snuffed out.

“The technology is, of course, in its infancy; far from fully proven,” Lundin began, frantic to slow the conversation down. If the court sorcerer decided that this project was a direct threat to her profession, then he was sure the Regency Council themselves would stamp it out—and his whole squad along with it. Delia’s tradition of independent research be damned; there were some entrenched interests you didn’t go up against until you knew you were absolutely ready. *Even I know that. And Kelley couldn’t be making a bigger hash of all this if he still hated me.*

“‘Far from proven?’ Mister Lundin,” Ouste broke in, “are you saying that you have yet to prove that a soulless box of gears, programmed by mechanics who haven’t practiced magic for a day of their lives, can cast a spell?” She put her fingers to her chest. “How very surprising!”

“Actually, I believe my technicians *have* been able to successfully weave a spell with the box,” Sir Kelley said guilelessly. He looked at Lundin—and then he opened his jaw as wide as it could go, as if he was trying to swallow an entire hard-boiled egg. Lundin drew back, but Sir Kelley closed his jaw again as quickly as it had opened, and kept looking at the technician without any recognition of what his face had just done. Lundin blinked.

“Didn’t you cast some kind of spell?” Kelley asked.

“Some kind of one, yes,” Lundin said, trying not to stare.

“Excuse me, gentlemen,” Ouste said, inclining her head. She fixed Lundin with a frosty glare. “Much as I’d love to learn more about your small triumphs, I have pressing business in the Princess’ chambers. Pleasant feastday.”

“You too,” Lundin said quietly, bowing again as the sorcerer turned to go. He noticed a rough fabric pouch on a cord at Ouste’s side as she walked to the vaulted doors. The pouch was the same fabric Archimedia had given him to wrap the *ojing*, and the size was just about right for several of those flat tan disks. *If she’s carrying ojing, does that mean she’ll be casting a spell in there?* He stifled a curse. Having a chance to watch the court wizard of Delia, presumably one of the world’s first-rate spellcasters, as she went through her magical process would have been a gold mine of observational data. But now that she hated him, thanks to Sir Kelley’s big mouth, there was no way he’d be able to wheedle his way into that room.

Sir Kelley’s big mouth dropped open again, and closed shut with a noisy click of teeth. Lundin jumped a little, which also escaped the Petronaut’s notice as he clapped his hands. “Glad I could make that introduction,” he said. “I think she’ll be following your project with great interest, Mister Lundin.”

“You’re probably right,” Lundin said.

“At any rate, technician—ah, Ms. Elena, there you are!” Kelley grinned as Samantha stepped up next to the junior tech, her face also bright and grinning. The Petronaut turned away to point at the corner of the room where white-clad servants were unpacking their gear. While his back was turned, Samantha dropped the fake smile and turned to Lundin with concern, mouthing “*did you see that?*” and doing a startlingly accurate reenactment of Kelley’s oral tic. He barely had time to nod before Sir Kelley looked back at them and they became the picture of attentiveness. “Abby the Abacus is unloaded. You’ll be primarily crunching numbers about crowd density along the Princess’ parade route. The Palace Guard is looking for you to see if they need to fortify security in any locations or consider a re-route once the Princess emerges from the Ordeals.”

“So we know that Princess is going to make it through?” Sir Mathias asked, behind the techs.

Sir Kelley frowned. “What a strange question, Sir Mathias,” he said. “Of course she will; there’s a whole day of joyous celebration planned around it. Excuse me!” Kelley waved at a passing servant, gesturing for her to come over. The trim, middle-aged woman hesitated, then swept over to them, her long white skirt flowing behind her. “This is Biatrice. We’re friends,” Kelley said, beaming at the chambermaid. She bobbed a quick curtsey to the squad, and they nodded awkwardly.

“Biatrice,” Sir Kelley asked, “Princess Naomi is doing well, isn’t she? She’s such a strong, wonderful girl, I can’t imagine there’s any chance of her not making it through the Ordeals.”

She looked at each of them, her mouth half-open as she decided what to say. Finally, she leaned in closer to the Petronaut team. “I suppose you’ll find out sooner or later, working back here,” she whispered. “Just this morning, things started going wrong for her Royal Highness.”

“What do you mean, wrong?” Sir Mathias asked.

“Well, she’d struggled a bit in week one of the Ordeals, but then she rallied in the most amazing way; like a true Haberstorm. Just last night, with how focused she was and how full of energy, we really did think it was a sure thing she’d make it through. The Regents, too.

“But then, this morning, it’s all different, all of a sudden. I haven’t seen her, granted—only Lady Ceres is with her now—but the word is she can’t move, barely opens her eyes, just lies there, struck with a great fever.”

“Spheres,” Samantha breathed. “Catching a fever right now, when her body’s exhausted from thirteen days of Ordeals...”

“And aren’t masters of physic forbidden from attending to a Haberstorm during the two weeks?” Lundin asked.

Biatrice nodded once, anxiously. “If a physician intervenes, she fails the First Ordeals. She’ll lose her place in the succession and be banished, as Prince Torvald was.”

“But if a master of physic doesn’t intervene?” Sir Mathias asked, his voice low and grim. Biatrice’s eyes dropped to the ground. None of them needed to put the worst-case scenario into words.

“The staff have been saying,” Biatrice said, putting on a smile after a moment of silence, “that this proves what an overachiever Princess Naomi is. She wouldn’t be content unless she added an Ordeal of her own to the ritual.”

“Is there anything we can do, Biatrice?” Sir Kelley asked, an outpouring of sympathy in his voice. His jaw swung open and closed again without his green eyes losing their softness.

Biatrice straightened up and tucked her hair back into place under its bonnet. “That’s why Ouste has been summoned. There’s no rule against magical healing or protection in the Tome of Ordeals, so hopefully she can help. All we can do is trust in Ouste, and in Princess Naomi’s strength, and keep working, I suppose. If you’ll excuse me,” she said, curtseying. They said quiet goodbyes as she trotted away.

“What a nightmare, to have this crop up on the final morning,” Sir Mathias said, shaking his head. “No wonder the Regents looked so worried.”

“Hey, team!” Kelley said, his face brightening. He turned to Samantha and Lundin. “Since magic is allowed during the Ordeals, what do you say you offer to use the squawk box to help Ouste?”

The technicians looked at each other, with the unspoken question “*how do we bury this idea as quickly as possible?*” “Oh, the court wizard knows what she’s doing, Sir Kelley,” Lundin said. “We’d just be underfoot.” *Where she would squash us like bugs.*

“Besides,” Samantha added, “we’ve never done any spells like this. It would take us hours to figure out the Mabinanto for a, you know, spell of fever reliever; hours more to press new disks; and who knows how long to cast the spell. The only spell we have the disks ready for is a spell of friendship.”

Before Kelley could reply, a white-clad Herald came dashing up to them. “Sirs,” he said, “if it please you, the commander requests your presence at the north gate.”

“Please tell the commander we’ll be there straight away. And thank you,” he said, reaching out and shaking the nonplussed servant’s hand, “for running all this way. That’s truly an accomplishment, and I want to make sure that your contribution to this day is properly recognized...”

Sir Mathias buried his face in one massive palm and gestured for the techs to lean in closer. “Listen,” he said, eyes peering at them between his fingers. “Secondary assignment number two. When you’re not working on fixing Sir Kelley, or tasks for the Guard, I want you listening for anything we can do to help Princess Naomi. If you think of anything at all, fire up the Communicator.”

“Look at you, Sir Mathias, commanding the squad,” Samantha said with sugary approval.

“You lose that tone or Lundin gets your machine lathe,” he said severely. Her face went stony serious. Lundin stifled a grin.

“Best of luck, technicians! See you later in the—” Kelley’s cheery goodbye was briefly interrupted by his jaw swinging open, viper-like. Samanthi and Lundin flinched involuntarily. “—day,” he finished. With a clatter of boots, the Petronauts followed the Herald down the hall and out of sight.

“To work?” Lundin said.

“Let’s just hope Princess Naomi makes it through this, and the day ends with the good kind of parade,” Samanthi said as they made their way towards the Abacus.

“The bright youth. The child queen. Naomi of the Haberstorms, sweet child of the shining braid.”

Jilmaq’s throat was parched. He had been weaving the spell in Mabinanto for eight hours now, and the Mobinoji had demanded nearly constant speech of him. He had known it would be taxing the instant he drew the Riker’s Hex on the floor in black sand and he felt his muscles spasm with tension, all over his body. There was great power at work this day, and great importance to every word.

His employer had demanded a gradualistic spell, a piece of technical finesse that required great reserves of stamina on the part of the caster. Instead of a spell taking effect all at once upon completion—his memory leapt back to that dreadful moment when the healthy LaMontina became a smoldering corpse—the desired outcome would creep in gradually, the effect sustained for hours. In this case, stretching out the time horizon meant Princess Naomi’s symptoms would be indistinguishable from a run-of-the-mill illness.

But to work the spell to its desired end, it might be another eight hours of speech before Jilmaq would know his task was complete. When that strange, small place in his hindbrain lit up with the knowledge that the spell was finished, then he would rest.

He wrapped a single strand of Princess Naomi’s hair around his palm three times and closed his eyes, spittle flying as he raised his voice again.

“Are you the Petronaut?”

Lundin was crouched behind Abby, cleaning out a jam in the printing apparatus. He looked up to see the round body of Lord Portikal, his famous belly obscured underneath an ornately patterned gray tabard. The mustachioed Regent was tapping his foot, his thick hands clasped behind his back. Lundin set down the stiletto-like dejamming tool and scrambled to his feet, bowing deeply.

“Hail to the Regents! Hello, my Lord. I’m... well, a technician. Would you like, uh, Sir Kelley...?”

“Do you know how to fix things?” The Regent demanded.

“Some things, yes.”

Portikal waved a hand dripping with rings and turned his back sharply. It wasn’t until he was a few steps away that Lundin realized the Regent meant for him to follow. He looked over and tried to catch Samantha’s eye.

“Who told you to set this up here?” Samantha was saying to a particularly bubble-headed midling servant, stabbing her finger towards a very unhappy Compiler. The machine was clunking in a tragic fashion. Samantha glanced over as Lundin waved. He pointed at Lord Portikal’s back, and her eyes went wide. “*Should I go?*” Lundin mouthed.

“*Are you stupid?*” she mouthed back, shooing him away furiously. Lundin quickly fell in step behind the Regent, as they marched towards—

Her Highness’ chambers, Lundin realized as Portikal shoved one half of the wide arched door open. The technicians had been installed in the spacious anteroom to the Princess’ personal space. Now Lundin was entering the sitting room where Naomi would receive guests or conduct business. The walls were beautifully papered, but there was far less furniture than he expected, and the drawn curtains made the room no brighter than a cloudy twilight. A single closed door led to Her Highness’ sleeping room, he supposed.

Ouste was in the far side of this room, closer to the curtains. She glanced at him and visibly stiffened before turning back to her magical accoutrements; a scroll, a bowl, a stick of charcoal. Only a few minutes had passed since the Petronauts had left, so clearly she hadn’t had the time to begin her spellcasting. Lundin tried not to be too obvious as he craned his neck to learn whatever he could about her preparations.

“Here,” Portikal said. Lundin brought his attention back to the Regent, who was standing in front of an upended piece of machinery. He crouched down. It was a standard fan box with conditioning coils. For people who could afford the expense, and the ‘tum that powered them, a single one of these could make an entire room pleasantly cool in the hottest days of summer. It was no surprise at all to see one in the palace. Lundin looked into the already-open casing, tilting it towards him for a better view.

“It’s not cooling the air properly,” Lord Portikal explained. “Can you repair it quickly, or should we have a replacement sent up?”

“No, no, Lord Regent, it’s a quick repair,” Lundin said, reaching into his tool pouch. “This wire on the cooling side has chipped off; it’s jamming the fan’s movements. Did you hear a rattling sound?”

“I suppose so.”

“I’ll clean this piece out and it should start blowing normally again,” he said, already unscrewing the fan housing. “Less than five minutes?”

Lord Portikal blinked, and his face softened considerably. He shifted his weight, clasping his hands on his belly, and nodded. “Very well,” he said. “The Princess will be much more comfortable. Well done.”

“Please don’t say that until it works, my Lord,” Lundin said. The Regent actually smiled back at him. As he clipped the twisted wire out of place, he took a little risk. “Is Her Highness all right, my Lord?” he asked, trying to keep his voice casual.

“Nothing wrong with being warm on a summer morning,” Portikal said, immediately becoming more guarded. Lundin nodded and buried his head back in the machine. He’d seen the flash of concern cross over the Regent’s wrinkled face before he’d mastered himself.

It really was a simple repair. Lundin scratched his forehead and idly wondered if they gave medals for maintenance tasks when his eyes wandered back to where Ouste was getting ready.

He stopped abruptly, halfway finished with removing the fourth screw, and stared. The wizard was giving careful instructions to a visibly nervous maidservant, standing on a stepstool with an *ojing* on a long string in her hands. Ouste was holding the pouch he'd noticed earlier in her hands, its wide mouth slung open to display a small stack of other *ojing* inside. Each of the disks was bright white.

"That doesn't make any sense," Lundin muttered.

"What's wrong?" Portikal asked, pointing down at the fan box.

Lundin shook himself, glancing up at the Regent, then back at the solid white disk the maid was hanging from a loop in the rucked ceiling. "I, uh, I need to investigate the air flow, my lord, through these windows. Very quick, very simple, won't be a moment."

Lord Portikal frowned. "Fine," he said as Lundin stood. The technician had the sense to give the Regent a nice deep bow before taking a slow, purposeful stroll towards the window, right past the sorcerer's magical setup.

He kept his face even and his eyes fixed on the window, not making eye contact with the maid or the wizard as he walked past. The maid glanced at him; Ouste very studiously did not. As he walked by, he flicked his eyes from the hanging *ojing* to the others in Ouste's hands. Sure enough, they were a brilliant white; and a flat white, without a trace of depth or swirling motion. His heart started pounding in his chest.

Lundin made a show of pulling back the curtains, opening the window, putting his face in the opening to feel the flow of warm outdoor air, frowning a few times, and then nodding decisively before closing the shutters and drawing the blinds again. He walked back to the fan box quickly and knelt down. Lord Portikal crossed his arms.

"Do you know what to do now?"

"I think so, my Lord," Lundin said, his mind far away as his hands breezed through the simple repair.

The Regent was grateful for his work, and the powerful man's praise would have been more than enough to send him over the moons for days at any other moment. But Lundin could barely focus enough to say the right pleasantries as his mind raced. He sauntered out of the Princess' chambers and practically bolted back to Samantha and the Abacus.

"How come Lord Portikal picked you?" Samantha said, teasingly, as Lundin drew close. She dropped the light tone when she saw the look on his face. The senior tech grabbed Lundin by the arm and turned him away from the passing servants.

"What's wrong?"

Lundin shook his head vigorously, as if to preemptively deny what he knew he had to say. But if there was any chance that he was right, they had a lot of work to do and no time whatsoever to do it. "I think Princess Naomi's under a magical attack, and I think Ouste is behind it," he whispered.

Samantha just looked at him for a long moment. "Boy oh boy, Horace," she said in a low hiss. "You sure you don't have any Haberstorm blood? 'Cause it's one ordeal after another with you."

"No," she raised a hand as he tried to object, or apologize. (He wasn't sure which was trying to come out of his mouth.) "Just give me your evidence. Quietly."

"When no magic's around, *ojing* are tan. A leathery color. They turn white in the presence of magic you're casting, black when outside magic is drifting through. Right?"

"Sure."

"Ouste hasn't even finished setting up her space, and all her *ojing* are already white. Pure white. Flat white." Samantha frowned. It was everything Lundin could do to keep from raising his voice; this was way too public a place for a conversation like this. "They ought to be tan up until she starts casting. For them to be white without any magic going on doesn't make sense."

"Unless there are magical Wards built into the Princess' chambers already."

"Even if there are, I don't think these *ojing* are responding to anything real. See, the disks fluctuate in response to magic. Even when they're all white, their surfaces are always in motion."

"I remember."

"The *ojing* in there don't have any movement. They aren't doing a thing." He exhaled sharply. "I think they're *painted*."

Samanthi narrowed her eyes. “The court sorcerer is hanging painted white disks from the ceiling in there.” Lundin nodded, and she pressed him. “You’re sure that’s what you saw.”

“I got a close look, close as I could.”

“And there’s only one style of *ojing* out there; the kind we’re used to, that doesn’t start out white.”

“Far as I know.”

“I’m not usually inclined to trust you, but I’ll try to stretch myself in this one case,” Samanthi said, her mind working furiously. “If Ouste is setting up fake *ojing*, and they’re all white, she wants everyone to think that the only spells in that room are hers.”

“And why would she do that—”

“—unless somebody else is flooding Princess Naomi’s chambers with bad magic as we speak,” she finished his thought. She looked at Lundin. “Princess Naomi isn’t sick, is she?”

Lundin shook his head, his face drawn.

“She’s being murdered.”

Chapter Ten

Braids And Barrels

“He said it was fixed,” Lord Portikal said as two female maids carried the conditioning fan into the Princess’ sleeping chambers.

Lady Ceres cracked her knuckles, unable to stand still. “I hope so,” she growled. “Naomi is on fire. We need that room cooler as soon as possible. And bring more ice chips,” she said to another maid, who curtseyed and swept out of sight into the anteroom.

“Ceres,” Lord Portikal said softly. The powerfully built woman, veteran of ten campaigns under Queen Tess, put her hands on her hips and exhaled heavily. Portikal laced his fingers together and took a step closer to her. “You’re doing well to keep the Princess so comfortable.”

“So comfortable in her final hours, you mean.” Lady Ceres’ piercing gray eyes were full of pain. She shook her head. “Unacceptable.”

Portikal looked down at the floor, mouth twisting as he chose his words carefully. “The Ordeals are taxing, and it would certainly not be the first time that an heir was claimed—”

“The Ordeals aren’t to blame,” she said, her color rising.

“Ceres, it stands to reason that—”

“I’ve been with the Princess for two weeks now, Portikal. I have seen her under great strain, and I have seen her rise above it. For thirteen days, I’ve seen a steady trajectory towards growth; increased strength, increased confidence, a powerful will, and a sense of self any Queen of any nation would envy.”

Portikal raised his hands placatingly. “She’s a child, Lady Ceres. You know what you want to see, but the truth is, Princess Naomi is frail, and always has been. We’ve known this about her from the day the master of physic told Queen Tess that Naomi would never speak a word—”

“She can speak, Portikal, as you well know. And the loudest voice and the strongest heart rarely go together, in any case.”

“In our capacity as members of the Regency Council,” he said, evenly, “we would be remiss in our duty if we did not squarely face that fact that, whatever the cause, the heir to the Throne is at death’s door.”

Ceres clenched her fists, staring helplessly at the closed door to the bedroom. A sweating girl in a thin shift lay in there, struggling for life against an invisible enemy. Ceres wanted nothing but to defend her, but not even the most experienced warrior could fight what she couldn’t see.

After a long silence, Lord Portikal spoke. “We have a choice. Summon the master of physic; possibly save her life; certainly deny her her place in the succession; and set her on the path to banishment.”

“The Throne is her birthright,” Ceres whispered. “She will not yield it.”

“In that case,” he sighed, “we need to consult with Krame and Marchise. The four of us must prepare an address to the citizenry for when... for the eventuality that the worst occurs.”

The fan box whirred into life in the next room. The minor triumph was small comfort to the two Regents. “A hard day,” Portikal said, rubbing his forehead with thick fingers.

“Something has been done to Naomi, my old friend,” Ceres said, shaking her head. “Last night, she was strong, energetic, and eager for the morning’s challenges. Illness does not strike such a child in her own bedroom. Not without foul play.”

“Careful.”

“I will not be careful while evil forces work on her, now of all days,” she hissed. “If she passes, and my dark suspicions are borne out, then the cowards responsible for this dreadful morning will not live to profit from it.”

Lord Portikal set a hand on her shoulder. She looked down at him, and he nodded, once. “From your mouth to the eight Spheres,” he said, his eyes wet.

“How is this possible?” Sir Kelley asked, his voice tinny in Samanthi’s ear. She cupped her hand around the Communicator’s earpiece to muffle any sound leaks, and leaned down towards the telescoping mouth trumpet.

“If we’re right, it’s going to take every interrogator in the Palace Guard weeks to figure out how a plot like this could take shape,” she said in a low voice, trying to keep outwardly calm. They’d set up the Communicator in the corner of the anteroom to give her as much privacy as possible; not that there was any to be had. A knot of Palace Guards, in supremely unhelpful fashion, had stopped not five steps away from her to discuss a fascinating sheaf of paperwork. She pivoted her body away from them, and away from the sight of Lundin scrambling with the first batch of crowd data delivered for Abby’s analysis. There was no way to tell the Guard their suspicions; not yet, given the total lack of meaningful proof. So Samanthi had told Lundin to keep plugging away at their mundane feastday assignments until they could rustle up some evidence. If both techs dropped their assigned duties now, it would draw unwelcome attention, and cracking this theoretical plot open would become even harder.

She shook her head and went on, flicking the Communicator back to transmission mode. “The best we can do is figure out who’s behind this, and how to stop them.” She flicked the switch back to receiving mode to hear the ‘nauts’ responses.

“The poor Princess,” Kelley moaned. “An enemy wizard could be anywhere within fifteen kilometers of the Palace.”

“That’s all of Delia,” Sir Mathias’ growling voice floated into her ears, distantly. He was sharing Kelley’s connection, letting his voice be picked up by the input in the senior tech’s helmet. “Where are we supposed to start?”

“Do you think Ouste is the one casting the spell, Samanthi? Or maybe she cast the spell on Her Royal Highness last night, and what we’re seeing is the result?” Kelley asked.

She clicked her tongue against her teeth, puzzling it out. “She’s not casting now, but maybe she was the culprit last night, Sir Kelley. It seems awfully risky for the court sorcerer to get her hands dirty directly like that, though.”

“Setting up those fake disks sounds more like she’s involved in covering this magic up than making it happen,” Mathias agreed.

“So, we’re back to no suspects.”

“Horace and I had one thought,” Samanthi murmured. “If you were casting a spell on the heir to the Throne, you’d want to be pretty confident it would succeed, right?”

“I’d say so.”

“That probably means that whoever planned this went out of their way to get, well, a piece of the Princess for their dirty wizard to use. Like how the opposition in Verrure stole LaMontina’s blood?”

The two Petronauts hummed in her ear, thinking. Samanthi moved the earpiece farther away, gritting her teeth. She hated this thing sometimes.

“She won’t have been bled for weeks now,” Sir Kelley mused. “Can’t be treated by a master of physic during the Ordeals, poor child.”

“What sort of piece are we talking about here, Samanthi?” Sir Mathias said. “Fingernails? Bathwater? Excrement? Hair?”

Her eyes drifted as she thought. The anteroom was lined with portraits of people important to the crown. Each of the four regents was represented; there was Ouste, her bald head gleaming; and there was Princess Naomi herself, with that long, shining, fawn-colored hair—

Samanthi gasped.

“Aggh,” the Petronauts said. “Don’t make that noise into the mouthpiece ever again,” Sir Mathias scolded across the airwaves.

“Sir Mathias, you’re a genius,” she said, her low voice picking up speed. “On Day One of the Ordeals, a great big piece of the Princess was chopped off and locked away. Remember?”

“Her hair!” Sir Kelley realized, thinking quickly.

“I have no idea where that hair is kept, or even if they keep it around.”

“I think it goes to the Haberstorm vault,” Mathias said. “They keep mementos from each scion’s Ordeals in there.”

“Sir Mathias, you’re on fire. I’m so full of professional respect I could kiss you.”

“How romantic,” the Petronaut said, a smile in his voice.

Samanthi heard the sound of raised voices and looked across the anteroom. Some gold-spangled clerk with a box of tan punchcards in his hands was berating Lundin. The poor lonely technician was trying to respond civilly while his arms were deep in Abby’s guts, repairing the damn printing mechanism again, no doubt. “Sirs, I need to go. We’ll do what we can on this end, which may or may not be anything.”

“We’ll contact you if we find anything. Look for the incoming call light on the Communicator.”

“Winding down,” Samanthi announced, coiling the earpiece back around its cradle and retracting the mouthpiece. The call light on top of the Communicator went dark. Samanthi sighed, spun on her heel, and went to rescue her junior tech.

“Sir,” Mathias said as they walked, trying to keep his frustration down, “I’m telling you, that’s not our traditional division of duties.”

“You know I hate to correct you, Sir Mathias, but I just can’t believe—” and here Sir Kelley paused to swallow an imaginary grapefruit. Sir Mathias was almost getting used to the tic at this point; *which just proves what an insane day this is*, he thought. “—that in an interrogatory capacity, I’ve historically played the ‘tough guy’ role.”

“I promise you, there’s a history of it.”

“I should be the ‘nice guy,’ and you should be the ‘tough guy.’ That’s the much more sensible division. Why work against our natural inclinations?”

“Nothing says it’ll even take much interrogating,” Sir Mathias said, unconvincingly. “The steward will probably let us right into the Haberstorm vault. I only brought up the roles in the slim chance he doesn’t.”

“I’m playing the ‘nice guy.’ You’re playing the ‘tough guy.’ There’s an end to it, please.”

“Yes, Sir Kelley,” Mathias said. At least Kelley was giving orders again. Maybe he was feeling better.

The two ‘nauts had begged off their post at the north gate, telling the thick-necked commander of the Palace Guard that an urgent assignment had been broadcast to them directly from Her Royal Highness’ apartments. (Completely true, of course.) The commander hadn’t made much of a fuss, but Mathias and Kelley had both noticed the meaningful look the man had shared with his deputy before agreeing to release them. *Typical Petronaut dabblers*, the subtext went. Members of a clear hierarchy with specifically defined duties, like the Delian Army and the Palace Guard, tended to look down on the seeming anarchic community of Petronauts, with its independent squads and elected, term-limited Board of Governors. *If only those ‘nauts would learn a little discipline*, the story went, *they’d actually do Delia some good*. Ignoring, of course, that Delia’s supremacy on the Anthic Thrust was directly due to Petronaut ingenuity; but it was all a discussion for another day.

The important thing was that Sirs Kelley and Mathias were clomping their way through the castle’s stony passages to the South Wing, where the steward, Volman, was being kept extremely busy preparing to serve and house hundreds of celebrants once the Ordeals were over—assuming, very optimistically, that what happened to the Princess today was something that the citizens of Delia would want to celebrate.

Sir Kelley asked a servant he’d met earlier where they could find Volman, and the freckled young man pointed them towards the larder. The smell of flour and salted meats hung in the air, pregnant with delicious potential, as they edged their way through the door into the darkly wooded room. A tall, thin, white-haired man, wearing a starburst medallion on the end of a long black chain, briefly looked up from his conversation with a pair of cooks as the knights entered, then went back to his discussion.

“That’s got to be the steward,” Sir Kelley whispered. “He seems nice enough.”

Sir Kelley likes a stranger; what a surprise, Mathias thought. He tried to figure out how to open a line of questioning, and found himself tongue-tied. He’d never been the ‘tough guy’ before. Much though he hated to do it given Kelley’s current state, he deferred to his green-eyed colleague. “Can you soften him up first?”

Sir Kelley actually winked at him. Sir Mathias rolled his eyes as the other Petronaut stepped forward. “Excuse me! Good morning, and a happy feastday to you. We’re looking for the honorable Davic Volman?”

“At your service, sirs,” the steward said, absently, making notes on a slate tablet in his hands. His pale eyes flicked up, taking in their faces and the composition of their armor. “The Reconnaissance Squad, if I’m not mistaken? Sir... Kelley, and Sir Mathias?” He named each of them correctly, pointing with a thin rod of chalk.

Kelley applauded. “Bravo! Your reputation doesn’t exaggerate your abilities! We were told, Mister Volman, that your knowledge of the people and the goings-on in this palace was second to none.”

“Yeah,” Sir Mathias said in a tough guy voice, scowling. He leaned against the doorway, arms crossed over his chest. The other men looked at him; Kelley with a plastered-on smile and Volman with

the mildest hint of disdain. He felt a drop of sweat trickle down his back. *Why am I the tough guy again?* he asked, fighting to keep the grimace on his face.

Volman whispered to the two cooks and they nodded, leaving the room. The old man bowed with easy grace to Kelley. "Your kindness does me too much honor; what you consider praiseworthy I humbly call but doing my duty. Tell, dear gentlemen," Volman said, holding his slate low by his stomach, "what brings you to the larder? Say the word and I will see you thoroughly provisioned."

"What a gracious offer, Mister Volman! But we're not here for food. We came to speak to you."

"I await your pleasure, sir," the steward said, inclining his head, "though I grieve to mention that my time is not fully my own, as a great deal of Crown business awaits me yet before mid-day."

"I'm sure, I'm sure," Sir Kelley said with a sympathetic face, which was largely spoiled when his mouth flapped open and shut like a beached sea bass. The steward kept admirably poised as the 'naut went on. "We'll get right to it, then. Are you responsible for maintaining the Haberstorm Vault, Mister Volman?"

"That responsibility ultimately falls to me, yes."

"Oh yeah?" Mathias demanded for lack of anything better to do, jutting his chin out.

Volman looked back at him, his eyes narrowing. "Yes," he said slowly, giving each letter its own syllable.

Sir Kelley nodded. "That's where material from the Ordeals is stored, right? Mementos from the various heirs over the years?"

"Quite correct," Volman said, lines of impatience on his weathered face.

"Is that where the Princess' hair was taken after being shorn off last week?"

"Indeed it was," the steward said. "I took the braid to the vault myself."

"And has anyone else been down to the vault since then?"

"On multiple occasions. The Haberstorm heraldry and many other ceremonial pieces are stored therein. If it is of interest to you in your leisure, sirs," Volman said, drawing himself up formally, "one of my vault chiefs will supply you with the record of individuals who have entered or exited the vault during the period of the Ordeals, which I hope may satisfy your curiosity on the matter."

"Is there any way we could see the vault for ourselves?"

"Regrettably, outside of vetted palace staff, no one may enter the vault without signed authorization from the Regency Council. Were it not a feastday, Sir Kelley, I'm sure they would be amenable to your request; alas, securing the proper paperwork today will not be possible." He looked from one Petronaut to the other. "If there is nothing further...?" Volman asked, waiting to be dismissed.

Kelley shot a look back to Sir Mathias. The big junior 'naut shrugged imperceptibly, an edge of desperation in his still-snarling face. Sir Kelley turned back to Volman with a small smile, taking a step closer. "You've been very helpful, Mister Volman. Just one more question, and we'll leave you be. As far as you know, has anyone accessed Princess Naomi's braid since it was locked away?"

"No, sir," Volman said, frowning, with a calm shake of his head. The notion had obviously never even occurred to him. Sir Kelley looked back at Mathias, his eyes giving an encouraging signal. If there was going to be a tough guy in this interrogation at all, it was now or never.

Sir Mathias cleared his throat. "Listen, Volman," he growled. He began a slow swagger towards the steward, tilting his head to avoid a low-hanging ham. "Let's cut the malarkey. 'Oh, here's the record of who went into the vault!' 'Oh, the Regents won't sign the paperwork!' 'Oh, I'm sure nobody's touched the braid!'" The huge man put on a small, insulting voice that sounded nothing like Volman. He was awash with sweat inside his armor as nonsense kept pouring from his mouth.

He looked down at the steward, his eyes hard. "Let me tell you something, Volman," Mathias hissed. "We know it all. We know about you. We know about the plan. And we know what you've done. So you can either talk to us right now, while we're still friends; or you can wait until later, when things won't be nearly so nice for you. Get it?"

Sir Mathias' heart was thumping like a piston going full steam. He kept his face frozen in a cruel sneer and looked down at the steward, waiting for Volman to laugh, slap his face, or simply leave. Sir

Kelley, standing out of Volman's view, was pressing his fingers to his lips and gaping at Sir Mathias like a man transfixed by a terrible accident.

Suddenly, impossibly, Davic Volman started to cry.

The Petronauts watched the old man's body convulse with slow, wretched sobs. He buried his face in his bony hands, tears dripping through his fingers. "Fermi was just a boy," he said, choking on his words. "I see his face everywhere I turn. I never—there's no place in the Spheres for a man like me. Oh, Fermi, forgive me."

"Right," Sir Mathias said carefully, his eyes wide. Kelley made a frantic circular gesture with one finger, like a spinning wheel going around. "We know all about Fermi," Mathias said. "So tell us where he is."

"The smoking room," Volman said, barely audible. He gestured to a thin door next to two great dark crates. "The barrel with the charcoal chips. I never meant for it to be this way...!"

Sir Kelley nodded at Mathias and dashed over to the door, disappearing from view. Sir Mathias put his hands on his hips, his mind reeling. "Since you're, uh... Since you're coming clean, Volman, why don't you get it all out? Right from the beginning."

"All I had to do was deliver the hair to Jilmaq. A crime, yes, but somehow when there was no blood on my hands, it seemed... well, it was just a plan! A means to a worthy end. But when I saw Fermi's blood, I realized that it was Princess Naomi's blood as well, and that I... after all the Haberstorms have done for me...!" The old man wept, anguished.

Sir Mathias was trying to make sense of it when Sir Kelley re-appeared, his face grave. Mathias left Volman crying and joined his partner in the doorway. Sir Kelley clapped him on the shoulder and gestured into the room.

Mathias craned his neck to look inside the wide barrel Kelley had opened. Visible through the black chips of charcoal was the bloated, terrified face of a boy. Sir Mathias exhaled, looking at the tangles of sandy hair smeared with blood. The two Petronauts turned back to the old steward, leaning himself against the heavy leg of a table as sobs continued to shake his frail body.

"Let's tell the Guard," Sir Mathias said heavily.

Chapter Eleven

The Box Squawks

Samanthi wound down the Communicator and walked back towards the Abacus, her face tinged a sickly gray. Lundin looked up from his fight with the Compiler, a stack of cards in his hand. "What's the word?" he asked, his voice low.

"There's a dead kid in the larder," she whispered. Lundin's eyes widened. "A servant. The steward killed him because he stumbled onto the fact that Princess Naomi's braid is gone."

"Stars and Spheres," Lundin breathed. "It's all true."

"They're telling the Guard about the murder, and then they're going to the vault to confirm the, uh, theft. Burn me, Lundin, the Princess is as good as dead," Samanthi said, her eyes going unfocused.

"Did the steward name names? Did he confirm that Ouste is in on it?"

"No. Well, he named their wizard. Jellmap, or something; the hack from LaMontina's tent?"

Lundin scratched the side of his neck. "If any wizard can screw up a sure thing, it's that guy."

"Small favors, right?" She drummed her fingers on Abby. "But then the steward clammed up. Apparently he wants to take the fall for this all by himself."

"As far as I'm concerned, those *ojing* prove that Ouste is a conspirator."

"But we're not magical experts. And we're outsiders. If we accuse her without stronger proof, do you really think the Regents are gonna believe our story over hers?"

Lundin shuffled the edges of the stack of cards. Then he set the stack down on top of the Compiler. "I need to see what she's up to," he said.

"Where are you going?" Samanthi hissed as he started walking away.

"Sorry, boss," Lundin said, sheepishly, as he trotted towards the Princess' rooms.

The three maids in the room visibly started when Lundin swung the door open, unannounced. One of them, a pretty brunette with close-cropped hair, dashed over to him, her white skirt billowing as she moved. "Excuse me, you can't be in here," she said.

"Sorry. Hello! I'm a Petronaut; I'm a technician. I was just, uh." He tried to look past her to get a good look at what Ouste was doing. Those bright white *ojing* were spinning ponderously on their strings. The silver-clad sorcerer was sitting on the floor in the middle of a white-and-blue pentagram, her eyes closed. "I, uh, I fixed the fan box for the Princess earlier," he said, standing on tip-toes to look over the maid's bonnet. "I wanted to make sure the repair was holding."

"Yes, it's nice and cool. Thank you, sir. Now please, you're not supposed to be here uninvited."

"Oh, I'm so sorry! See, I thought because I *had* been invited earlier, that that meant I was *still* invited now, and later. But I have to be invited each time?" he asked, deliberately obtuse. Just as he thought, Ouste's mouth wasn't moving. That bald lady was dead silent. He shook his head, his mouth tightening.

"Yes, sir, each time you must be invited."

"My mistake! I'll leave you alone, then. Sorry about the mix-up. Goodbye," he said after the door slammed in his face.

"Did you get that maid's name?" Samanthi asked as Lundin came back to their station.

"No, she's not my type; all business," Lundin said, moving back to the Compiler. His hands went back to work automatically, sorting cards and feeding them into the toothy slot. "Ouste isn't even talking," he reported, just loud enough to be heard over their thrumming machinery. "She's sitting there in the pentagram, meditating silently."

"Maybe that's her process."

"Maybe she's letting the Princess die," Lundin shook his head. "It's perfect, isn't it? With the braid to focus on during the Enunciation, Jollmip's spell can't fail. The only thing that could block his magic

would be a first-rate defending wizard on the other side. And with Ouste in on the plot, she can set up all the trappings of a serious defense without so much as speaking the *pingdu calabra*. Because non-wizards have no idea what makes magic magic, no one will ever be the wiser.”

“Kelley and Mathias know to look for Jellmap. They said the Guards will help them, and they’ll broadcast to all available ‘nauts on the street to join the hunt too.” She tossed a few cards in the Pickle, and they sizzled noisily as they dissolved. “Maybe they’ll be able to find the wizard before the spell’s done.”

“That always works great. Just ask clan LaMontina.”

“Not helpful, junior tech,” Samanthi snapped. She slapped an open palm against the side of the Abacus, creating a metallic thump. Two passing manservants stopped to look at them, carrying an ornate leather trunk. Samanthi turned her back on them. “Instead of focusing on how terrible this all is,” she said, “how about you start helping me think about what we can do?”

Lundin shrugged, hugging his arms to his chest helplessly. “I don’t know. We can’t catch the wizard in time. We’ve got the squawk box here, but there’s no way we could set up a magical Ward in time, even if we knew how. We can’t make Ouste do her job and defend the Princess. We can’t bring a master of physic in, or—”

“Hold on,” Samanthi said. She got that hungry look in her eyes that meant things were about to get exciting. “You think Ouste’s a stronger wizard than the J-guy?”

“No doubt.”

“So if she stopped pulling her punches and actually set up magic to counter him, you think she’d win?”

Lundin frowned. “I mean, if the spell’s not too far advanced, maybe. But—“

“Tell me, junior tech, what’s the one spell that we have ready to go?”

“The spell of friendship. Samanthi, where’s this going?”

She grabbed him by the side of the head, pulling their faces close together. “We’re going to make our good friend Ouste fall in love with Princess Naomi all over again,” she whispered, her eyes shining.

It was easier said than done.

“This is the same report you gave us at 7:28,” the clerk complained, scanning over the six-page readout. Her companion, a scrawny clerk with a ridiculous bouffant hairstyle, scowled over her shoulder at the report. “Couriers have delivered two new shipments of updated crowd data to you since then,” she complained.

“Is this the same report?” Samanthi gasped, standing shoulder to shoulder with the bureaucrats. She made a great show of inspecting the paper carefully. “You know what? You’re absolutely right!”

“I know I’m right!”

“Of course she’s right,” the male clerk spat.

“We’re relying on you Petronauts to give us the latest projections. We were *informed* that you would make our jobs *easier* today.”

“Do you know what happened?” Samanthi tapped her forehead as if remembering. “That first shipment of data you talked about? Sure enough, it came in. And as we were processing it, the Compiler had a detached transverse belt. Set us back almost an hour, trying to patch it. And *then*, the printer press inside the Abacus had a nasty jam, and by the time we were almost, finally ready to run that new report, guess what happened?”

Samanthi stretched out her open hands to the clerks. They couldn’t guess.

“*That’s* when the second set of data updates came in! Talk about bad timing! So we figured, ‘why go to the trouble of printing this first set of reports, when they’re already outdated? Let’s just get cracking on this new round!’”

“So where is ‘the new round?’” the clerk asked, suspiciously.

Samanthi pantomimed tearing her hair out, laughing heartily. “Rrrgh! Would you believe that, just as we were getting going, the buffer stacks in the Abacus had a full reversal? What a day!”

The clerks looked at each other. “So when will they be ready?”

She clapped the female clerk on the shoulder. “Rest assured, I’m doing everything I can on this end to prepare the new cards,” she said. “My associate, meanwhile, is using our mobile repair apparatus to prepare the buffer stacks. Very sensitive equipment, can’t be jostled. That’s why he needed to use the storage closet for a less dynamic environment.”

They followed Samanthi’s outstretched arm, looking at the closet door where Lundin had been sequestered for more than an hour now. “How much longer will he be?”

“Not long, not long. He’s a truly exceptional worker. I always say, ‘I wonder what I did to deserve a junior tech like him?’” she said, laughing. *Isn’t that the truth*, she thought darkly.

“So that was a mobile repair apparatus, huh?” the male clerk said, sniffing. “It looked an awful lot like a squawk box to me. One of those singing things.”

“A lot of people who don’t know any better say that,” Samanthi nodded, supportively. The clerk straightened up, his bouffant bouncing with indignation like the plume of an angry quail.

Inside the cramped storage closet, Lundin stood with a nervous ear to the door. The walls were lined with shelves of linens and vases, and there was barely enough room to squeeze between the shelves and the Melodimax, shoved as it was into the center of the narrow walking space. The wide trumpet of the squawk box was stuffed with a pair of lacey pillowcases in an effort to muffle the noisy, clicking, androgynous voice as it droned on.

“—*li Havei ith mosk, berandriave pol sh ’vaei tob*—”

The *pingdu calabra* was long done. Those three pairs of metal disks sat in a sleeve of their own on the shelf by the door. On the floor were two piles for the Illustration—pitch disks and articulation disks separate, of course—which the machine was slowly working its way through. Nine pairs total for this friendship spell, for an Illustration that lasted an interminable forty-five minutes or more, on top of the quarter-hour the Invocation had required, and not to mention however long it was an Enunciation took before the spell was actually considered ‘cast.’ In casting the spell on Kelley a few nights ago, Lundin had fallen asleep after toggling a ‘repeat’ lever inside the Melodimax. He had no idea how many times the machine had spoken the name Tymon Kelley Malcolm, Esq., before its ‘tum had dwindled and it had switched off. Maybe just one full revolution—five minutes—would be enough to make the magic

happen. If they wanted Princess Naomi to survive Jollman's spell, they needed to have Ouste charmed and casting for the forces of good as soon as humanly possible.

Spheres, but Samanthi was brilliant. Lundin shook his head in wonder, keeping one ear to the foot traffic outside and another on the squawk box, to make sure he'd be ready to swap in the next disks when these ones finished. Leave it to her to figure out how the one spell they had could be the perfect tool for the job. Earlier in the week, after inspecting the Illustration disks closely in the wake of the over-successful casting on Sir Kelley, they'd had a brainstorm for how to tighten up the code and keep it more narrowly focused. Punching the new disks had taken time, but he and Samanthi had decided it was worth it. Now, with any luck at all, this friendship spell would do nothing except make Ouste a loyal subject of the Crown again, full of devotion to her Princess. And it might also make her mouth move strangely for a few days. *I'm okay with that*, Lundin thought, fingers drumming on the next set of disks.

The portraits out in the hall had proven invaluable. Not only had Princess Naomi's full name, Naomi Elizabeth Galidate Haberstorm, been on her portrait, but Ouste's portrait too had been titled "Xanaka Ouste of Upper Elthenia." That's exactly what they'd punched into a new pair of Enunciation disks for this particular casting of the friendship spell. The full details would make the spell that much more accurate when it came to targeting in the Illustration and Enunciation alike.

"Come on, come on," Lundin whispered, peeking into the open side of the squawk box. This pair of disks still had at least two minutes to go. There were five more pairs in the Illustration before the Enunciation even began. *Another half-hour with no disasters, and maybe we have a chance to put Princess Naomi's survival into the hands of a woman who's currently letting her die!*

"I need a new job," Lundin said morosely as the squawk box brayed into his ear.

Princess Naomi's eyes cracked open.

There was her ceiling, great waves of fabric stretching from one wall to the other. As she looked at them, they seemed to swim, making her queasy. An overwhelming impulse filled her to close her eyes again, but through sheer force of will she kept her eyelids fluttering, reaching out to the real world. She was covered in sweat; she could feel it all over her face, and her back. Her blood was on fire. Every muscle throbbed with the pain of it.

With a powerful effort, she turned her head, her mouth falling open and her tongue lolling out like a hound's. It was taking all her strength not to go back inside her head, to the place darker than sleep where she had been for what seemed like months. *Was it just last night I fell asleep giggling, ready for the final Ordeals and the feastday?* she thought. *Can that be? What's happening to me?*

Lady Ceres was there, thank the Spheres. The towering woman had her back to the Princess, in low conversation with one of the maids. Elsie? Veronica? Naomi's vision was blurry, and she couldn't make out any features. She gritted her teeth and scraped her fingers against the thin bedsheet to get their attention. The scratching sound was like tidal waves crashing in her ears, and she could feel the vibrations of her movements all up and down her aching arms. But Ceres didn't even stir.

Blackness was creeping into her vision from every side. This wasn't like any fever she'd ever experienced. No—this was something darker, and much more wicked.

Naomi's fingers flicked across each other, and her hand rotated at the wrist. <<*Help me,*>> she said. <<*Help me.*>>

Like a swimmer catching only a quick breath before being pushed underwater by the waves, Princess Naomi's lids closed and she sank back into unconsciousness.

“—javinish s’kal mar lindish spir ith brovalia—”

Resting on the shelf across the tiny room, Lundin’s two *ojing* were still pulsing with white as the words kept coming. He clung to that whenever he felt his nerves getting the better of him; whether or not the plan would work, at least the spell was working. One more pair of disks in the Illustration, then Lundin would put on the Enunciation disks and have the squawk box repeat Ouste’s name for as long as he could. Once he had toggled the box to ‘repeat,’ he might even risk stepping into the outside world to see what had happened in the past hour-and-a-half. This closet was feeling awfully cramped by now. *Thank the Spheres nobody seems to need sheets today*, he thought, picking at the fraying edge of a duvet cover.

He was surprised not to have heard from Samanthi, quite frankly. Maybe she figured the less attention she drew to the fact that Lundin was cloistered in a closet, the better for their plan. It would be hard to convince even the most credulous observer that the chanting Melodimax was a mobile repair apparatus, and odds were good that the meddling clerks outside had only gotten less credulous as the morning drew on.

Well, they can be as sour-faced as they want, Lundin thought, yawning, *as long as they stay out for another—*

The door swung outwards into the anteroom. He staggered, putting his foot into the stacks of already played Illustration disks. The thin circles slid to the ground in a clatter of metal, resonating cacophonously in the tiny closet. Lundin involuntarily clasped one hand over his ear as he braced against the man-sized Melodimax with the other, balancing himself. A small war party of brocaded clerks stood glaring at him in the doorway, the men with huge hair and the women with tight bonnets. Samanthi was barely visible behind them, her face flushed and her eyes furious.

“I told you, Mister Lundin’s work can’t be disturbed! Close that door right now, or the repairs will fall apart! You’re only hurting yourselves!”

“Mister Lundin,” the clerk in front said venomously, her eyes narrowed to unfriendly slits, “how are the repairs coming?”

“Nearly done, nearly done. Fifteen more minutes,” he said, straightening up and putting on a smile.

“Ms. Elena said you would definitely be done twenty minutes before this,” another said.

“I’m sure I never said ‘definitely,’” Samanthi objected.

“This is your so-called ‘mobile repair apparatus?’” the tallest of the clerks said, looking past Lundin.

“I told you it looked like a squawk box!”

“It is a squawk box! Listen to it!”

One of the women held up her hands. Loud and clear, even through two layers of pillowcases, came the long strings of Mabinanto:

“—videl, lastic, joi arkhest teronion—”

“What a pack of liars!” the head clerk said, her eyes flashing. “Our teams have been gathering data all day, while you’ve been locked in a closet listening to music?”

“You can’t call that music,” another said.

“Yeah! What is that?”

“What are you lazy Petronauts up to?”

Samanthi and Lundin exchanged a desperate look. Samanthi opened her mouth, ready to bluster or start beating some heads, when he suddenly raised a hand and tilted his head, as if listening to something. The clerks briefly stopped chattering, and the only voice was that of the Melodimax.

“—sh’tanu hamish ell tosk—”

“Excuse me,” Lundin said absently. He turned his back to the clerks and spoke directly into the trumpet. *“Grabdesh orbintalo, ith bith d’lith moosh?”*

“—Barttic d’scel. Wavin eth poreil, scim weshi—”

“Oh, of course,” Lundin said, nodding. He reached for a blank metal disk, straining across the Melodimax to the shelf on which he’d happened to set them. Then he crouched down on the ground, where the disk press was swung open, and lowered the blank into place.

The mob of clerks and the confused senior tech watched him work as if nothing was happening. The magic box continued its arcane drone.

“What in the burning fields are you doing?” a clerk asked, more bewildered than suspicious.

Lundin shushed him gently. “Sorry, I need to hear this,” he said, pointing a thumb over his shoulder at the Melodimax. “Dame Kyla from the Cavaliers is talking me through this repair.”

They looked at the stuffed-up trumpet. “A Cavalier? That’s another Petronaut talking?”

“Of course! Chatty, isn’t she?” Lundin grinned. “She’s real thorough, though; I shouldn’t complain. Hang on—*hivish grumbdumb? Aspic tonk lick b’doom?*”

“—*vasil yin norinna poeva flasmic ile—*”

“Oh, *flasmic ile,*” he said, readjusting a notch on the metal press. “Got it!”

“You expect us to believe you’re actually talking to that thing?” a high-voiced clerk scoffed, his nervous eyes glancing around the rest of his group for support. The rest of them had their heads tilted appraisingly, uncertain what they were seeing. “You’re not even speaking real words,” he accused shrilly.

“Old Harutian, actually,” Lundin said, not even looking up from the press. “It’s for security. You never know who might be listening in on the transmission between here and there.”

The clerks murmured to each other, cowed and impressed. “Okay, everyone,” Samanthi said, listening closely to the Melodimax, “Dame Kyla says we’re entering a very sensitive part of the repair. It would really be best if we gave Mister Lundin some space. Fifteen minutes, Mister Lundin?”

“That’s all,” he said, nodding calmly.

“Well, then, we’ll be back,” the head clerk said, trying to muster up a threatening voice. The door closed gently from the outside, and Lundin was alone again. He stopped playing with the press (he’d been busy spelling the names of his childhood pets backwards), and sat back on his bottom, knees upraised. His heart was racing, and he let out a long, ragged breath.

The door popped back open about halfway. Samanthi’s fist came flying down and pounded him on the shoulder three times in energetic succession. He curled away, raising his hands as he looked up into the senior tech’s luminous, wild-eyed, smiling face. “You damned stupid genius,” she crowed, slamming the door shut as quickly as she’d entered. Lundin leaned back against the Melodimax and rubbed his shoulder, a grin spreading across his face. He rested his head against the talking machine, feeling the vibrations bounce through his body.

Fifteen minutes.

Under normal circumstances, the notion that such a simple spell could slip through the defenses of a wizard like Ouste was laughable. She had dueled with arcane warlords on the battlefields of Lessak. She had beaten back two attacks on old Queen Tess, brought to bear by teams of anti-monarchical mages. She had been the undisputed international champion at the Kolympask Sorcerous Games five years in a row; a feat yet to be duplicated. When it came to direct magical competition with another spellcaster, she was the greatest wizard alive.

But any magical defense required, first, that the wizard recognize herself as under attack. And with six white-washed leather disks hanging above her, instead of real *ojing*, the meditating Ouste was completely unaware of a new source of magic until—

Her eyes flashed open, like waking up from a dream. Ouste looked around, feeling oddly disoriented. She was on the floor of Princess Naomi's sitting room, of course; she was here because the Princess was ill. *No!* The truth came flooding back into her mind. *Not ill; under attack!*

The entire plot raced through her mind, and her lips parted in horror. She looked to an ornate clock on the wall. Nearly nine. That meant Jilmaq had been weaving his gradualistic spell for eleven hours now, stringing its effects out minute by torturous minute. *At my direction*, she thought, with a stabbing pang of conscience. Ouste thought of Princess Naomi's smiling face, her courage in the face of the Ordeals, and the birthright this plot was so cruelly denying her, and tears came to her eyes. *How could I have been so cruel? How could I have come this far when my love for Her Highness is so strong?*

A calculating part in the back of Ouste's mind began taking stock of the inconsistencies and waving a tiny flag for her attention; but her dispassionate self was powerless against the flood of emotion now coursing through her. She rose to her feet, startling several of the maids, who had nearly forgotten the sorcerer was in the room, sitting in silence all this time. Ouste rubbed her hands together, her pale eyes flashing. She knew exactly what spell Jilmaq was casting, having chosen it personally for him in what seemed like a past life. That meant she knew precisely how to counter it. The timing would be tight, given that she had wasted more than two hours in idle meditation. But for all the pain she had caused Princess Naomi, Ouste was determined to make recompense.

"Pingdu h'leth dagriss ith m'navei," she began in a ringing voice, hands lifted up high.

Chapter Twelve

The Last Ordeal

“Winding down,” Dame Miri Draker said, removing the Communicator helmet. The Parade squad’s equipment pavilion was sweltering enough without the bulky metal helmet radiating heat back into her skull. She lowered the helmet back onto its stand and made her way through the orderly stacks of gear and crates, all loaded with trinkets to distribute to the festive crowds outside. She stopped in the passageway, a white-gloved hand resting on the corner of the tent flap. Her mind was racing, playing through the announcement she’d just heard from the Board of Governors again and again:

“Notice to all squads: Palace Guard reports the discovery of a plot against the Crown. The wizard Jilmaq is suspected of currently carrying out acts of sorcerous treason at the very highest level. Stopping the wizard Jilmaq, without unduly alarming the populace, is of the utmost urgency. Last known location is his home in Drabelhelm district outside the city walls, a two-room hut removed from the main boulevard.

“All squads are directed to assist the Guard to the fullest, according to your means and your capacity.”

Dame Miri exhaled, making her decision. She swung the flap open, bright morning sunlight spilling over her. It was a warm, clear day, perfect for a population eager to celebrate Princess Naomi’s success in the Ordeals. It was almost unbearable to think that a situation so grave could be unfolding in the palace on a morning like this. The air was full of the sounds of talking, laughing, and music; it seemed that half of Delia was on the streets of Gildet, the well-manicured district just east of the Palace where the royal parade would begin that afternoon. *Spheres willing.*

Miri flashed a big smile to a cluster of families, who cheered and waved at her. The eyes of the fathers and the teenage sons widened and lingered on her as she walked; this was, as she well recognized, just another part of her job. The Parade squad’s mission was to make Petronauts as flashy, attractive, and appealing as possible to the masses. So her Parade “armor” was less like armor and more like a metallic cocktail dress, accented with white leather gloves that stretched to her elbows, and wedge-heeled boots with straps that encircled her tan legs to mid-calf. Her breastplate was, in fact, functional, and the swishing plates of her metal skirt might actually serve to repel an attacker who was determined to strike her above the knee and below the waist. But all in all, the armor was a costume to display the body beneath it, not to protect that body on a battlefield.

“—assist the Guard to the fullest, according to your means and your capacity.”

The words ran through her head again as she stopped a few meters behind Sir Sigurd. The brawny, barrel-chested Petronaut’s costume was even less practical than hers; more of his body was covered in bronzing oil than in clothing. Thick, studded bracers covered his wrists; a massive circular shield was slung over his back; his skirt was even shorter than hers. Apart from his boots, the rest of his impeccably conditioned physique was openly on display, for which the whispering women in the gathered crowd were grateful.

Dame Miri struck a balletic pose, smiling brightly and making herself a frame to the stunt he was preparing. Hands raised high, the big man suddenly poured his body backwards into a series of handsprings. After the third, he launched himself four meters in the air (with the aid of the ranine coils in his boots) and, with practiced legerdemain, shot two unobtrusive disks from his bracers into the ground below. He fell to earth in a sinewy crouch, like a panther leaping from a tree, just as the perfectly spaced flash disks burst, sending twin pillars of whistling white sparks high in the air on either side of him. The crowd, leaning out of windows and packed together on the flagstone sidewalks, cheered wildly.

“Lift,” Dame Miri called under her breath, keeping a smile on her face. Sigurd turned and saw her as she began running towards him. With the muscle memory of long practice, he swung his hands to her waist as she leapt, her upraised arms making a graceful arc above her back and her legs pointing ramrod-straight behind her. He lifted her above his head, raising her two and a half meters in the air. She curled her ring fingers and the fog jets at her waist activated, pumping out a cloud of sweet-smelling white smoke. The artificial cloud hovered in the gap between her waist and the top of Sir Sigurd’s head, obscuring the big man’s bulging arms. Dame Miri began to flap her long arms in smooth, symmetrical wingbeats, as if flying above the clouds. The crowd oohed and applauded fervently as Sigurd carried her along the street, a trail of gossamer cloud behind her.

When she stopped the fog jets, Sir Sigurd lowered her to the ground and the two Petronauts bowed to the thunderous acclaim of the crowd. Smiling brightly, Dame Miri put a hand on Sigurd’s oil-soaked shoulder and turned him away from the spectators. “We’re going on assignment,” she said, her mouth not moving.

“Where to? Parapet Square?” he asked under his breath, a smile similarly fixed on his face.

“Drabelhelm.”

He looked at her, and his smile flickered. “Dame Miri, I’ll be the first to say that the folks at the bottom need entertainment too, but—”

“Crown business, Sir Sigurd. There’s a plot afoot against Her Highness, and a wizard in Drabelhelm is the key to the whole thing.”

His big brown eyes widened. “By the living Spheres. Is the Guard mobilizing?”

“And all Petronauts are supposed to help,” she said, nodding. “Northeast Gildet puts us closer to Drabelhelm district than any other ‘nauts, and certainly closer than the Palace Guard, so we’re heading immediately to the site for reconnaissance.”

Sigurd stopped in his tracks, his mouth half open. Dame Miri turned to face him. “You want to be first on the scene against a wizard?” he said.

“Seconds may count today,” she said, dropping her smile. “We’ve got a duty to the Crown.”

“Dame Miri, I hear you; but our duty today is to keep people happy, not to—”

“And how happy will Donny Q. Delian be when he hears that his Princess is dead?” she hissed, stepping in close to him. Her violet eyes were hard, and she held Sigurd’s gaze for a long time.

“Sigurd,” she said, quietly. “I’ve learned a little about magic from the techs over in Recon. The wizard will be too focused on his spell to be any danger to us. And even if he does shift his attention to attack us, isn’t that a small price to pay if it saves Her Highness’ life?”

Sir Sigurd sighed, scratching his neatly trimmed blond beard. “You just can’t wait to be reassigned to the Shock Troop squad, can you?”

“Counting the days,” Dame Miri said, grinning. She squeezed his arm, her white glove coming away wet with bronzer. “Double-time, junior ‘naut,” she ordered, dashing down the street as quickly as the milling crowds would allow.

It was more than half past nine by the time they arrived on the outskirts of Drabelhelm. The muddy roads were crisscrossed every which way with carriage tracks. Not enough vehicles came out here for the city to justify improving the roadway. A handful of drunks, two here, one there, lay sprawled against the splintered fence outside a dilapidated mill. No merchant in her right mind would locate a workhouse out here now, with the incidence of crime and vagrancy as high as they were. And as long as jobs stayed away, and vehicle traffic was prohibitive, this isolated knot of poor souls was likely to stay just as crime-ridden and desperate as it was right now.

“Drunk on a feastday morning,” Sir Sigurd muttered, inclining his head towards the sleeping bodies.

“More likely sleeping off a feastday eve,” Miri said. She gathered her cloak around her more tightly and pressed forward. They’d stopped in the equipment pavilion for an instant to grab the long, inconspicuous brown cloaks. At least to a casual glance, they might not look like Petronauts immediately. *Keep telling yourself that*, she thought wryly, knowing that her filigreed boots and Sir Sigurd’s bare legs were plainly obvious beneath the cloaks.

“This wizard, Jilmaq, lives in a two-room hut a bit off the beaten path,” she told Sigurd. They scanned the moldering houses as they walked by. Most were deserted now, their occupants likely having made the long walk to the more developed areas of the city to find a spot on the parade route. Sigurd pointed down the winding street.

“It looks like there are a few alleyways down there.”

Dame Miri nodded. “We’ll fan out and inspect both sides of the block at once. If we get out of earshot, use a flash disk to—”

A heavy metallic clang shattered the air, and Sir Sigurd was driven to his hands and knees with a muddy splash. The big man grunted in pain and surprise. Dame Miri wheeled around, her violet eyes searching, and heard the rush of air just in time to leap backwards. Her ranine coils sent her flying wildly, skidding to a stop four meters away in front of a crumbling house. The thick crossbow bolt that had narrowly missed her was embedded deep in a fencepost across the street. Sigurd rolled onto his feet; the bolt aimed at his back had ricocheted off his shield, concealed by the brown cloak. As he reached awkwardly to bring the shield to bear, a dagger spun through the air and lodged in his left shoulder, sending a burst of blood skywards. Sir Sigurd howled, falling back to earth and clutching his wound.

“Sigurd!” Miri shouted. She finally caught sight of their attackers: the three drunks, perfectly alert now, standing by the abandoned workhouse fence. *Not drunks, but guards*, she thought, her heart pounding. One of them was cranking a new bolt into place on his crossbow; the second was stalking towards Sigurd with a fresh dagger in his hand; and the third was leveling a crossbow right at her.

Dame Miri flexed her ring fingers and a cloud of smoke billowed out where she was standing. She ducked into the abandoned house under cover of the smoke, seeing the trail of the crossbow bolt through the vapor as it twanged through the air. She quickly took stock of the filthy hut—a broken chair, scraps of pottery, a hearth full of ashes. A battered fireplace poker lay next to the hearth. She snatched it up and risked a quick glance through a gap in the rotting boards of the wall. Two of the men were sprinting towards the house, splitting up to flank the building from front and back. She couldn’t see the third man, on his way to slit Sigurd’s throat.

She shed the constricting brown cloak and squeezed her way lithely through a window in the back of the house, sinking into a catlike crouch among the weeds. The roof, sloped away from the workhouse and their attackers, was covered in shingles, not noisy thatch. Her mind working furiously, she prayed the rotting planks would support her weight and tucked the poker into the back of her skirt, parallel with her spine. Her fingers and toes found careful purchase as she scrambled up to the roof, as quietly as she could manage. There was no time to plan any further. She drew the heavy iron poker, dashed the few meters across the shingles—which, miraculously, stayed solid under her feet—and flung herself off the roof to the street below.

The three men yelled as she catapulted into view, sailing through the air. One of the men by the house wasted his crossbow bolt on a wild, hopeless shot, cursing loudly. The man menacing Sir Sigurd with a dagger looked up to see the Petronaut falling towards him, her skin and armor gleaming in the

sunlight. And then the iron poker struck him on his jawline just below the right ear, and he crumpled to the ground with a sickening noise.

Dame Miri landed heavily on her shoulder, her body twisted from swinging the poker in midair. But she used her momentum to roll, pivot, and flip back onto her feet, facing away from the remaining men. She was still holding the poker in her sooty white-gloved hand. She whirled on the two attackers as they rushed towards her, knives out.

“Miri, duck!” Sigurd shouted.

She flung herself to the ground unthinkingly as something hissed sharply above her head. Dame Miri glanced upwards to see a new figure standing above her, regaining its balance after the vicious left cross that had just missed her. She noticed the glint of three blades extending from the attacker’s knuckles before a steel-toed boot caught her forcefully in the stomach. She gasped with pain, her eyes watering, and rolled away in time to dodge a second kick. The new attacker was right on top of her; even with all her gymnastic skill, she barely reached her feet before a bladed fist came hurtling towards her again. The blow rebounded off her breastplate, tearing her exposed right bicep deeply instead. She rolled with the impact and sidestepped to the right, whirling the poker around in a wide arc and striking the backside of her adversary’s knee with all her strength.

Her assailant’s legs were swept upwards, sending the hooded figure tumbling back-first onto the muddy ground. Dame Miri blinked as she looked down. The figure was wearing a featureless oval mask, mottled brown like the inside of a tree trunk. From the two holes where eyes should have been, a pair of golden lights blazed up at her instead. The very blankness of the face was sinister, and Miri fought down a sudden pang of dread. The shape of the pliable armor Miri could see under the fighter’s black cape suggested this newcomer was a woman. Then she heard the distinctive whine of gears as the masked woman tensed her muscles, preparing to launch herself to her feet.

Stars and Spheres, she thought in disbelief. *She’s a Petronaut.*

Dame Miri jabbed downwards at the Petronaut with the point of her poker, but her moment of shock cost her. The woman flexed her fists, and her blade-claws ratcheted out another six centimeters. What had been empty air was now a swarm of knives, into which Dame Miri plunged her arms before she could stop herself. She screamed as the poker fell out of her hands, and she staggered backwards, slicing the backs of her hands open against the blades in her unthinking retreat. She looked down, taking stock of her injuries dumbly. Her hands and wrists were a mass of gashes, and her left hand didn’t seem to close properly.

Something solid was thrust into her right hand, which closed around it automatically. She looked down into Sir Sigurd’s sweat-drenched face. “Take them!” he shouted, gesturing at the two men, now closed to knife distance. He’d put the hilt of the dead man’s dagger into her hand. Muscle memory took over and Dame Miri narrowed her violet eyes, quickly taking stock of the distance. The swarthy man on the right gurgled, his face contorted with shock as a dagger spun through the air into his chest. He stumbled to the ground and was still. The other man closed with her, snarling in her face.

Miri weaved away from his first thrust to her head, and bent her belly away from his next slash. She didn’t trust her arms to function properly, so she kept them low by her side, giving her opponent as little body language as possible to read. As he advanced again, she kicked out with lightning speed, digging her heel into the sensitive tendons where the ankle meets the foot. His leg fell out from under him and he dropped onto his knee, grunting in pain as his knife arm swung up, uncontrolled. She pivoted, raising her right thigh high, and flicked a toe into his exposed wrist. The dagger fell dully into the mud, and he started to stagger to his feet. Two quick kicks to his stomach doubled him over again, clutching his belly. Dame Miri prepped herself with a breath, then raised her long left leg to its full extension, well above her head, and snapped it back downwards in an axe kick. Her heel clouted the miscreant at the base of his skull and he went limp. She was breathing heavily, and her vision was going fuzzy. *I’m losing blood*, she thought, trying to shake her head clear.

Sir Sigurd was on his feet, she saw, his shield strapped around his good arm. The fact that he wasn’t dead was a miracle; the masked Petronaut was striking at him furiously, her claws ringing against his shield again and again. Harsh golden light from the mask’s eye sockets reflected off the battered steel of

Sigurd's shield. He had fresh gouges on his back and leg. The other Petronaut was moving stiffly on her right leg, where Miri had struck her with the poker. Dame Miri snatched up the unconscious man's dagger in her still-functioning hand and sprinted towards the attacker.

When she was a few steps away, just as the Petronaut whirled towards her with a double fistful of blades, she used her wounded arm to press a button on her belt. Suddenly, Miri's breastplate flashed with dazzling, colored light that pulsed on and off in rapid succession. The Petronaut's featureless yellow eyes seemed to tilt down for just an instant at the display, and Dame Miri lunged forward, plunging the dagger into the woman's chest—

—where it rebounded harmlessly off her armor.

Miri stumbled to the ground, overextended from her lunge. The dagger slipped out of her hands, and she fought to pick it up in the muddy street, stunned. *That was better than any CQ armor we have in Delia*, she thought with an oddly dispassionate flash of interest. Then the masked Petronaut put her boot through Dame Miri's head (or so it felt), and the senior 'naut of the Parade squad lay on her back in the mud, her limbs splayed haphazardly around her, staring into the sunlight.

There was a distant roaring sound, and Miri rotated her face towards it. Sir Sigurd's muscular arms were snaked under the woman's armpits and his fingers laced on the back of her head. The full nelson was obviously agonizing for him to maintain, as his wounded shoulder oozed wetly from where he'd pulled the dagger free. Then he loosed the hold slightly so he could start clawing at her face. Dame Miri frowned absently, wondering why he would try such a thing. The woman struggled, stomping viciously on his feet and nicking his side with cuts from her extended claws. Sigurd finally succeeded in prying her mask upwards at the chin with his good hand, and then he lowered his injured left arm to a strange angle, the steel bracer on his wrist catching the light. His arm recoiled with a distant sound, like a puff of air, as something launched out of his bracer. The Petronaut's head flinched backwards as if stung, then the two grappling bodies disappeared from Miri's sight. She flicked her eyes upwards and saw the two of them poised high above the earth. *Her ranine coils are also very good to handle that much weight*, she thought, barely able to keep her eyes open.

The bodies came crashing back down a moment later. Sigurd tumbled gracelessly end over end and landed on his back in a shower of mud. Miri saw the muck splatter onto her legs, but could barely feel the chill of it. The Petronaut landed unsteadily, but on her feet, her bloody blades shining red in the sunlight. But the woman didn't slit their throats immediately. Instead, she retracted her claws and began digging at her face, her fingers pulling her dark hood back and reaching for an unseen clasp. She clawed at herself for a frantic moment before Sigurd's flash disk, lodged between her cheek and the mask, finally went off.

Twin columns of sparks burst forth from the eyeholes of the mask, streaming across Miri's whole field of vision. The Petronaut's final scream mingled with the whistling sparks as her body collapsed backwards, convulsing. Then there was only the sound of the whistling; then there was nothing but the chirping of birds, far away.

Get up, a voice said inside Dame Miri some time later. *Get up*.

She took a deep, noisy breath, as if emerging from a pool of water. She opened her eyes. How long had she closed them? Dame Miri gritted her teeth and rolled onto her side, her head pounding. Her left hand was useless, so she braced herself with her right and willed herself to her feet. Then she was standing, swaying unsteadily, her vision fuzzy and whirling. She concentrated on keeping her breathing steady, taking stock of the filthy street. No one else came towards them.

Sigurd was there on the ground. "Sir Sigurd," she said, her voice a feeble croak. "Sir Sigurd!" she said again, more authoritatively. "Report."

There was a long silence. His body wasn't moving. Miri tried to focus her eyes; she couldn't tell if he was even breathing. "Sigurd, you are ordered to report," she said again, her voice cracking.

The battered Parade 'naut finally coughed, his eyes still closed. "Tough crowd," he rasped.

Dame Miri smiled, shakily. She knelt down and put her hand on his good arm. "Can you stand?" she asked, quietly, looking into his pupils. Sigurd nodded.

"Then on your feet, junior 'naut," Dame Miri said, gently helping him to a sitting position. "We've still got a wizard to find."

Something was different.

Jilmaq continued to speak, as he'd been doing for twelve hours straight, holding the Princess' braid aloft. He was physically tired, but his determination and focus were as unflagging as ever. He knew the curse of boiling veins backwards and forwards, every syllable painstakingly researched and rehearsed for this fateful day. He was performing to the absolute best of his ability, just as his visitor had asked him to do.

And yet, suddenly, something was different.

With every phrase he spoke in the gradualistic spell, he imagined a grain of sand filling a vase. When the vase was full, the spell would be complete and the Princess—well, the spell would be complete. But now, in his mind's eye, he couldn't shake the image of a grain of sand lifting out of the vase for each one he dropped in. At first, the rate of removal had been far slower than his steady pouring-in. But now, roughly an hour after the strange visualization had popped into his head, the best he seemed to be able to manage was to keep the sand level. And a nagging premonition in the back of his head told him that, although he was already pouring as fast as his powers would allow, the force arrayed against him was only going to become stronger as time went on.

The wizard was covered in sweat, naked to the world, having shed his rags hours ago. But the cold sweat of terror was mingled with the natural result of his exertions now. His visitor had promised him protection, and that no intruders would break through to molest him in the unlikely event that anyone even knew to look for him. But he'd heard nothing about having to deal with a magical adversary. The spell was challenging enough already. How could he be expected to—

In the yard, his gate swung open with its distinctive screech. Jilmaq's eyes went wide, and he stumbled over his words. *It must be an animal in the yard*, he thought, frantically.

"Did you hear a voice?" a man's baritone voice said, barely audible through the walls.

"Check the back. Make sure no one runs away," he heard a woman reply. Her voice was ragged and merciless.

Spheres help me, Jilmaq thought. His thin chest was heaving, and his bloodshot eyes darted around his home in terror. Nowhere to run; no way to fight; no reason to surrender. He heard the hinges on his front door creak open. The only thing he could hope to do was to finish what he'd started.

"*Doxcoi, lavidesh ist maluvi malodi malacest*," he bellowed. Enough of this gradualism. It was time to cast the spell and let the ripples spread where they may. "*Naomi Elizabeth Galidate Haberstorm, malvodum sh'lesh dorask—*"

"What's that sound?"

"Get in here, Sigurd!" the woman's voice snapped. Around the corner came a blood-stained Petronaut with blue-black hair, one hand hanging limply by her side and a dagger in the other. Jilmaq shied away from her, his eyes wild and frantic as he continued to cast at the top of his lungs. She lowered herself into a crouch and, with impossible speed, launched herself across the room. The butt of her dagger struck Jilmaq's forehead and his whole world went white.

Princess Naomi screamed; the first sound her throat had made in thirteen years of life. Lady Ceres whirled to look at her, her face draining of color.

In the next room, Ouste felt the sudden rush of energy and, with quicksilver reflexes, spoke a single polysyllabic command. A last-ditch Ward had been enchanted into the stones of Princess Naomi's chambers when she had been born; an innovation of Ouste's own devising during the days of Queen Tess. She had been maintaining the Ward with a tiny corner of her mind for thirteen years, sacrificing that part of her own power indefinitely should the day come when speed was of the essence. Now released, the Ward loosed a great burst of invisible magical noise around the Princess, disrupting the connection between the Heir and a malicious spellcaster. Only the strongest of links could persist through a Ward of that magnitude.

The shock of the Ward's activation struck Ouste like a sledgehammer, her brain reeling with the upheaval. She dropped to the ground, insensible, cracking her skull on the tiled floor. One maidservant shrieked as the others rushed to her aid.

Lord Portikal rushed in from the anteroom at the sound of commotion. "Sweet Spheres," Portikal said, seeing Ouste prone on the floor as well, her head cradled in a maid's white lap. "Ouste, are you all right? What's happened?"

"Does the Princess live?" Ouste said, her eyes closed.

"I—"

"Does she live?" the wizard bellowed in a voice too large for her body.

Portikal swallowed, then ducked his head into the Princess' sleeping chambers. It was not permitted for a man to enter her sleeping rooms, but if the time had ever called for an exception, it was now. Lady Ceres was kneeling by the Princess' bedside, her back to the door. "Ceres!" he called out, fearful. "How is Her Highness?"

There was a long moment of silence. Then Ceres turned to face the other Regent, relief radiating from her strong face. "She's alive."

"She's alive, Ouste," Portikal said, sighing with relief. "Now, are you all right? What just happened?"

Ouste looked across the room at the Regent, blinking her light blue eyes. The Ward had disrupted the connection between Naomi and Jilmaq; and it had also burned the fog out of her brain. Memories came back to her, clear and sharp. The steady progress of the plan; the conference with Volman; setting up the mock *ojing*; settling in for a long day of meditation while Jilmaq went to work; and then, the inexplicable rush of sentimental garbage; the moronic decision to mutiny against herself; all leading up to the moment when she activated the Ward, expending a huge investment in time, treasure, and magical power to put the nail in the coffin of a plan of her own devising!

And all because—the conclusion was unavoidable—someone had invaded her. But not elegantly, like a proper adversary, but in the grossest, basest, clumsiest manner possible. The crudest of amateurs had managed to land a lucky blow today, of all days. And what was most galling was that now her hands were tied. With Jilmaq's connection broken, the spell would progress no further. Even if Ouste did nothing more to counter his curse, as it stood now, a healthy young girl like Naomi would recover from it naturally in a manner of days. The Regents and the populace, given the extenuating circumstances, would allow her to complete the Ordeals when she was healthy, and the entire plot would be unraveled.

She tried unsuccessfully to swallow her pride, her face tight with fury. Her best option now was a bitter pill indeed. "Now, Lord Portikal," she said, rising to her feet with the maids' help, "I must return to work. I will not rest until I have cured the Princess."

With that, Ouste began a spell of healing in snarling phrases of Mabinanto. *And after this*, she thought, *I will not rest until I put my rival in his grave.*

Chapter Thirteen

The Royal Visit

“What in the black flames do you think you’re doing here?” Samanthi said.

Lundin glanced over his shoulder and shrugged defensively. Their storeroom at the Petronaut warehouse was cramped, packed floor to ceiling with shelves and parts. This was where the carters had delivered the Melodimax and the Recon squad’s other gear after the riotous feastday yesterday. Lundin drummed his fingers on top of the squawk box. “I’ll come out in a moment.”

“You come out now,” she said, stalking into the room and closing the door behind her. Samanthi was wearing a suspiciously dress-shaped garment over top of her cleanest slacks, and her sandy hair was twirled into pretty, full-bodied curls not typically associated with rolling out of bed. Lundin, too, was in a glossy peacoat and had his boots blacked; though their shine wouldn’t last, the way he was shuffling his feet. “The Princess and the Regents have the right to show up late. *You*, junior tech, do not.”

“I just want a moment, please, Sam.”

“You can have a moment in the hall, with the rest of us, as we wait for Her Royal Highness to give the Petronaut community her personal thanks. Does something about this sound optional to you?” She put her hands on her hips as he steadfastly refused to meet her eyes.

“Do you think Dame Miri and Sir Sigurd don’t deserve to get medals?”

“Of course they do. They killed an invading Petronaut, they captured Jellyface, and they almost died.”

“Do you think Kelley and Mathias don’t deserve medals for making that steward crack?”

“Of course they do.”

“So, what? Are you bellyaching because *we* aren’t getting medals? Because if that’s it, I’ll slap your face here and now.”

“No.”

“You and I know that the public isn’t ready to hear we’ve got working magical machines.”

“I know,” Lundin said, his hand on the squawk box.

“And even if we could tell them you and I helped save the day, Kelley and Mathias would still get the press. The Regents would rather just deal with people with ‘Sir’ and ‘Dame’ in front of their names. That’s life, Horace.”

“I know that.”

Samanthi punched him in the shoulder, as hard as she could. “So what’s your damn problem?” she demanded.

“You know who else got a medal yesterday?” he said, quietly. Samanthi cocked her head. “Ouste.” She blew her breath through her lips, looking at the ground. “Hey, Horace.”

“For meritorious dedication in the protection and arcane restoration of Her Royal Highness.”

“Horace. What were we supposed to do?”

“She’s still up there in that palace. She’s got the trust of the Regents and the Princess more than ever before. And just because we stopped her once doesn’t mean we have any hope of stopping her next time.”

Samanthi put a hand on his shoulder, at gentle speed for once, not hitting speed. “At least we stopped her,” she said, clearly troubled by it herself.

“I just feel like we let the Princess down. We don’t even know what Ouste wanted. Or that steward. Or who that Petronaut was, or even where she was from.”

“So there’s more to do,” she said. “That doesn’t mean you can’t stop to celebrate a job well done. It just means that, when the party ends, you sleep it off and go back to work the next morning.”

Lundin smirked, shaking his head. "I'm always learning something from you, boss."

"If that were true, you wouldn't still be such an idiot." She grinned up at him.

The door to the main warehouse hall swung open again. Sir Kelley stepped inside, his black-and-silver suit spotlessly clean. Mathias hovered in the doorway, his long hair slicked back, touching the collar of his black silk jacket. "Mister Lundin!" Kelley barked, his eyes hard but his mouth smiling. "Ms. Elena! So good to see you! Now why aren't you out on the floor, like a couple of reasonable people?" Kelley's mouth chomped open and closed several times after his words finished, and his forehead furrowed in confusion.

Lundin and Samantha stared at him. "Coming out right now, Sir Kelley."

"Lundin was just being melancholy," Samantha explained.

"Melancholy?" Kelley growled. "Of all the self-indulgent—! Stars and Spheres, Lundin, sometimes I just can't stand you. And sometimes I love you!" he said suddenly, his voice rising. His mouth flopped open and stayed that way for a long moment, until he used his hands to physically close it again. A certain bewildered frenzy was creeping into his eyes.

"Spell's wearing off," Samantha whispered to Lundin.

"Or getting worse," he whispered back. "Funny; I thought I would be able to tell the difference between those two things."

Sir Mathias stepped forward and put a gentle hand on Kelley's shoulder. "You two should really come take your places out here," he said. "Dame Julie said she spotted the Regents' coaches a few minutes ago."

"Excuse me," a female voice behind them said.

The technicians saw Mathias and Kelley's eyes go wide, and the two 'nauts dropped to one knee, heads bowed. Lundin and Samantha turned around to see the forgotten side door to the outside swinging wide open. There in the doorway was a massive woman, easily as big as Mathias, in ceremonial blue and silver dress armor. Lady Ceres had a tight smile on her face, her hand resting lightly on the doorframe. Standing in front of her was a slight girl in a pale blue tunic with dark blue leggings. Were it not for the platinum bracelets on her wrists, or the jeweled diadem in her short, fawn-colored hair, Princess Naomi might have looked like any other midling girl, laughing and playing in the streets. But there was something else, in her deep brown eyes; a striking maturity that told even a casual observer that this girl was beyond the ordinary.

The techs sank to their knees. "Hail to her Highness, hail to the Regents," the whole squad said in a confused, dutiful flutter.

"Please stand up," Ceres' warm voice carried through the room. Uneasy, they stood up, eyes fixed on the young Princess. Naomi smiled at them, her fingers fluttering. "Don't let the others know we're here yet. Her Highness says to be very quiet, just like her," Ceres translated with a grin.

The squad looked at each, at a loss. "*Do we laugh? Was that a joke?*" The unspoken questions flew between them. But Naomi's hands were already moving again, and Ceres continued to translate. "Before the award ceremony, Her Highness wanted to get a quick look into the, uh... the underbelly?"

Naomi rolled her eyes and moved her fingers again, tracing a low curve with the tip of her index finger. "The other side," Ceres corrected. "The other side of the Petronaut world. After everything you all did for her yesterday, she's quite interested in your work, technicians and knights alike," Ceres explained.

"Her Highness takes after Queen Tess, then?" Sir Kelley asked tentatively, his mouth behaving for once.

Ceres laughed; a low, throaty sound. "She just might," she said. "Her Majesty was never happier than when she was hearing about some new gadget that smoked and spun."

"Our technicians would be honored to show you anything you want to see, your Highness," Sir Mathias said, bowing his head. Naomi nodded back, a smile on her lips.

Lundin turned, wide-eyed. "Sir Mathias, Sir Kelley," he said, his mouth dry. "Wouldn't you rather be the ones to, uh, tour the gear with Her Royal, uh?" he trailed off, star-struck.

Mathias shook his head, grinning. “Her Highness said she wants to see the Petronaut underbelly. And I’m afraid that’s you two.”

“Besides,” Sir Kelley said, raising his face into an almost-normal smile with great difficulty. “Petronauts are always only as good as their technicians. Ask away, Your Highness.”

“Go on,” Ceres encouraged. “What would you like to know about?”

Naomi’s eyes swept the room. Her gaze fell on the dented Melodimax, with the stacks and stacks of plate-sized metal disks piled up all around it. Princess Naomi laid a hand on the cabinet, her other fingers signing at breakneck pace.

““This looks like a squawk box,”” Ceres said, frowning. ““But so many disks! You listen to music while you work?””

Lundin and Samanthi looked at each other. They’d talked it over for a long time during the feastday, and decided that the city wasn’t ready to hear that mechanized wizardry was a reality. Between the hype and the hysteria, the advocates and the naysayers who would all come crawling out of the woodwork, too much publicity now would destroy the idea before it even began. For now, it needed space. The two of them needed space, too, to savor the quintessentially Petronaut joys of taking a chaotic slice of the world and trying to put a loving, orderly box around it. All they wanted was to dig their minds into the problem as independent researchers for just a little while longer.

But here was Princess Naomi, daughter of Queen Tess, the greatest friend the Petronaut community had ever known, resting her hand on the ir mechanical mage and looking up with expectant brown eyes.

With city-wide publicity, in the best-case scenario, their work would be taken away from them. There were any number of worst-case scenarios, and almost all of them involved Ouste figuring out who had enchanted her.

The two techs looked at each other and shared a deep breath. *Ultraxi Pillok Mentatum Est*. All they could hope is that they were equal to do whatever was coming next.

“Actually, Your Highness,” Samanthi said, stepping closer to the heir, “this is a special project we’ve been working on in secret; so secretly, that not even all the Petronauts know about it.”

“I’m a head of state, almost. I can keep all kinds of secrets,”” Ceres translated, shaking her head. Princess Naomi gestured at them, her foot stomping and palms splayed open in a movement that needed no translation. <<*What is it?*>>

“Your Highness,” Lundin said, his face almost as alive with excitement as hers, “It’s a wizard.”

Princess Naomi’s brown eyes went wide.

About the Author

“In [The Wizard That Wasn't], Rovik demonstrates his skill... convincing and realistic multidimensional characters... rich drama and intrigue... the dialogue is witty and fast-paced. I truly enjoyed Rovik's work.”

—**Indie Book Blog Database**

“It's always a pleasure to discover a new indie author who knows how to tell a good story... If you want to see what it looks like when dieselpunk-fantasy is done well, get a hold of this one.”

—**Mike Reeves-McMillan, author of [City of Masks](#)**

Ben Rovik is the author of the *Mechanized Wizardry* series and the related short story collection *Petronaut Tales*. Ben is also a published, award-winning playwright (writing as Ben Kingsland), and spent many years as an actor before finally deciding to settle down into a sensible career: steampunk novelist. He's one of ten people who graduated from Johns Hopkins University with no intention of becoming a doctor. He lives in Maryland with his wife, daughter, two cats, and a great deal of wine.

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Other Petronaut Tales



[Arm's Length](#)

Sir Roland of the Bulwark squad has a suit built to take enormous punishment so his comrades don't have to. When the Delian schooner *Granite* comes under attack from two corsair clippers, Roland and his tech are duty-bound to defend the sailors and civilians on board. But keeping the pirates at arm's length is going to take some unorthodox measures...

[Ebook on Amazon](#)



[Aloft](#)

Junior technician Ensie Thalanquin is the odd girl out in the Aerial squad. When she falls for a civilian machinist, can they keep a relationship afloat despite the differences in their backgrounds, the meddling of their superiors, and the pressure of a dangerous flight test a few short weeks away?

[Ebook on Amazon](#)

Sample Chapter from *The Mask And The Master* Book Two of Mechanized Wizardry

Saving Princess Naomi was only the beginning for the Petronauts of Delia. It's up to Horace Lundin and a brand new team to unlock the mysteries of magic before their enemies can, and it's up to Kelley, Mathias, and Samanthi to lead the hunt for masked Petronauts outside the city walls. As they scour the Tarmic Woods for information, the Recon squad stumbles on some unpleasant surprises...

Sir Kelley was intently listening to the knot of smugglers, his head cocked and his armored body absolutely still. The men and women were too far away for Sir Mathias to make out their low conversation, but Kelley had closed the distance enough that a single enhanced leap from his hiding place would land him right in their midst. If they were saying anything of interest, hopefully Kelley was picking it up.

One of the smugglers stabbed his finger towards the ground, leaning in closer to the woman he was speaking to. As the man moved his arm, a long metal cuff slid down his wrist. Mathias frowned, tilting his head for a better view. It covered more than half of his forearm, but hung loosely, like a bracelet. The thin man unconsciously pushed it back towards his elbow with his other hand, continuing to speak and paying no attention to the ill-fitting accessory. *Strange thing to be wearing, out here in the forest.* It looked so awkward Mathias had trouble believing it was decorative, but what practical purpose could a too-big bracer on only one arm serve?

The woman moved to a bundle on the ground and untied it with a sharp yank. Craning his neck, Mathias caught a glimpse of gleaming black fur underneath the oilcloth. Judging by the height, there were maybe three dozen pelts in the stack. A heavyset man was arranging another cloth on the ground as she rifled through the poached skins. The thin man with the cuff crossed his arms over his chest, visibly impatient. The woman lifted about a third of the skins from the stack, holding them away from her body, and set them into the other cloth. As the heavyset man tied up the new bundle, the woman put her hands on her hips and barked something to the whole group. "...want to kill yourselves, then go ahead!" came drifting up the hill to Mathias.

The thin man closed the distance with the woman, his finger in her face. Every hand went to a weapon as the rest of the smugglers eyed each other. Far from being a unified group, it was clearly two against four now. The woman and the heavyset man wanted their cut of the furs, and the others weren't inclined to give it to them. The heavyset man had a nervous hand on each of the pistols in his belt as he stood behind the woman, carefully watching as the guard let his musket drift towards the pair. The thin man gestured angrily at the smaller bundle of furs, then pointed south with one long finger. Mathias unconsciously drew closer to his tree as the man's finger pointed essentially right past him, but none of the smugglers even looked up.

The woman raised her palm. "... to Delia? Now?" her voice rose, as she looked the thin man and his three cohorts in the eye, one at a time. She dipped her head and rocked back on her heels with mock casualness, and her mouth moved through a slow series of words.

It must have been an insult—and a good one—because suddenly the air was bristling with guns and swords, and the heavyset man was frantically trying to cover four enemies with two weapons. *Spheres*, Sir Mathias thought, shifting his weight. *These idiots are going to kill each other before we learn anything!* The arguing man and woman squared off against each other impassively. He extended his arm past her, pointing at the furs with an air of finality. His metal cuff slid out of place again, jangling down

at the base of his wrist. With a lazy motion, she lifted a gloved hand from her hip and flicked the metal bracer, hard, with the backs of her fingers. There was a metallic impact, then a brief chattering sound—

And three claws ratcheted out of the cuff.

Just like the blades on that 'naut in Drabelhelm! Mathias' eyes went wide, his body tensing up. This band of thugs just became a thousand times more interesting.

He shot a quick glance across the hillside to Sir Kelley, who was looking right back at him, his body language reading the same anticipation. Kelley pointed to the northwest, then raised two fingers and indicated the two of them. *Iggy will create a distraction; then we go in.* Sir Mathias nodded, and Kelley blew three quick chirps into his signal whistle. The sound blended right in among the scattered birdsong in the forest; as Mathias glanced back towards the smugglers, none seemed to have even heard it. The thin man was sputtering, grabbing at his wrist as he tried to get the blades to sheathe themselves again. The woman laughed, deliberately disregarding the weapons all around her. She turned her back on the thin man and walked towards the share of the furs she'd taken. Furious, he drew back his bladed arm for a blow.

Then a flying saucer came hurtling towards him through the trees.

The smugglers stared up at it, momentarily dumbfounded as the Aerial squad's impossible machine plowed through the low-hanging branches to their northwest, more than three meters off the ground. It exhaled a noisy stream of air as it flew, the raspy sound clearly audible to Mathias now, about two hundred meters distant. The machine was a platform, the bottom third of a hollow cone, ringed with inward-sloping walls. Its circular base was nearly a meter thick, concealing the mighty propeller inside, and the slanted walls rose up another meter. Its pilot, Iggy, was crouched out of sight as the machine, visibly tilting in the direction it was flying, powered through the air twice as fast as a man could run. The exterior of the floating platform was covered with interlocking panes of dull grey armor, studded with hundreds of rivets. Sir Mathias couldn't help but smile at the sight of their implausible cavalry, charging headlong towards the frightened smugglers.

Go get 'em, Ironsides, he thought.

A chaotic volley of shots rang out from at least five guns, sending puffs of white smoke into the air. Most of the shots went wide, but the guard's musket ball connected with Ironsides, sending the floating platform into a drunken wobble as it barreled forward. Half the smugglers toppled to the ground in fear as the machine flew over their heads, far too high to collide with them. The thin man raised his arms involuntarily to shield his face, and the force of the air column beating down on him drove his own claws into his cheek. He hollered in pain, sinking to his knees and pressing his other hand to his face. The claw-blades hanging by his side were tinged with blood. Ironsides continued gliding through the air past the disoriented mob, leaving a trail of twigs and splinters in its wake. Only one of the smugglers had the presence of mind to reload, already pouring powder into her pistol for a second shot.

That means we'll get you first, Mathias thought, stepping out from behind the tree.

"Drop your weapons, by the Throne of Delia!" he bellowed. He fired, his shoulder rocking back with the familiar recoil of the gun in his arm. The smuggler spilled her powder as she leapt backwards from the shot at her feet. Then Kelley raced past her in a blur, his metal arm extended, clotheslining her into the dirt. Mathias lowered his arm and started to run towards the fray as quickly as he could without toppling his heavy suit over on the steep hill.

Mathias watched as the heavysset man drew a massive hunting knife and leapt at Kelley, blade slashing towards the 'naut's chest. Sir Kelley flung his torso backwards and the point of the knife scraped along his armor, just below his pectorals. He kicked the smuggler in the stomach, his armored greaves knocking the wind out of the big man. In a fluid motion, Kelley drew his black baton from its loop on his back and brought it down in a great dark arc onto the man's wrist. The knife dropped from his shattered grasp and he crumpled to the ground. Then Mathias noticed the other woman looking at him from behind the gaping barrel of a blunderbuss. *She was the only one who didn't fire at Ironsides,* the 'naut realized belatedly, swinging his arm up and hoping he could get a shot at her before—

A flurry of gunfire rang out from the west and the woman contorted in agony, bleeding from her shoulder and her leg. Mathias shot a quick look over at the squad of Delian field agents, advancing into

the clearing in two disciplined lines. He caught the eye of the freckled agent who'd been working with Samanthi, the barrel of her pistol still smoking. She nodded at him, a curl of auburn hair peeking out of her skullcap and the edges of a smile on her mouth. Then she grabbed her powder horn and tended to her pistol with the utmost professionalism. Sir Mathias stifled a smile of his own and picked up the pace, charging across nearly flat ground now towards the terrified two smugglers still standing.

Two? There should be three left...

"Mathias! East!"

Sir Kelley's harsh voice launched him into action. The thin man was fleeing east, stumbling through the woods with his bloody claw-arm trailing behind him. Those claws were the prize of the whole operation; there was no way the smuggler could be allowed to escape. Sir Mathias left the other smugglers behind as Kelley and the agents swept down on them, and broke east after the escapee. He raised his arm as he ran, gun barrel tracking the man's legs, but the smuggler was leaping through the underbrush like a rabbit and reliable aiming was impossible. The Regents would want this man alive.

"Stop, in the name of the crown!" he shouted out. The rancid coils were pumping in his legs and his strides got longer and longer, erasing the distance between them. A beetle splattered against the faceplate of his helmet with a wet noise and a smell like a spill in an apothecary shop, but he didn't even slow down. The smuggler struggled through a dense patch of ferns, suddenly turning north and disappearing from view around a rain-smooth boulder. Mathias jumped, the wind whistling in his earholes as he flew skywards. He landed on the peak of the boulder, looking two meters down at the smuggler on the other side. The man had stopped, fiddling with something on his belt. "You can't run—" Sir Mathias began, raising his arm.

"Death to the pretenders," the thin man wailed, the claw-marks on his face red and wild.

He hurled something through the air at Mathias, his long arm swinging jerkily. Sir Mathias sighted along his wrist and fired, coolly, clipping the smuggler in the thigh. The thin man crumpled to the forest floor, and then a small black bottle broke against the Petronaut's chest, and he burst into flames.

The heat was incredible. Sir Mathias slapped his breastplate unthinkingly to beat the flames out, and his gauntlet came away sticky and flaming. The temperature against his chest rose astonishingly with each passing second. The fire was dripping down his stomach towards his groin. He scraped at it with both hands, his body acting automatically while his mind retreated in shock, until both hands were engulfed in flames. The heat of his armor was growing unbearable; beneath it, he could feel the layers of thick cloth padding against his skin starting to curl and scorch, and smell the smoke as they went alight. Staggering on top of the boulder, Mathias looked down at his breastplate. Some jellied substance was clinging to it—a dark black slime—and everywhere he had spread the ooze on himself, he was a roaring flame. If he didn't put the fire out soon, it would find its way along the fuel lines to the petrolatum bladders against his lower back. If that happened, this boulder would become a crater, and Sir Mathias Mascarpone would be ten thousand bloody morsels for ten thousand hungry vermin on the forest floor.

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