

KNOTS & ANCHORS

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Original Timeline

Chapter 1

“Knot finders are like the undead. You can't kill them unless you take off the head.”

The official inquisitor of the Hall of Justice squinted at Wray. “There's no such thing as the undead, Your Honor.” He shook the square bottle in his right hand and the remaining poison sloshed around the glass like liquid emeralds . The other half had been poured down the throat of the inquisitor's latest subject, a woman strapped to a rack a few feet away. She was barefoot. The rest of her clothing were rags. And her head hung down with dark tangled hair obscuring her features. Her body twitched for a moment before relaxing. She raised her head revealing strange brown-gold eyes. Something wrong skittered behind her gaze.

Wray gave the inquisitor a stingy smile. “Any more of that and she will be of no use.”

“I'm just trying to do my job, Your Honor.” The inquisitor smiled back revealing black teeth. “Justice wanted a confession so I'm going to give 'em one.”

“The truth serum works best in smaller doses.”

“Well, what will you have me do? The git won't say anything no matter what I do.”

“I have a better idea.” Wray folded his arms until they disappeared under the folds of his gray-green judicial robes. A joke, he thought, on him. He was no judge. But unlike others who fell into the thankless job and never got out again, he was going to do something about it. And the wretch on the rack was his ticket to it. “Extracting a confession and capital punishment are mere formalities under the law. The evidence is quite clear on the matter. And the victim has no friends

or family, in this jurisdiction at least, who could plead otherwise. I've spoken with Calner. The knot finder will be of more use to us alive than dead.”

“Oh? What sort of use?”

“For traversing broken tethers.”

The woman on the rack screeched. “No! Just kill me now. That's suicide!”

The inquisitor set the bottle of poison down on a nearby table and scratched his head. “Well, if that's the case, I'd say the use would be worse than the punishment. Broken tethers are supposedly impossible unless you're a legendary Ancient. Are you sure you don't want me to continue to extract a confession?”

“I'm sure.”

The woman screamed. “You bastard! You don't know what the hell you're asking, you privileged toad. There are things on the tethers you don't know about. And if you knew about them, you'd think twice about traversing the tethers, even to see dear old grandma. There are things out there. Things that if you saw, you'd want to gouge your eyes out.” She began thrashing around on the rack, but the leather ropes held and all she succeeded in doing was tangling her hair further.

“The git is mad,” said the inquisitor as he rolled his eyes. “There's no rhyme or reason to her fits. You say something, it could be anything, and she goes off. Nearly skewered one of my assistants earlier when he decided to question her about her family.”

“Mad or not, knot finders are hard to come by,” said Wray. “Even harder to come by are any knot finders who will traverse a broken tether. Or in this case, unwillingly.”

“Good luck with that. It's going to be difficult to have her come along with you with the git in this state. Do you want me to use the tranquilizer?”

“Have you used the tranquilizer on her before?”

“No. But there's always a first time for everything.”

Wray half expected for the tranquilizer to fail. After all, the truth serum that the inquisitor had forced into her had not worked. But after the inquisitor topped off a syringe with a clear liquid he obtained from a thin blue bottle sitting next to the truth serum and jabbed it into the woman's flailing arm, she suddenly went still as if an invisible wind had sucked out all of her energy.

As a judge specializing in small claims, he rarely ever ventured down into the interrogation rooms in the basement of the Hall of Justice. But when he did, he often privately objected to the brutal methods that the inquisitors used to extract confessions and mete out punishments. This wasn't anything different. Even if the woman was a murderess and even if she was a knot finder, part of a breed engineered by the Ancients to be resistant to nearly every substance known to man, he thought the torture too messy and time consuming. Why waste all your efforts on all of this when a quick beheading would solve everyone's problems?

But in this case, he had the inquisitor to thank for whatever bureaucratic delays he had instigated before the inevitable. It had given him enough time to discover that a knot finder was in the Hall's custody and to convince Calner, the presiding judge of the murder trial, to give her to him for use in a "personal research project" that could substitute as a punishment under certain arcane laws. Of course, his personal research project wasn't research at all. It didn't matter to him if the woman lived or died. She was just a tool for something much bigger than finding a broken tether.

The inquisitor poked at the woman's arm to see if she was still responsive. When he was satisfied that she was completely sedated, he finally signed off on a form that Wray had produced from a pocket. He untied the leather rope and shoved her body into Wray's arms. "There you go. If you lose control of her, it's going to be your head that's going to be on the chopping block, not mine."

"That's fine." Wray was expecting her to be heavy, but she was actually smaller than she seemed on the rack. They must have been starving her, he mused. She seemed like nothing but skin

and bones. He didn't find it too hard to haul her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. "You can take this up with Judge Calner if you want an official word."

The inquisitor snorted as he went back to organizing his bottles and implements of dangerous substances. "If anything, you taking the git off my hands will just give me more time tonight to go to the tavern. This stuff is hard work, you know."

"Hm," he said noncommittally as he moved back to the entrance. With his free hand, he opened that scarred door that separated the interrogation chamber from the rest of the basement. He let the door slam behind him as he climbed the stairs up to the first floor of the Hall of Justice.

It was just after work hours and most of the workers in the Hall had gone home after an entire day of working on various cases that came through the place. Most of the cases were similar to what Wray worked on most of his time, small claims involving businesses and organizations, bureaucratic tape involving everything from new residents buying property in the city to business financial records. Large cases involving murder and theft were usually handled by the crimes division. But as things were in Despina, even that division was swamped with paperwork of all kinds. Wray merely took advantage of the situation to get what he wanted.

The Hall of Justice was located off one of the main streets sprouting south from the city hub. Nearby were other city buildings, City Hall, the Guard House, the Commerce Guild. Once Wray was out of the Hall of Justice, he climbed down a flight of stairs from the building down to the near empty street. No one who was out and about looked at him twice or asked him why he was carrying a person on his shoulder. In any case, the gray-green robes that he wore gave him a certain authority that made anyone think twice about possibly questioning him.

Wray did not live far from his place of work. It was only two blocks from the Hall of Justice that he turned down a thin, winding residential road lined with three story town houses. His own home stood at the corner, a dark blue shadow in the dimming light. It was a property that he had

inherited after his father died. The only property that he still held after he decided on a certain course for vengeance.

By the time he made it inside the foyer, the woman on his shoulder started to wake up. He headed to the guest room on the first floor and dumped her on the sofa near the window. He winced when he realized that the woman was still filthy from her imprisonment. His housekeeper was going to be livid when she realized that the sofa would have to be cleaned.

The woman moaned and then her eyes opened. She opened her mouth, but he covered it with his palm before she could scream.

“Be quiet,” he said.

In response, she bit his hand. Wray cursed and jumped back. He looked at his hand. She had managed to draw blood.

“Bastard,” she hissed. She tried to get up, but she fell back onto the sofa as her legs gave way, still too weak from the tranquilizer that the inquisitor had given her. “Who the hell do you think you are, taking me to this death trap?”

“This is no death trap,” he replied. “This is my home. And you'd best remember that you're a guest here until I have no more use of you.”

She glared at him. “What did you do to me? I can't even stand up.”

“I had the inquisitor tranquilize you so you could be easier to transport.”

“Bastard.”

“Tell me something I don't know,” he retorted. “For the time being, you should be glad that you're not getting poisoned back in the dungeon in the Hall of Justice. You're going to be weak for a little while yet from the affects of the tranquilizer. I suggest you get some sleep. In the morning, I'll tell you what your duties are.”

The woman screamed, then. But since she couldn't get up and have at him, he retreated and

shut the door to the guest room, muffling the sound somewhat. But that didn't prevent the rustle of footsteps in the hallway and the appearance of the housekeeper, an old woman who had worked for his family for decades, even before he had been born.

“What on earth is that?” Gerhild exclaimed. Her night cap bobbed as she tried to strain past him to see what was going on in the guest room. “It sounds like you have a girl in there.” She turned back to give Wray a glare. “You may be a judge, my boy, but that doesn't give you leave to kidnap helpless girls for your pleasure. Release her at once.”

“You have no idea what you're asking, Gerhild,” Wray replied. “That isn't just some girl. You could say that I rescued her from certain death. She just doesn't know it yet. As a knot finder, she's critical to my plans.”

The old woman sniffed. “I don't approve of your plans, boy. And neither would your parents, were they still here, rest their souls.”

“But since they're not here, that doesn't matter, does it?” The woman had stopped screaming. Good, he thought. To the housekeeper, he said, “She's just a bit overwrought from all the things that have happened to her today. Tomorrow morning, give her a bath and feed her breakfast before sending her to my work rooms. I need her well rested before I use her.”

Chapter 2

The vision came about ten minutes after he decided to sit down at his desk to study the knot jumping manual that he had obtained from a book antiquarian the week before. Visions came at strange, random times when he was awake, sometimes while he was in the middle of working,

sometimes in the middle of a meal, or even when he was in conversation with another person. When he had been younger, an oncoming vision would trigger involuntary spasms that would look like an epileptic fit. But as he grew, he had mastered enough control so that he could still minimally function when a vision came. It was the rare person who could tell when he was under the grip of a vision.

But since he was alone in his work room, he let the vision take him under completely. He found himself on a dark, foggy plain with nothing but some swampy water and a dead tree. It was impossible to make out anything else in his surroundings except for the fact that it was probably in the evening.

Not all the visions that he had were important. But because some of the visions he had did come true, he had learned that everything in a vision could have meaning. In case this one could be a clue to the future, he tried to scrutinize every detail that he could see. The dead tree appeared to be an oak, judging from the dried leaves lying at its base. Otherwise, its bark was as black as charcoal, as if it had endured a previous fire. The water near the tree was as black as the tree bark, opaque from all of the dirty debris that floated on the surface. Otherwise, there didn't seem to be anything of note. Perhaps this was one of his unimportant visions. So he waited for the vision to fade.

It was when he began to become aware of his work room again that something flickered at the corner of the dark pond. A dismembered hand washed up onto the shore.

The vision left him suddenly, leaving him gasping over his desk. He stared blindly at the manual in front of him as the afterimage of the hand lingered in his mind. The hand appeared to be his own.

He had seen the deaths of many people in his visions. For instance, he had seen the death of the Emperor, his Regent, and several of his counselors in a vision when he was fifteen. It had been a bloody, filled with dismembered body parts and debris from an explosion that had rocked the royal

throne room. He had been disturbed then and he could not help telling his parents and his oracle mentors, but they had all ignored him, thinking it was a nightmare that he had mistaken for a true vision. But then it had come true. Everyone had then talked about it, but still they had ignored him because he had still been a boy.

But even that vision had nothing on this one because this one had appeared to be one about himself. He rarely had visions about himself. However, when he did, he took notice. There was, of course, the possibility that he was mistaken. That the hand that he had seen in his vision had not been his. But his gut told him that his initial impressions were correct. If his vision was to be believed, there was a certain chance in the future that something terrible would happen to him if he continued his course. And losing a hand might be the least of his problems.

He lowered his head so that his forehead touched his desk and he breathed deeply. Nightmares and bad visions could not deter him from his chosen path. After what had happened to him, he would do anything and everything to avenge his parents' death and the loss of his own honor, never mind the fact that people still called him "Your Honor." If he died doing it, at least he tried.

The creak of a door broke into his rumination about his determination to continue his course despite the dark vision.

"I have half the mind to kill you where you're sitting, but the housekeeper keeps telling me that you saved my life so I will refrain from doing so. At the moment."

Wray finally lifted his head and turned to see who had disturbed him in his lair. The woman that he had carried back home the previous night was standing at the door. If it weren't for her strange, mad eyes, he would not have recognized her. She had bathed. Her dark hair which had been in tangles before was combed back into a severe bun. And she was wearing a clean, though dull, gray dress that was a little big for her, probably borrowed from Gerhild. The housekeeper had tried

to make the dress fit better on the woman's thin frame by cinching it with a white sash around her waist, but the sleeves and neckline still hung loose around her. She wore matching gray slippers which made no sound as she fidgeted at the threshold.

“Perhaps you might be the eventual death of me,” he replied. “But I've just had a vision and I know it won't be today.”

“What are you, some kind of oracle?”

“Just a two-bit fortune teller. Or at least that's what all my mentors have said. I might have amounted to something significant once upon a time, but that's not possible now.” He smiled bitterly as he thought back on a happier time, when he had trained hard in order to get the opportunity to apply to the coveted position of Seer to the Doge. And then everything had fallen apart after his father's death. “Come closer. There are certain duties I expect from you for the reprieve I granted you back at the Hall of Justice.”

“It was a reprieve that I never asked for.” She made no indication to follow his directions to move. Instead, she turned her head to survey his work room. It was located at the back of his townhouse, next to the kitchens. It used to be a shed for storage, but after his parents' deaths, he had it converted into a work space. One side of the room was lined with a built-in bookshelf, filled with volumes related to traveling the tethers, knot navigation, and theories proposed by the Ancients on the nature of universes. He had read all of those books, but he only understood a fraction of it. The rest of the room was cluttered with mechanical instruments and partially disassembled engines. The remains of machines built to travel the tethers.

“Too bad. Because you're here now.”

“If this is how you're like all the time, no wonder you live here by yourself with only the servants for company.” Her gaze fixed upon a device sitting in the corner of the room collecting dust. It was a black box made of some kind of strange, shiny material as if it was obsidian or jet. But

no matter what he had done with it, it had done nothing. It had not broken apart. And it was stronger than diamond. She finally moved, but it was towards this object. She examined it, but made no move to touch it.

He ignored her earlier jab. "I think you already have a pretty good idea of what I want you to do. Considering your profession..."

"My destiny," she interrupted, "that I never asked for either."

"You're a knot finder. A navigator. I need to get to a certain city that can only be accessed by a tether that had been broken since the departure of the Ancients from this world. And you are the key."

"I am the key to nothing. I know I'm just a pawn." She finally reached out to touch the black box. She held it in her palms. "This is the work of demons, you know."

"No, that's the work of the Ancients," he corrected her. He didn't know why she thought the box was made by demons, but he had read about her background when he found out about her murder trial. Edith of Valdrada wasn't sane. Had never been considered sane. But her skills were high enough in demand that her employer had no qualm in hiring her to work. And that had been her employer's mistake. This was probably his mistake, too, but he had the advantage of foresight.

"Why do you think it's been made by the Ancients?"

"I deduced it. I haven't seen it mentioned in any of the manuscripts about the Ancients that I've come across, but I'm pretty sure a substance that is tougher than anything that is known to man was certainly made by someone more technologically advanced."

"I've seen this before," she said. "It's the equivalent of a periscope."

"What's a periscope?"

"It's like a telescope, but it's attached to a submarine." Seeing his stony, confused expression, she shook her head. "So this world hasn't developed a submarine. Do you know what a telescope

is?"

"Of course I know what a telescope is."

"You don't have to sound testy about it." She touched the black cube in a strange series of movements. A light flashed and then the side of the cube went white. "Well, this is sort of like a telescope, except it uses gamma rays instead of visible light to visualize your surroundings. It's very sensitive to anything in the environment, which is good for the beings who live in a certain city on a distant web connected to Zirma."

"I've heard of Zirma, but I've never been there."

"Then you would have never heard of these beings either. They call themselves demons. It is a corruption of an Ancient term for their race. They aren't actually the demons that you would have known from mythology." She glanced down at the white part of the cube and saw something that made her yelp and drop the object. The cube winked back into darkness. She slowly edged away. "There are too many dangerous things in this place. And since you obviously don't have any clue about any of this stuff, I think it would be best for you to just leave whatever plans you have for traveling broken tethers and let me go."

"I don't think so. You won't deter me that easily with talk of danger." He glanced over at the cube. "You need to teach me more about that mechanism. About all these mechanisms here."

She gave a small laugh. "And I thought I was the mad one. Is that why you've collected all of these things? To help you find a broken tether? Why would you want to do that? There are so many other cities you can get to through tethers that aren't broken."

"If I wanted to get to the cities that were connected by unbroken tethers, you wouldn't be here, would you?" He finally stood up from his seat. "I need to get to a city that was disconnected from the web of tethers a long time ago. When the Ancients left the known worlds. After the Great Rending. Marozia."

She laughed fully then. “Marozia? You've been reading too many fairy books, Your Honor.” She said his title in a sarcastic tone, as if *Your Honor* meant *you are an idiot*. “Marozia doesn't exist. It's a fool's paradise invented by the Ancients just so people like me would go on navigating the tethers without questioning why they can never stop.”

Chapter 3

Wray had the impression that Mad Dita, as that was what Edith insisted that he call her since that was what everyone else called her, was not taking his project seriously. Apparently she really believed that the existence of the city of Marozia was really a myth and that any attempts at getting there would end in death, at best. But whatever the case, he was willing to risk death.

A few days before Dita's trial, Wray had gotten word from a few of his contacts in the Despina underworld that a certain high official belonging to a group called the Black Cockatrice was on the hunt for a particular manuscript that was said to give whoever possessed it a political and strategic advantage. Wray could guess very well what the Black Cockatrice wanted: to gain favor with the Doge of Despina and the new Emperor. And with that thought in mind, Wray had immediately decided that he had to get his hands on this manuscript himself. There was no way he wanted to Black Cockatrice to gain advantage.

After the death of his parents, Wray had been numb to every thing around him for a couple of weeks. During that time, he hadn't questioned by certain accounts that his father possessed were seized. He didn't question why his candidacy for the position of Seer was dropped. But at the end of that mourning period, he began to notice these things and began to question. That was when he

uncovered faint links to his father's death to a certain group that he had opposed in his political dealings with the Doge. That group had been the Black Cockatrice.

And from then on, his rage and his vengeance at the injustice of the shambles of his previous life became focused on destroying the organization that had thought to wipe his family from the city.

So when he heard about the Black Cockatrice's quest for this manuscript, he felt that he had to act. It did not matter to him how he got the information, whether it was by bribe or intimidation. And from the information that he had managed to gather, the manuscript the organization was looking for had been originally written by the Ancients. And since it was considered extremely dangerous, the Ancients had placed it in a city called Marozia right before a cataclysm called the Great Rending that struck all the tethered cities.

Wray had just finished writing his correspondence for the day in his other study and had made his way to the back of his house with the working room. He had left Mad Dita there after breakfast to work on one of the engines that he had purchased from an antiques dealer from the edge of the city. When he had left her there, she had pulled up a stool to the engine part and had grabbed a screwdriver and a wrench from a nearby toolbox and had started muttering about gaskets and poor design.

He pushed open the door to the work room. It seemed deathly quiet and there appeared to be no movement at all in the room. There was no evidence of Mad Dita's presence. Had she somehow sneaked out of the room? Did she escape once he had left her there? Despite the warning spells and charms that he had put on his doors, he would not have been surprised if she had managed to escape undetected.

“Hey, are you in here?” he yelled out.

There was a loud clang and then a vociferous curse. “What the hell are you doing here?”

At the irritated voice, he felt himself relax. So the knot finder had decided that fixing the

engine in his work room was more interesting than escaping his house. He leaned against the threshold and crossed his arms. "I'm here because this is my house."

Finally, he saw Dita peer above a large conglomeration of metal. There was a dirty, greasy streak marring her pale face. "I thought you were leaving me in peace to work on this. Next time, give more warning! I almost bent this grommet out of shape when you started screaming."

"I was not screaming. I was simply projecting my voice so you could hear me."

"Whatever. Go away. I'm still working."

"Why should I go away? This is my house. And you're working on my things."

"Humph."

"Besides, it's almost noon."

"So?"

"The noon time meal. Lunch. Food."

She grumbled again and disappeared under the mess of metal. For a moment, he thought that she had ignored his comment, but then she reappeared, standing up with a dishrag in her hands.

"I'm only going to be eating because your cook, whoever he is, is a good one."

"I will relay your compliments to him, then."

She gave him a strange look as she walked toward the entrance of the room. "That's unusual. You don't strike me as the sort of person who would give compliments to anyone, let alone one of his own servants."

"There are a lot of things that you don't know about me."

"Obviously." But it was also obvious that she didn't particularly care about anything about him either. "Are you going to stand like a statue in the doorway this entire time? If you are, I'm just going to ignore your offer for lunch and go back to work."

"No, I'm not going to stand here the entire time." He nodded toward her. "You have a

smudge right there.” He raised a hand to wipe her cheek with his fingers.

Something flickered in her eyes. Those who just knew her reputation would say that it was madness. But he thought that maybe it was panic. She took a step back. “Don't.” When he dropped his hand, she wiped her own face with the rag. “Well, are you going to move now or aren't you?”

He finally stepped away from the work room door and back into the hallway. She followed him back to the dining room where they had shared breakfast. The housekeeper, Gerhild, was already there setting two places at the end of a long mahogany table. Dita sat down at the same seat that she had taken during breakfast and began eating without speaking.

Which was a relief, really. He had been to dinners populated with upper class ladies who liked to chat incessantly about nothing. With all the words getting flung over his head, it was hard to eat, let alone keep anything down in his stomach. He appreciated Dita's silence. He would have expected a mad woman to be far more disruptive about everything, let alone the noon time meal.

The cook had outdone himself with the noon time meal. Aside from the soup of mushroom and beef broth, the cook had baked a pot pies, flaky crusts containing a savory filling consisting of potato dumplings and sausage smothered in a spiced sauce.

As a side dish, the cook had prepared a mix of vegetables, peas, carrots, and red peppers, tossed with thinly sliced shallots. The meal was ended with a small bowl of peaches glazed with a thin drizzle of mint. His cook was a treasure, Wray thought as he spooned the last of the dessert into his mouth. He had inherited the cook, along with the housekeeper and the other servants, from his parents. Where his parents had found the cook, he had little idea. His only guess was that his parents had taken the cook in after he had been fired from his position in a neighboring household.

His musings was broken by the clink of silverware as Dita finished her lunch and pushed back her chair.

“Wait.”

She had been about to get up, but at the sound of his voice, she settled back in her seat and watched him sullenly. “Why? Don't you want me to finish fixing that engine?”

“Yes. But maybe we can talk about your progress.”

“We could talk about my progress,” she said, “but I don't think you'd understand a word that I would say.”

“Very well. Then could you at least tell me about your progress in words that I would understand?”

“Maybe.”

He raised an eyebrow when she didn't continue. “Well?”

“Let's just say that I'm about halfway through with fixing that defunct piece of technology. If you want to do some actual knot jumping, I would not recommend using it even if it works. The more advanced technology is more reliable.”

He frowned. “There's more advanced technology?”

“Yes.” Her mouth twisted. “Don't tell me. You're completely technologically illiterate. Do you even know how to operate your own oven?”

“Why would I need to operate my own oven? I have my cook do that for me.”

“So you never bothered to learn?” She sighed and then gestured with her hands as if she were warding off some sort of evil spirit. “So what do you know about tethering engines? Or let me put this another way. Do you know anything about how knot jumping works? Or do you just book a travel agent?”

“To be honest, I've only gone the travel agent route,” he admitted. “It was only the last two years that I seriously became interested in tethering and knot jumping.” He didn't see any reason to explain why he was interested in these things in the first place, so he decided not to say that. “I started gathering up books and parts, hoping that I could somehow get a device or even a vehicle

together myself..."

"But let me guess. You had no idea what you were doing."

"Well, I've tried," he said defensively. "But my talents lie with visions and future telling. And I make my living as a judge, such as it is."

"Not such a bad living if you ask me," she said, glancing around the dining room.

"It's inherited," he said flatly. "If it weren't for my parents, I'd be living in a dank apartment across town, in a bad neighborhood."

"I see." But it was clear that she didn't see. Or care. "I'll tell you this, Your Honor. In order to understand tethering and knot jumping, on a deeper level than the superficial understanding that most people have, you need to know some basics."

"What sort of basics?"

"Math and physics, for one."

"I know how to add and subtract. And I think I remember the formula for dropping objects off a tower."

She shook her head. "You're hopeless."

"You mean I need to learn much more advanced math and physics, then. That, I suppose, is why you're here."

She snorted. "Of course. And if you would actually let me do my job, you'd actually have your engine fixed."

"But you said more advanced technology would be better."

"Ah, so you were listening to me earlier."

He pushed his empty dessert dish to the side and folded his hands on the table. "Of course I'm listening. You don't see anyone else here yammering about, do you?"

She shook her head.

“If everything in my work room is of old technology, I will need to get newer technology.”

“You can't just buy a new engine just for the hell of it. You need to tell me what you want to do with it. What you ultimately want to do.”

“As I told you earlier, I need to get to Marozia. But you said that's impossible.”

Something flickered in her gaze again. Fear? Madness? It passed too quickly for him to tell. “It is impossible. But let's assume that Marozia is real. It would still be impossible to get to. From Despina, at any rate.”

“Why would it be impossible to get to from here?”

“There are only a certain number of anchors and knots that the Ancients created in each universe.” At his blank look, she further explained, “Each city, I mean. The Ancients called each city that connected to other cities anchors.”

“So the Ancients called a city an anchor rather than a city.”

“No. They called these places cities, too. An anchor is just another name. It's a technical term.”

“All right.”

She held out her arm and made a fist. With her other hand, she pointed to her fist. “Think of this as the city. The anchor. And my arm is the tether that goes from one anchor to the other.” She tapped her finger on her shoulder to indicate the second city that was connected to the first. “That's the basic idea.”

“Okay. I get that. But where are the knots? I hear people talk about knot jumping and knot finding.”

“Knots are the collection of junctions that each anchor has with every other anchor.”

“Junctions?”

She opened her hand to splay out her fingers. “So you know that from Despina, you can

travel the tethers to get to several other cities. Well, technically from Despina, you can only get to Valdrada. Which means that Despina only has one knot. But if you were at the hub of the collection of cities that Despina is connected to..."

"Leonia."

"Yes, Leonia. You could go to several cities because there would be several existing knots from Leonia."

He tapped a finger on his chin, thinking. "Leonia is connected to quite a number of cities. Not Despina directly. But Valdrada certainly. And Hypatia and Olivia and three other cities. That would mean that Leonia has six knots."

"You're catching on," she said with approval. "So you see? Even if Marozia existed, you can't go there directly. Or indirectly to my knowledge. Despina only has a knot with a tether going to one other anchor, Valdrada. And no other city I know of has a knot and tether to an anchor called Marozia."

"That's what you say."

"It's not only what I say," she said stiffly, "But what I know. I've traveled to a lot of cities. And as a navigator, I know the maps that all knot finders and knot jumpers use. And none of those maps show any indication that there is any location with the same name as the place that you are looking for."

"I have an entire library of books filled with works by the Ancients and all of the cities that they have mentioned. I can show you the references. Maybe that will make you believe."

"You can show me the references, but they may mean nothing. Especially if those references are fairy books."

He frowned as he pushed his chair back and stood up to tower over her. Mad Dita didn't appear fazed by his attempt at intimidating her. Especially not with the sneer that appeared on her

face. She would look prettier if she smiled, he suddenly thought. But she didn't seem like the type of woman who smiled a lot. Not only was she not quite sane, but he had the impression that her life hadn't been a very happy one. Perhaps some time, he could dig deeper into her history. Knot finders were a rare breed. In any city. They were rare enough that they were treated quite well as a requirement of their training.

He motioned for her to follow him as the housekeeper entered the dining room to clear the dishes away. "I keep most of the texts about traveling the tethers in the work room. But I keep the maps that date back to the age of the Ancients in my study." He did not wait for her to get up. Instead, he walked out of the dining room down the hallway and around a corner to a small alcove where there was a door that led to his study which was a room at the bottom of a tower.

The study room itself was circular in shape. The wooden shelves, filled with leather bound volumes, had been specially built to curve around the sides and to reach the ceiling. Opposite of the door was Wray's desk and two chairs. Piles of papers and books surrounded a lamp made of blue-green glass and a large gray quartz crystal that acted as a paperweight for several thick envelopes. When Dita crossed the threshold, he motioned for her to take the guest chair, a straight back piece of furniture carved out of chestnut and lined with a faded blue linen seat cushion embroidered with abstract purple flowers. He took his own seat from the other side of the desk and rummaged around in a pile of papers.

"You're not very organized, are you?" she said. "Will I have to wait the entire day until you find what you're looking for?"

Wray glared at the knot finder who was sitting across from him. If he didn't need her experience about traveling the tethers so much, he would have just left her to rot in the basement of the Hall of Justice. "I know where everything is in my study," he said as he shifted another pile of papers and put them on a stack of books at the corner of his desk. "It might seem like a mess to you, but there's a method to everything."

"A system that is probably only apparent to you."

"Be quiet." Finally, he found the volume he was looking for under a pile of unopened letters which had been delivered from the business bureau. He really should be throwing them out, he briefly mused to himself. The business bureau was always sending him small claims and complaints, hoping that he would do something about them. After his first year as a small claims court judge, he had decided to ignore all of it since it didn't really affect anything that actually came through the Hall of Justice. If the business bureau really wanted to get something done, they should have followed the rules and filed their claims with the court clerks.

As it was, the business bureau's direct complaints were lost on him. Perhaps he should just put all of this on a pile and instruct his housekeeper to burn them all. If the business bureau actually sent a representative to ask him if he ever received any of their correspondence, he would just claim ignorance.

He lifted the volume out of the paper pile and wiped off a bit of dust with his sleeve. The book itself was a text that had been printed before the Great Rending, when the Ancients still roamed freely among the cities. The cover was made of a soft, leathery material that the Ancients had synthesized to be waterproof and fireproof. The volume looked like more contemporary paper books, but it wasn't made of paper and it weighed far less. And like all other books made by the Ancients, there was no lettering on the cover to indicate what the book was about. He opened the cover of the book to reveal a black screen embedded in a white panel. He moved a finger over the

black screen and words typed themselves onto the surface in a soft gray light. The font was angular. The words archaic. But even though Wray had little theoretical knowledge about technology, he did learn the language of the Ancients when he had been a school boy. He placed the volume at the center of his desk so that Dita could have a look at it.

“The Travels of a Wanderer,” Dita read easily, said in the pronunciation of the Ancient tongue. Whatever circumstances that she might appear to be in now, it was evident that she too was well versed in the dead language. “Written by the fifth Baron of North Umbria, Sir Reginald Pendleton the Third.” She looked back up at him.

“What?” he said, when she was peering at him.

“Baron of North Umbria, Sir Reginald Pendleton the Third? If my thoughts are right, this was some privileged rich person's account of his travels. I'm not familiar with this name, so most likely it is just someone's indulgent diary.”

“Indulgent diary or not, it has some information,” he said defensively. When he had first started collecting Ancient books, it had taken him a while to learn to operate the sophisticated piece of technology. But now that he had some practice, after collecting literally dozens of Ancient texts, he easily touched the surface of the Ancient book in a certain pattern to “flip” the pages on the screen. He paged through the book until he found what he was looking for. “The author of this volume visited many places on his travels. That's what counts, doesn't it? And not how much money he made.”

“It does make a difference whether this was an amateur or a truly seasoned traveler,” she argued. “An amateur can make mistakes or someone might tell him a fact and he wouldn't question its veracity. Seasoned travelers, particularly ones with some sort of scholarly bent, have the wherewithal to question if something doesn't seem quite right. I would suggest looking up tether maps made by the Ancient navigators Redding and Oliver. Or even the Ancient Ping, even though he

is more focused on the theory of travel rather than the actual destination.”

“I have all of their books,” he said. “Those were the first ones I got since I got the impression that they were the classics of tether traveling. But they say nothing of Marozia.”

“They probably didn't say anything about Marozia because even they knew it was a make believe place.”

He blew out a frustrated breath. “Can you at least work with me here? Humor me? I could very well send you back to the Hall of Justice and the inquisitor can just resume his torture until you confess.”

Her shoulders jerked from his threat, but her voice was calm when she said, “Fine. Send me back to the Hall of Justice, if you really want. But I don't think you'll do that. Especially not after you literally kidnapped me and brought me here to work in the mess of your back room. If you want me to pretend that Marozia is real, I suppose there's no harm in that, unless you want me to take you there.”

Wray had every intention of making her use her expertise to find Marozia, but he would take his victories one day at a time. “All right. Assume that Marozia is real. Then how do you explain this?” He gestured to the page in the book that he had found.

She leaned over to peer at the book again. On the screen was a spider web of connections between different cities or anchors. Many of the cities had strange names that were not mentioned in any of the current maps and charts. There were a few familiar names at the corner of the map, including Despina. But what drew the eye was the center of the web.

The center of the web appeared to be a city like the others, but it was not labeled.

“That,” said Wray, “is Marozia. The author of this volume makes mention of it in the text.”

“I haven't heard of half of these cities before,” she said. Instead of sounding skeptical, she seemed thoughtful. That gave him hope that there was a chance that she wouldn't fight him when

the time came to actually travel the broken tethers that would lead him to his destination. “But that doesn't mean anything. This Baron whoever he is is an unknown source. We don't know how trustworthy he was. Maybe he made all of this up.”

“That's a cynical view of things.”

“I'm trying to be realistic.”

He snorted. “That's rich. How can you be realistic when in the previous breath, you say that demons exist?”

“Well, they do.”

He sat back and clasped his hands as he stared at her. “Never mind. What I want to do is to get to the center of that web. Marozia.”

“Well, if you want to be technical, it isn't exactly the center. There's only one connection the center has with the rest of the web. Otherwise, it's pretty much on its own. An orphaned city. Which isn't particularly unique. At least that's what the theorists say. They say that after the Great Rending, a significant number of cities became orphaned, when all of the tethers to the anchors were cut.”

“But let's say that all the tethers exist. How would we get there?”

“If you want my thoughts on how we might theoretically get there, we could do this.” She reached out and with a few taps of her fingers, she made the map move as if all of the cities were rotating in three dimensional space. Wray stared in fascination as she adjusted the map's position so that the web appeared at another orientation. Then she traced a line from city to city until there was a route along the indicated tethers, glowing in bright red. “That's the path you would take, assuming these anchors exist and the tethers are still intact.”

The path began at Despina which appeared at the edge of the map. Wray knew that Despina, now, was only connected to one city by a tether that had remained unbroken since the Great

Rending, to Valdrada. But on this map by the Ancient Baron, there were several tethers radiating outward from Despina. The path that Dita had outlined had next gone to another city that he had never heard of, let alone been to.

“Bestheba?” he said, trying to sound out the syllables that were written in Ancient script.

“Beersheba,” she corrected. “Of course, if this place even exists and we could get to it, you would have no idea what to expect there. It's said that the Ancients even created tethers to universes and words that were hostile to life. Why they would do that, no one has any idea.”

“Do you have any idea?”

“It would be certainly a death sentence for undesirables,” she replied. “But after the Great Rending, much knowledge from the Ancients did not survive. It's surprising, in some ways, that you had managed to collect even more than one Ancient text. Most sources we know about today supposedly from the Ancients are actually second hand accounts. But whatever the case, it's impossible to get there. There does not exist a tether from Despina to Beersheba now.”

“And that's why you're here.”

Her eyes flashed. It wasn't madness, but anger. “There is no way you're going to make me navigate a broken tether. You could die attempting it.”

“Have you ever attempted to find a broken tether?”

She crossed her arms. “Trust me, you don't want to find out.”

He opened his mouth to protest, but then there was a flurry of knocking at his study door. He raised his voice to bade whoever it was permission to enter. The door opened, revealing Gerhild, the housekeeper. Her brows were beetled and her mouth was bowed downward.

“Your Honor,” said the housekeeper. “You have a visitor who says that he has an urgent message for you.”

“Who is it and who is the message from?”

“He wouldn't say. But he's dressed like a dock worker and he says that the message is urgent because it is about the movements of a person of interest.”

Wray suddenly sat up in his seat. This was definitely unexpected. “Is it? Then send him in immediately.”

“Very well, sir.”

A moment later, the housekeeper gestured towards a short man wearing the rough dark clothes of a dock worker who spent his days on the outer harbor of Despina and ushered him into the study. He doffed his cap when he addressed Wray and there was a slight, but noticeable gap in his front teeth when he smiled. He spoke with the harsh accents of a commoner who grew up in the harbor district, but that didn't faze him. Wray had hired the man to watch and observe.

“Doncho,” he said, addressing the man by name, “you have news?”

“Yes, Yer Honor,” the man said bobbing his head up and down. He glanced at Dita sitting across from him and raised an eyebrow. “This may be sensitive information, sir.”

“Do not worry about her,” he said with a careless wave of his hand. “She is under my employ. You were saying, Doncho?”

“Yes, Yer Honor.” Wray's paid spy tucked his cap under his arm and began vigorously gesturing with his hands. “You said to watch the warehouse at the end of the last dock where the gentlemen from the Black Cockatrice often stored their goods for their trading business. For the past month or so, none of their movements were out of character. The operations in and around the warehouse appeared to be the same as every other trading business. But there was a change in activity last night. I couldn't get back to you earlier because I wanted to watch everything that happened before I came to report to you.”

“What did you see?”

“They received an extremely large container. Much larger than a camel.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dita raise an eyebrow.

“I would guess that it was probably about the size of a small house,” said Doncho.

“A small house?” Wray found himself exclaiming.

“That was my reaction,” the spy said, nodding. “The container was made entirely of wood.

The same kind of wood you would use for packing goods in order to be shipped overseas. It came on a barge that I found was registered by the trading company that is backed by the Black Cockatrice. They moved the container from the barge to the warehouse during the night. They had some kind of wheeling mechanism that helped them move it. And then, about an hour ago, they took the container out of the warehouse and started moving it to the city proper. I think they are going to the roundabout. The city center.”

Chapter 5

“Why the hell are you in such a hurry?”

Wray ignored the mad woman's babbling. He had to get to the city center as soon as possible. After Doncho's report, he had immediately called for the housekeeper to get his cloak. On the spur of the moment, he had decided to drag Dita along with him in case there was something that he need explained. He could have very well just taken her as she was, but Gerhild had insisted that the woman be swaddled in another cloak as well to keep her from catching a cold. That had taken away precious moments as Wray had waited impatiently for the housekeeper to find a cloak that could fit her.

He had not wanted to attract any undue attention, so had had been forced into a walk, but he

kept up a fast pace, forcing Dita to keep up since he had an arm around hers to keep her from escaping.

“He just said that it was at the city center,” she said. “There's nothing there except the tether to Valdrada. And I can tell you right now that Valdrada is of no interest whatsoever. If you're trying to find something that once belonged to the Ancients, you would have better luck searching in any city but Valdrada.”

“I've been to Valdrada a few times,” he said as they walked passed the main street with the Hall of Justice. It was early enough in the afternoon that there were still people mingling around on the steps of the building before they were to head back into the courts for the afternoon sessions. None of those people paid them any mind as they rushed past. “It seemed like the usual sort of city. It's located at the bottom of a mountain, isn't it? Sometimes it experiences cold winters. But I had always just stayed there very briefly, only a few hours at most before transferring to another transport to another city.”

“A few hours would not give you a real sense of any city,” Dita said. “It is a gray, pitiless place. The people there hold no tolerance for anyone who is different. They had their way, they would cut themselves off from every other city in the web. They would become an orphan city. But as it is, their greed for trade profits give them an incentive to keep the tethers to other cities unbroken.”

“You sound like you speak from experience.”

“I grew up there,” she said sharply.

“You had a terrible childhood, then?”

She did not respond to that question. Instead, she said, “Who are the Black Cockatrice?”

“The Black Cockatrice is a group of wealthy nobles from Despina. They have interests in a variety of areas, ranging from trade to politics. They have great wealth and a fair amount of power. People say that they have the ear of the Doge even though no one's seen direct evidence of it. But I

wouldn't be surprised if that were true.”

“Then why are you so interested in this group that you even paid a spy to watch them? Did they commit some sort of crime that the courts were unable to persecute them for?”

He gave her a bitter smile when they finally stopped at the edge of the city center, a roundabout paved with cobblestones and ringed by shallow archways that led down to an underground complex housing what was properly called the anchor. A fountain carved of marble stood at the center of the roundabout. Water spewed out of the fountain, but other than that, there was no other distraction. The roundabout was empty.

“I am not that idealistic,” he said. “This is for personal reasons.”

“Did they rip you off?”

Wray decided not to answer her question. The reason why he was targeting the Black Cockatrice was far more important than simply being defrauded of money. There were things in the world that were far more important than mere financials. Instead he said, “It should be obvious, even to you, that carting things off to the city center has supreme significance. The anchor is just below our feet.”

“True.” She glanced at the nearest opening to the underground facility that Wray had decided to head towards. “But the large container of something, as your spy had described, could be anything. You said that this Black Cockatrice group was also involved in trading. I assume they are doing some legal trading, at least, to cover up whatever it is that is their true purpose. Maybe they're just transporting some goods. Like lacquered furniture or hand mirrors. And even if they are transporting illegal stuff, there's really only a limited choice there, too. It's most likely drugs. And if it's drugs, shouldn't you be trying to get some other authorities into this? You can't stop them by yourself.”

“I don't think it's drugs,” he said. “It has to do with traveling the tethers. From my previous

information, I'm pretty sure of it. Besides, I'm not going to try and stop them. I know that will be futile and dangerous. Instead, I want to see what they're up to. And if my suspicions are correct, you will definitely be useful in helping me identify whatever technology that they are using."

"I'm just a knot finder," she said. "If you wanted someone who really knew the technology intimately, you should have found yourself an engineer."

"Unfortunately, I don't know any engineers. Or anyone else who knows engineers. Besides, even if I were to find an engineer, they wouldn't have the incentive that you do for helping me."

"Oh gods. Incentive? I was pretty much forced into this! Didn't I tell you that it would have been better if you had just left me at the Hall of Justice?"

"Well, I don't see you running off now back to the Hall of Justice."

"That's because at the moment, my curiosity is overriding my common sense."

"Does that happen often?"

"What happens often?"

"Having your curiosity overriding your common sense."

He glanced back at her to see her lips thinning with her response. "Too much."

They made their way to the nearest archway and descended a wide flight of stairs towards the underground complex housing Despina's anchor and the gateway or knot to the tether leading to Valdrada. It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dimmer light, but after a moment, he could make out the artificial lights installed in thin panels overhead. Above ground, artificial light was generated by a mixture of gas and electric lamps for the wealthy. The commoners had to make do with fires and candles. The artificial light in the underground complex of the city center had been manufactured centuries before the Great Rending by the Ancients. The advanced technology that the Ancients used to make these lights ensured that these lights would last as long as the city existed. And maybe even longer than that. But other than that knowledge, no one on Despina knew exactly

how the Ancients created the artificial lights, let alone the entire underground complex. The knowledge had been lost with the Great Rending.

Past the flight of stairs was a long hallway, wide enough for a large container that Doncho had described to be pushed through, that wound into the interior of the underground complex in a spiral. Every so often, there would be hallways which branched outward. The casual traveler would have stuck to the main hallway to avoid getting lost, but Wray had obtained an Ancient blueprint of the complex and had memorized several routes that would reach the center, without anyone else noticing. At the third branch, he turned abruptly, forcing his inadvertent companion to follow him.

“I hope you know where you're going.”

“Quiet,” he said lowly. “I don't want any chance that they could overhear us.”

In a softer voice, she said, “Well, do you know where you're going?”

“This will lead to a small observation deck that will overlook the actual anchor,” he said. “I've checked it before myself. Anyone at the anchor and entering the tether to Valdrada won't be able to see the observation deck.”

“So you're planning on spying on what happens here.”

He nodded.

She managed to keep pace with him as they ventured through the hallway which branched several more times. In his head, he counted the intersections until he came to the one he was looking for. It led to an unlocked door and a short flight of stairs going slightly upward. After another corridor, they came to the observation deck which was completely enclosed except for a few, almost invisible slits that overlooked the main anchor.

The anchor was a physical mechanism which anchored a tether to a city. In Despina, the anchor took the form of a round circular platform of stone that at one time could rotate. Presently, no one knew how to move it. The platform itself took up the entire space of the cavern below which

was the size of the city center above. There were markings etched into the platform in straight perfection, more evidence that the anchor had been constructed by the Ancients and not by any of the peoples who currently populated the city. Along the edge of the platform were tick marks like that of a clock. Each tick mark was etched with a series of numbers and letters in the Ancient's alphanumerical system. The rest of the platform was crisscrossed by a series of lines and dots that at first seemed incomprehensible. Wray could only guess that it was some sort of map or directional sign post that the Ancients had put on the platform.

Down in the cavern, there were several arching gateways, or knots, placed in every direction. The artificial light that glowed from the ceiling lit the archways in a white florescent glow. Before, Wray had never paid much attention to why there were so many archways compared to the reality that there was only one that worked to go to the next city, Valdrada. That particular archway was visible straight ahead of them from the alcove. Several small passenger vessels large enough for a crew of four and enough cargo room for a month's supply of food, resembling the shape of a pill and the color of off-white were clustered at the center of the platform.

The the anchor and knots, and even the passenger vessels, were not what caught Wray's attention this time. It was the enormous object that several men, dressed in the black and gold robes of the Black Cockatrice, were maneuvering onto the platform so that it faced the archway leading to Valdrada. They had taken it out of the shipping container that Doncho had described. The object appeared to be an updated version of the small passenger vessels at the center of the platform. This one gleamed with a metallic sheen and appeared to be twice as large as the other vessels. A hatch opened and the men began to load the vessel with supplies.

“It looks like they're heading to Valdrada in that thing,” mused Dita quietly. “I've only seen such a vessel once before. In a distant city where they did not lose as much information about the Ancients' technology compared to here. It was an upgrade that was supposed to be used specially by

that city's monarch.”

“I wonder how they managed to get one here.”

“If they didn't physically take the vessel from that city to here, which I guess they didn't since this arrived by sea,” she said, “then what must have happened was that someone smuggled in the plans for the vehicle and then had it made elsewhere before bringing it here.”

“Hm. Makes sense.” His eyes scanned the men who were preparing the vessel. There were four of them, but no one that he recognized. They must be lower level flunkies who worked for those really in charge of the Black Cockatrice. “Do you recognize anyone?”

She shook her head even as she kept her gaze out. “The community of knot jumpers and knot finders is a small one here in Despina, but I only know those who work for the commercial travel agencies. There are some knot jumpers and finders who are pretty much privately employed as a rich man's chauffeur. I would guess, since this just arrived today, that they are going to be running a test to Valdrada.”

“Won't that be dangerous if the vessel fails on their way there?”

“Yes. But if they built this exactly like the specifications as the other vessel that I had seen, they would have no problems. But judging from all of the supplies that they've loaded, I don't think they will be back for a while.”

“If that's the case,” he partly murmured to himself, “I wonder where they're ultimately going and why? If it's anything related to what I think it is...” His mind whirled. He knew from information that he had gleaned from paying spies around the city that the powers behind the Black Cockatrice had several plans in motion, all of them geared towards gaining political advantage with the Doge of Despina. The plan that he was most concerned about was the plan to gain possession of a particular book by the Ancients that was located in Marozia. He had every suspicion that these henchmen working for the Black Cockatrice were on their way to Marozia to get the book. The only

thing that was confusing him was that they were going to Valdrada.

“There's nothing of interest in Valdrada except a bunch of xenophobic locals,” Dita continued. “They are probably going through Valdrada on their way to another destination. Probably to a city where there are more prospects for trading.”

“Or another city where they have more advanced technology to get to Marozia.”

She slanted him a glance. “There's no such place as Marozia.”

“But Beersheeba would be on our way to Marozia.”

Her expression tightened. “We would need a working vessel first before you try to traverse a broken tether.”

Before he could reply, the hatch to the metallic vessel closed after the last crew member entered it. There was a low rumbling sound coming from the vehicle's engine and echoed throughout the underground cavern as it powered up. The vessel moved, as if gliding on a cushion of air, until it was aligned precisely against the tick mark on the anchor that pointed towards the knot to Valdrada. Once the vessel was standing directly over the tick mark, the archway began to glow a bright green. A moment later, the vessel's engine warmed up into a high pitched whine, forcing Wray and Dita to cover their ears. One reason why, he thought ruefully, that it was tradition for travelers going to other cities to go alone without any bystanders.

The vessel angled upward into the air a few more feet and then suddenly jumped through the green archway. Wray had only been a passenger on one of the smaller vessels before. Inside, the only view screen and portal available was to the knot jumper and knot finder, the pilot and navigator. As a passenger, he didn't see anything when the vessel itself jumped through the knot. But he did feel the jolt of the jump as the vessel moved. But now as a bystander, he saw that there was something that briefly streamed out of the archway right before the vessel entered the tether. Once the vessel was completely through, the bright streaming particles spewed outward in one last

cascade before the stones of the archway turned back to its usual florescent white.

Wray shook his head to clear his ears. After the noise of the Black Cockatrice henchmen and their launch vessel, the underground complex of the anchor was completely silent except for his own breathing.

“Well, that's that.” Dita sounded bored. “You want to go to Valdrada to chase after them? Or are you going to send some lackey to go after them.” She turned to him, her expression brightening.

“Do you want me to go after them?”

“I thought you didn't like Valdrada.”

“Well, yeah. Valdrada is probably one of the last places I would want to go. But it would be better than trying to navigate a broken tether.” Her voice had turned sly.

“I know what you're planning to do,” he told her. “If I allowed you to go after them, you would simply escape me. Maybe just pass Valdrada on your way to another city. And then I would never see you again.”

“You have my word that I will simply follow them.”

At that statement, he sneered, which made her blink. “I don't believe your word.”

“But...”

“If it's any consolation to you,” he said loftily. “I don't believe anyone's word. You're coming with me.”

Her eyes flashed, even when her shoulders slumped. “That's certain death.”

Wray moved away from the openings in the observation alcove. “Come with me. I want to take a closer look at the anchor. Like most people, I know the basic mechanics of what happens when one travels the tethers, but there are some things which I think you can explain to me.”

Dita sighed as she trailed after him down the hallway. “Another lesson, Your Honor? This is getting old. I'm no teacher. Could you not have just asked someone at the local university to explain

it to you?”

“If I asked someone at the local university, they would be asking me why I would want to know about this stuff. People in Despina are remarkably unobservant and apathetic about knowing the mechanics about certain technology.”

After a series of winding corridors and down another flight of stairs, they finally made their way down to the platform. Wray found himself slowing and paying more attention to the markings on the anchor. Except for the numbered tick marks, he had no idea what the rest of the etching meant.

“In that volume by the Ancient Baron,” Wray began, “there were several tethers coming out of Despina. That must correspond to all of these archways we see down here. I've never questioned before why there was so many when in reality, everyone just traveled through one of them.” He inclined his head towards the archway that led to Valdrada.

“They are all knots,” Dita confirmed. “But there is only one unbroken tether left here to Valdrada. The other ones, I assume, are broken. That's why no one uses any of these other archways to reach another city.”

“What's all these markings on the anchor?”

“They're navigational and computational aids for the jumpers and finders. I could explain this to you, but it would probably be too technical. Unless, of course, you have the aptitude to be a jumper or finder.” But from the skeptical expression on her face, he could tell that she didn't think that he was jumper or finder material.

“I am most definitely not a jumper or finder. My ancestry is not from the lines that the Ancients bred specifically for those purposes.” But he did come from a long line of seers. After looking back several generations, things got a bit murky. No one was quite sure if the Ancients actually bred a line of seers or if the seers came out of a natural mutation from the population. But

in any case, he knew he had no jumpers or finders in his ancestry. “That's why you're here. Anyways, can you tell where each knot and tether leads to?”

She frowned. “Maybe,” she said reluctantly. She pointed to the tick marks. “These are “layer” coordinates. The number here pointing in this particular direction on the knot,” her arm moved up to the archway where she indicated some small strange markings etched to the keystone, “are another set of coordinates for the “depth”. Every anchor established by the Ancients can be described by a combination of layer and depth coordinates. The words 'layer' and 'depth' are approximations in our language for technical terms that the Ancients used to help describe how to get to the different cities.”

“I see.”

“In some cities, this platform is able to move,” she continued. “That way, you can get to more cities from just one starting point.”

Wray looked around and counted the archways. “That would be very convenient. There's only eight knots here so I just assumed that there was only going to be eight different cities we could get to, even if all of the tethers were unbroken. But with a combination of all of these tick marks, it could be in the hundred.”

“Yes,” Dita agreed. “The combination of all of these coordinates could theoretically get you to several hundred cities from one starting point. When I started learning about this, my teachers had told me that before the Great Rending, the anchor could rotate so that you could hit all of these combinations. However, after the Ancients left, some of these anchors stopped moving, probably because they people who knew how to maintain the anchors died off or failed to pass on the knowledge. Despina is probably one of those cities since one can only get to one other city from here. I've been to other cities where the anchor could move and other tethers remained unbroken.”

Wray peered through the archway that would lead to Valdrada. Because at the moment it

was unactivated, the archway only led into a dead end alcove. “Do you think we could get to Beersheba from here? If we moved the anchor to the corresponding coordinates, we could go there since this particular tether is unbroken.”

“I don't think you understand,” Dita replied. “The tether is only unbroken for the path to Valdrada. Although you might use the same knot to jump off to another destination, that doesn't mean that that particular tether would still be there. Besides, the coordinates to Beersheba might be completely different.” She smiled then, but it wasn't a particularly nice smile. “This is more complicated than you might think. That volume from that Ancient Baron mentioned nothing about coordinates. It was only an approximate map of all the cities that were linked together during the time that the author was still alive.”

“Then we'll find the coordinates,” said Wray with a definite tone. He wasn't going to let her doubts hinder him from finding what he wanted. “I've amassed quite a few books from the Ancients. All we would have to do would be to look through the ones with maps to find one that does have the coordinates listed.”

“That might not...” but she didn't finish as she suddenly shut her mouth and cocked her head listening.

“What is it?”

She put a finger to her lips to indicate that he should be quiet. She then motioned for him to follow her as she made her way to the collection of vessels at the center of the anchor. From the outside, the vessels looked like smooth pills, interrupted only by a view screen at the front where the cockpit was located. But this didn't deter Dita. She activated the hatch to one of the vessels with a quick motion of her fingers on the side of the vessel. The hatch slid open soundlessly and she disappeared into the dark interior. Wray looked at it dubiously, but by now, he too heard the noise which sounded near the entrance to the underground facility. He hastily stepped into the vessel.

Once he was inside, the hatch soundlessly slid closed.

After a moment, he let his eyes adjust to the dimmer light. He could see Dita's shadowy figure as she made her way towards the front of the cockpit and pressed a few controls which caused a few more lights to illuminate the interior. Wray had been inside one of these vessels before when he had traveled to Valdrada. There were two seats at the front of the cockpit, one for the pilot and one for the navigator—the jumper and the finder. In the rest of the vessel cabin, there were a series of six seats, padded with a synthetic leather that was the color of flesh, a material that had been made by the Ancients and could only be replicated in a distant city that would take several jumps from Despina.

“Why are we here?” he asked in a quiet voice.

Dita motioned for him to come closer. She pressed another control and the view screen flashed to indicate a view outside. He could see the rest of the anchor and the knot to Valdrada. At the corner of the view screen, there were the nearby vessels.

“I don't see anything.”

“But you heard something, did you not?” she replied. “Someone is coming down here. I figured it might be a good idea to keep hidden in case these people are part of that group you're spying on.”

“But what if they want to examine this vessel?”

“We can figure out what to do if that happens,” she replied, without any worry. “Look, they're coming down.”

To the right of the view screen were the edge of the steps that led down onto the anchor platform. Dita's suspicions were right. The people coming down were wearing black and gold, indicating that they were part of the Black Cockatrice. But it wasn't until they were walking closer that he realized that he recognized these people. They were part of the leadership of the Black

Cockatrice.

The three men were all part of the senior cabal comprising the Black Cockatrice. The leader of the three was a tall man with graying hair and piercing blue eyes. This was Drolius, a nobleman who had managed to get elected onto the counsel to advise the Doge the previous season. Beside him were Alderich and Gaugin, two other noblemen who were basically Drolius' shadows.

Wray knew all three of these men. He was pretty sure that they were all instrumental in the death of his father if not for everything else that led up to it. He was, however, not quite sure if they had a personal hand in his father's death. For now, all he had was a gut feeling that they, or at least Drolius, was involved. Wray himself was just a small claims clerk and on the outside, did not appear to be in any way knowledgeable about the cabal of the Black Cockatrice since it was mostly a secret society that confined its members with the upper class. But that did not matter. Wray knew about them, even if they did not know about him personally.

“You know who they are?” Dita whispered. She must have seen the change in his expression.

“Yes, I know who they are,” he replied. “They're part of the Black Cockatrice.”

“What did the Black Cockatrice ever do to you?”

“None of your business.”

She gave an exasperated huff and then peered out of the view screen. “They look like they're examining the anchor and the coordinates.” She pressed a couple of controls on the pilot's panel.

“What are you doing?”

“You'll see.” In a few moments, it became clear what she had activated. Sound from the outside was being filtered into their compartment.

“So the first team is now currently heading to Valdrada?” said Aldrich. He was distinguishable from Gaugin because he was thin and blond. The other man was short and balding. “I still don't understand why they're going there if ultimately you want them to go to another city.”

Drolius waved a vague hand. “That is a very good question. But the knot jumper and the rest of his team reassured me that there was no other way of doing it unless he tried a much more risky proposition. We will have to take the long way about it.”

Gaugin padded around the anchor, squinting at the lines that crisscrossed the platform. “What a waste. I'm thinking that perhaps Rocheville might also be right. That we could expend just as much energy trying to find a shortcut.”

“What do you mean?” Drolius narrowed his eyes. “You know Rocheville is just a crackpot.”

“A brilliant man, nonetheless,” Gaugin replied. “You know this looks rather familiar to Rocheville's etchings.” He pointed to a line leading to an archway next to the one that led to Valdrada. “If I'm reading this right, we could go directly there if we took this route.”

“That would be too much risk,” Drolius exclaimed. “We would need to find an expert to figure out if that tether is broken or not.”

“How hard would that be?” asked Aldrich.

“Not very hard,” Gaugin replied. “But there's one thing to think about. If we do hire an expert to assess this, they're going to ask why we want to know considering that we already have one functioning tether connecting Despina to the rest of the web.”

The three of the Black Cockatrice members continued talking about the team they sent to Valdrada after they tabled the discussion about broken tethers, but Wray tuned out the subsequent conversation to peer into the other knots. Ten minutes later, the three of the men left the underground complex. Seeing that they were gone, Dita made to leave the vessel that they were hiding in, but Wray grabbed her wrist.

“Let go of me,” she said coldly as she stared at him.

“No. I think we'll try a little experiment now.”

“You can't possibly...” She wrenched her wrist away from him and crossed her arms. “I am

not going to pilot this vessel into suicide. If you want to go, then leave me out of it.”

“You're the knot finder. You will help me in this,” and he gave her a nasty smile, “or there will be worse things for you than the basement of the Hall of Justice.”

“You bastard.” She remained standing for a moment, glaring at him. He sensed many thoughts going on behind her eyes, but finally, she walked back to the cockpit to sit on the navigator's seat. “Do you have any idea how to drive this or are you planning to kidnap a knot jumper as well?”

“We might need to do that if this does not go well the first time around.”

“What do you mean doesn't go well for the first time around? If it doesn't go well the first time around, we're going to be dead,” she exclaimed.

“I don't need a cynic constantly reminding me why this won't work,” he said between gritted teeth. He glanced at the controls and tried to orient himself. There were labels on a panel. He touched it and lights flickered, activating the controls. It appeared to be rather similar in interface as the books written by Ancient authors that he had collected over the past couple of months. After tapping a finger on a menu, he activated the vessel and heard an engine powering up. The vessel floated upward and began to move forward. He tapped a few more buttons and the vessel maneuvered around the other vessels sitting at the center of the anchor and began aligning on the platform in front of the knot that was next to the one to Valdrada.

He had absolutely no idea where that particular tether, if it was unbroken, would lead. But because those men from the Black Cockatrice seemed so interested in it, he was bound and determined to figure out why they were looking for it. Perhaps it would be the shortcut to Marozia that he had dreamed about since his parents had died.

“They were right, you know.” Dita had watched him closely as he had manipulated the navigational controls. After a moment, reassuring herself that he appeared to know what he was

doing, despite that fact that he was not a born knot jumper, she had turned to her own controls, starting to analyze the coordinates that popped up on her own personal screen. “You would need an expert in tether travel to examine the other knots to determine if it's unbroken or not. Since only a select few ever jump from Despina, I doubt anyone has ever done any maintenance in this place.”

“It's too late for that now,” he replied. “Because we're going now.” As the vessel aligned on the anchor markings with that of the archway, the stones on the target knot began to glow a deep red. Perhaps it was an ominous sign that the color of this archway was different than the one to Valdrada, but as he had mentioned to the knot finder, it was too late to turn back. He was invested in this.

Dita uttered a prayer to the gods. Wray pressed a button labeled “launch” and the knot sucked the vessel into a tether that may or may not have been broken.

Chapter 6

Traveling the tethers, or at least traveling an unbroken tether, was not a particularly memorable event. When Wray had occasionally traveled to Valdrada, the tethers were barely noticeable. For one moment, he was in a vessel in the passenger side of the cabin in Despina and then there was brief turbulence as the vessel traveled the tether. Then a moment later, they would have arrived at Valdrada, none the worse for wear. The knot jumper and knot finder in charge of the vessel never gave any indication that the jaunt was anything but routine.

But traveling who knows where on a questionable tether was another thing entirely. There were things flashing on the view screen that Wray found extremely hard to comprehend. In fact, the flashing light and movement of winding things that his brain could only interpret as fraying threads

made him more than slightly nauseous and he was forced to look down at the controls to see where the vessel was actually going. He glanced over at Dita and discovered that she hadn't bothered looking at the view screen at all. Instead, she was mumbling as she adjusted her own controls.

Knot jumping was all a theory to Wray. When he first learned about knot jumping from the bits of text that he had read in Ancient books, he had thought that it was easy enough. Theoretically he knew which buttons to press, but he was feeling too ill to make much sense of anything. Perhaps that was why the Ancients had specifically bred particular people to become knot jumpers. Jumping required a certain type of equilibrium that normal people did not possess. Dita, on the other hand, did not seem fazed at all with the traveling.

She glanced at him and her annoyed frown turned into a concerned expression. "Are you all right? You look like you're about to pass out."

"I'm all right, I think. Is this what jumpers go through all the time when they're piloting this?"

"Jumpers certainly don't look like how you do now." She glanced back at her controls and began to curse. "No wonder this particular knot has never been used from Despina. This tether is seriously frayed. It's on the verge of breaking, if no tethering engineer comes to do maintenance in the near future. Hold on. This vessel is going to jump a thread."

"Is that why they call the pilots knot jumpers?" he managed to get out before the vessel jerked and the engine squealed. When the vessel jolted a second time, he made the mistake of looking out at the view screen. The sudden explosion of colors from a strange hyperspace outside of the known universes strained his eyes, spiking a pain in his head. He heard a shout, probably from Dita, before blackness bled into his eyes.

When he finally awoke again, he found himself slumped over the control panel. He glanced to

his side and discovered that the navigator's chair was empty. For a moment, all his mind could register was that Dita was gone. He stared at the empty seat for what seemed like an eternity before he realized that his head was not aching. Slowly, he sat up and then looked around at the vessel.

He did not see Dita immediately. At first, the vessel's passenger compartment appeared empty. But then he spotted her backside poking out from the far end of the vessel as she rummaged inside one of the emergency chests attached to the small cargo area. After a minute, she emerged from the chest with several packages that were wrapped in bright orange shrouds. She glanced at him and made an exasperated moue with her mouth when she discovered that he was awake.

“You look like you just bit into a lemon.”

“I'm just disappointed that that trip didn't outright kill you,” she replied. “This will make things more complicated.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Well, just look outside.”

He finally glanced up at the view screen. To his relief, there was no trace of the strange brain breaking colors of hyperspace. Instead, it appeared that they had emerged into another area similar to the underground facility underneath the central square in Despina. The vessel was sitting on another anchor, also crisscrossed with Ancient markings, surrounded by another series of knots or archways. This anchor was also empty of people. But the noticeable difference was that there appeared to be plants growing into the area where the anchor was located from the stone ceiling. Roots and vines were breaking into the stone. To the side, along a decomposing stair, there was even a tree bearing lumpy purple-colored fruit.

“It doesn't look dangerous,” he said.

“It's too bad that this vessel is too primitive,” she said, ignoring his comment. “The sensors aren't sensitive enough to detect every single contaminant in the air, or even to determine if the

physics of this particular universe is compatible with our physiology. You see trees and stones out there, but that could all be an illusion. We have no idea what we're dealing with out there. Those trees could actually be beings that are hostile to creatures like us.”

“But they're just trees. And didn't the tether lead us here? Wouldn't logic dictate that the Ancients not make a link from a habitable universe to one that isn't?”

“That's logic. But we don't really know the Ancients. Perhaps this is just a prison universe. Or a universe where they sent their criminals to die.”

“Didn't I tell you I didn't like hearing your cynical remarks.”

She rolled her eyes and then said, “Catch.” She threw one of the orange packages to him. Automatically, he raised his arms to catch it. The box felt remarkably light for its size. “I found these at the back in one of the emergency cabinets. It's an environmental suit, in case you find yourself in an unknown and possibly hostile universe.”

“But it looks perfectly fine out there.”

“Do you want to die before you figure out how to get to your fabled Marozia?”

She did have a point there. Somewhat reluctantly, he began to open the emergency pack and pulled out a lightweight suit made of a white fabric that felt like white linen except for the fact that there was a shimmering coating of something on the outside. Attached to the suit was a clear hood that zipped up to the neck of the suit. Attached to the hood was a small black device that appeared to be simply a box to his untrained eyes. When he touched it, though, a small green light began to flash at one of the corners and words began appearing in Ancient script. It was some sort of an air filtration system, he guessed.

By the time that Wray had put the suit on himself, Dita had already zipped up her suit and was doing some last minute readings on one of the sensory panels at the cockpit. When she saw that he had finished donning his protective gear, she pointed to where the hatch would open. She

pressed a control lever next to the hatch and a panel slid open. She went through the opening and a force field briefly glittered before it let her pass the invisible barrier. Seeing that she did not immediately drop dead once she was outside, Wray followed her onto the platform with the foreign anchor.

The filtered air smelled slightly sweet as if someone had perfumed the suits beforehand. But other than that there did not appear to be any difference in this new city than Despina. Ahead of him Dita had walked across the anchor platform to look at the markings that were pointing to the archway that they had just come through. To Wray's untrained eyes, the markings did not look that unusual to him, but whatever Dita saw, it made her shake her head.

“What's wrong?” he asked. It surprised him a little that his voice sounded somewhat distorted from the hood that he was wearing.

Her voice sounded somewhat muffled when she said, “The coordinates here on the anchor match up with the knot which would indicate that it would go to Despina. The surprising thing is that there are new markings here. Fresh markings that appear to have been made in the last couple of decades.”

“How can you tell that some of the markings are made in the last couple of decades and not several hundred years ago by the Ancients?”

She pointed a gloved hand to a few hash marks on the side of the archway knot.

He peered at the hash marks. “That just looks like a few incomprehensible hash marks to me.”

“Those are not incomprehensible marks,” she said. “They're a sort of pidgin the Ancients supposed used to convey a lot of information in a few strokes if they didn't have room or didn't want someone to know what they were writing, especially other species.”

“If that's the case, how do you know about it?”

"I'm a knot finder," she said as if that explained everything. "Look, I'll explain if you stop interrupting me."

He crossed his arms. "Fine."

She turned back to the archway to touch the markings with her gloved fingers. "These marks tell me that this particular archway was targeted as one that needed repairs and there is a date here. But the date doesn't make much sense to me. It is probably in the local calendar."

"Ah."

She turned back to look at him. "We traveled the tether to whatever this place is. I don't know if an expert engineer would designate the tether as a broken one, but I wouldn't say that it is completely broken. Just terribly frayed. I'd imagine that we could still travel back and forth to Despina a couple times before it becomes completely dangerous." She shook her head. "That is certainly lucky for you, even though you can't even stomach being a pretend knot jumper."

"It is just a quirk of my physiology," he exclaimed. "I'm not a real jumper. I'm just trying to play at one."

"Which is all the worse for you," she remarked. "Perhaps you should have kidnapped a knot jumper anyway."

"That may be so, but we're here. Do you think we're in Marozia?"

"There's only one way to find out." She brushed by him and headed towards the crumbling stairway that was giving way to the encroaching vegetation. She gingerly climbed the stairs. The stones appeared to be able to support her easily and soon she disappeared above, beyond the greenery.

For someone who claimed she didn't want to do anything or go anywhere suicidal, she seemed particularly adventurous in a new and possibly dangerous place. He climbed the stairs after her, careful to put his feet on particular points on the stones that appeared to be sturdily wedged

into the rest of the structure. He brushed by the foliage on his way up and out. He had the eerie sensation that the branches and leaves were reaching out toward him, trying to grasp at his arms. But when he looked back at the vegetation, they appeared to be staying innocently where they originally were. He shook his head and continued up.

Mad Dita stood at the entrance looking outward onto a large, crumbling square that was designed similarly to the city center of Despina and a number of other cities that Wray had the fortune of visiting. The design was yet another indication that the Ancients had visited this particular place many centuries ago. The only problem was, it appeared that the surrounding city was abandoned. There were several buildings ringing the city center, but all of them appeared to be in the same condition of crumbling ruin as the rest of the structure leading down to the anchor.

“Maybe this is a dead city,” he said with a frown.

“Which would be too bad,” she replied as she headed off one of the branching streets from the city center. She did not look back to see if he followed her. “There's no one to ask where we are. That would mean we would have to jump to another place to figure out where we're going. I don't particularly like the fact that we're pretty much traveling the tethers blind.”

“We're not exactly blind. We know the coordinates of where we've traveled before, don't we?” They were walking down the side street, past what looked like abandoned shops. He peered inside one of the structures from what looked like used to be a window, but saw nothing but darkness.

“Yes, we have our previous coordinates. But that doesn't help us any unless you want to back track to Despina.” She glanced back at him, finally. “Do you want to go back to Despina? I wouldn't complain, you know.”

“No, we're going forward. I'm sure that there's an unbroken tether to some other place from here.”

“Or there might not be. That may be why this entire place looks abandoned. This city is practically orphaned even if the one tether to Despina is not completely broken. If no one travels the tethers to this place, that means there's no trade. And no goods flowing to the inhabitants, whoever they were, who lived in this place.”

“But there's so much vegetation in this place, especially compared to Despina, even. Despina itself is an oasis located next to a sea. The rest of the world is mostly desert. And even then, I think people would be able to survive there, even if it was cut off from every other place.”

“Survive, yes, but not flourish.”

He turned back to follow her down the street. They encountered a large building that looked like the equivalent to the main library in Despina. The front steps were crumbling and the front doors had long rotted away, but the place smelled quite clean when filtered through the suit. Wray had the urge to unzip his hood and take an experimental sniff of the air outside. What harm would it do, anyway? When Dita had her back turned from him, he reached up to unzip his hood. A faint beeping began echoing from the device attached to the back of his suit, warning him that what he was doing was something that he shouldn't be doing. Tentatively, he sniffed the air. It smelled musty like an old library. It reminded him of ancient rotting books, the kind of books written just after the Ancients had left the cities after the Great Rending. Those books had been written on materials that were not as durable as the Ancients' technologically advanced books. These fragile manuscripts easily decomposed if exposed for long periods in the light or the damp.

He zipped the hood back up over his head and the beeping stopped. Then he stepped into the ruin and found Dita standing in a wide atrium where the roof had fallen down decades ago. Vines had started growing on the walls. On the floor, there appeared to be a mosaic of the heavens, but there was enough dirt on the tiles that he had difficulty telling whether the heavenly bodies depicted were stars or planets.

“This used to be a grand place,” she mused. “I wonder how it would have looked like when the place was new?”

“It would probably rival the Doge's palace,” Wray replied. “The outside facade looks like that of the main library in Despina. I wonder if this place had been designed by humans like us or the Ancients? Or if there was some sort of blueprint for all of the connected cities?”

“We will never precisely know unless we find an Ancient who could explain it to us. Or at least an Ancient text that would have an explanation for it.” She moved off to explore a small alcove that turned out to be a small corridor leading to another location in the building. At her sudden exclamation, he looked away from his examination of the walls of the main atrium, which appeared to be tiled similarly to the floor, and headed to the location where Dita stood.

The room was filled with shelves, just like the main library, lending credence to his theory that this was a library as well. Some of the shelves even appeared to have some books still stacked on piles.

“This is like a treasure trove!” she breathed. “I bet all of these books were written by the Ancients. Or at least written close to the time of the Great Rending. The bindings look very similar to the tomes that the Ancients created.”

“I believe you're right.” He stepped forward to grab one of the books and blew the dust off the cover. There was no writing on the cover, but that didn't mean anything. He turned the cover and discovered that there was a screen inside, exactly like other Ancient tomes that he possessed. He swiped a gloved finger over the screen and it slowly began to blink as if the book was slowly waking after centuries of lying dormant. A couple of characters finally blinked on the screen. He recognized the writing as the writing of the Ancients, but he couldn't exactly read it. He had not seen that particular combination of glyphs before even though he had seen the individual glyphs themselves before. He tried to sound out the glyphs with his tongue, but there were so many

consonants that his mouth tripped over the sounds before he could figure out what it was.

Hearing him stutter, Dita walked over to him to look at the tome he was holding in his hands. She sounded the glyphs silently before saying, "I think this is written in a very old dialect."

"Are you familiar with it?"

She shook her head. "There was one language that the Ancients used which most of the tethered cities adopted. The Ancients called it Standard. But the Ancients themselves weren't a homogenous population. There were several tribes of Ancients who had their own languages and dialects. This is probably in one of those old languages. We would need a linguist to help us decode this."

He sighed. "Think of all the knowledge locked up in this decaying library, let alone this book in my hands."

"Forget about the knowledge, all of this would fetch a pretty penny."

"You're not thinking about selling all of this, are you?"

"Don't sound so horrified," she sniffed. "Unless you're a rich man, you can't afford not to think of the practicalities. Personally, I'm no scholar. I would have very little need of any of this. Might as well sell it, don't you think?"

"You're not the sole discoverer of this, you know."

"That's true, I suppose," she said regretfully. "And even if you agreed with me to sell this whole lot off to some crazed book collectors, there's only so much cargo room in the vessel that we came here with."

"We should continue to look around. Maybe in one of these rooms, we might find a clue to where we are."

"Good idea."

He glanced around and saw that the small room filled with books had exits at all four corners.

The exit which they had entered through from the main atrium was built with light gray stone. On the keystone, there were a few simple scratches in the similar style as the markings that Dita had found back on the knot to Despina. Directly across from that exit was another exit to another room beyond that appeared to be lit with a faint yellow glow. Wray walked in that direction, thinking that perhaps the roof to that room had also caved in, allowing the light to stream through into the room.

But when he stepped through that threshold, something in that room suddenly sprang into action. A dark shadow with strange inhuman appendages jumped away from a shelf of books and began chirping in clicks and hisses. His feet froze as his heart hammered in his chest. A monster.

Chapter 7

Dita screamed.

The creature, which looked like a gigantic cockroach to Wray's eyes, began waving its antennae and four of its appendages. And making hissing sounds as if it was trying to defend itself. The creature wasn't immediately jumping at them, attacking. Instead, it appeared to be clutching a lantern in the shape of a small globe and gibbering to itself in the corner of the room. It wasn't moving toward them at all. Instead, it looked like it was trying to hide from them.

It was that, more than anything, that made Wray's heart slow down. He took a deep breath and then reached out to grab Dita. He shook her quickly. She stopped screaming to take a breath. When he shook her a second time, she gulped and then looked at him.

"It's not doing anything to us."

She finally glanced at the creature. In his arms, her body shook, but her voice sounded relatively calm. "That's what appears to be doing now. But it could be doing something much more

dangerous in the next couple of minutes. We should go now, before it rips us apart.”

“I don't think it'll be doing any of that. I think it's frightened. After all, there's two of us and one of it. We outnumber it.”

“That's what you say,” Dita whispered harshly. “That doesn't mean anything if it's a really strong...thing. You know some people could fight ten opponents with their hands tied behind their backs, don't you?”

“Sure, but that doesn't mean that this one would.” Wray peered at the gigantic cockroach again. “It looks frightened.”

“That's you ascribing human emotions to it. It doesn't look remotely human.”

“It has eyes and legs. Something recognizable. If it wasn't remotely human, then it would probably look like a blob or something.”

Dita huffed. “Why the hell am I debating this with you? We should be running away!”

At that moment, the gigantic cockroach emitted a hiss and a click and seemed to bob around as if it was looking for something. One of its arms took hold of something that was strapped to its waist. A small brown pouch which appeared to have several pockets sewn onto the outside of it. The creature took something out and put it in its mouth. The hissing and clicking seemed to splutter as if it was speaking in static and then it began to speak in dry, strangely accented words. If Wray had not studied the old, dead languages, he would not have understood it. Instead, he found that he could make out the words. Words that the Ancients used to speak although he had only read such words before. It was the standard dialect, although the accent indicated that whatever version that the giant insect had learned from was different than the one that was being taught by the elders in Despina.

“Who are you? Are you the Ancients?” the gigantic cockroach asked.

Wray and Dita looked at each other and then looked back at the creature.

“No,” said Wray, switching to the language of the Ancients. “We are simply travelers. Who are you?”

“I’m,” and the cockroach said its name in a series of clicks and hisses. “I suppose you could translate it as Mendel. Why are you in these ruins?”

“We’re travelers from another city,” replied Wray. “And we are just exploring the place. What are you doing?”

“I’m just trying to find things,” said Mendel. “This is an old library that the Ancients used to keep and no one else seems to want to come here. Except the crazy.”

“I’m pretty crazy,” said Dita.

“You don’t count,” Wray told her. To Mendel, he said, “Why do you say that? Are there more of your kind here in this universe? And why aren’t they concerned about all the things that the Ancients left behind? I assume your race had contact with the Ancients.”

Mendel clacked his large mandibles as if he were laughing. He wasn’t quite sure if the giant insect was doing it because he genuinely found Wray’s comments funny or if it was ironic. It was difficult to tell with a cockroach. “The Ancients created us. It would take a long time to tell.”

Dita crossed her arms, no longer looking frightened, especially since the cockroach seemed rather civilized. “Well, I have all the time in the world.”

“Maybe you do,” Wray muttered under his breath, in their own language, “But I have places to go and things to find.”

“Oh come on, it’s not as if that going to really stop you,” Dita replied. “Didn’t those lackeys for the Black Cockatrice pretty much go in the opposite direction for whatever it is they’re trying to find? I mean, Valdrada isn’t particularly the go to place for stuff by the Ancients. And even if they’re just using that as a stop over, I’m pretty sure they will have to go through many stop overs. Depending on where we are, we may be closer to whatever it is you’re trying to find. If it exists, that

is. And if whatever they are trying to find is the same thing as the thing that you're trying to find. I'm not quite clear on that.”

“Your companion is very chatty,” said Mendel to Wray. “I'm not quite sure I followed all that your companion said. I know the standard Ancient dialect, but it is mostly academic for me.”

“I'm a knot finder,” said Dita. “That's why I'm fairly fluent in the Ancient language. I'm Dita, by the way. Or Mad Dita as everyone calls me.”

“Why are you mad?” Mendel asked.

She gave the cockroach a strange grin. “The short explanation is that I bumped my head as a child and I was never right again. I'm a murderess, you know. So it might not be such a great idea to associate with me. He on the other hand,” she said pointing to Wray, “made me take him to this place because he needed a knot finder. Unfortunately, I'm not much of a knot finder as I don't know what this city is.”

“This city used to have a name. My kind calls it click-click-click-hisssss. The Ancients called it Beersheba.”

Wray's heart nearly stopped at that piece of information. He had simply gone on intuition to go through the unknown knot and tether that the Black Cockatrice members had briefly discussed. He didn't know if it was Beersheba or a completely different city, but he did know that whatever it was, the Black Cockatrice had targeted it for their purposes. And he wanted to do all he could to thwart their purposes, no matter what it was.

For the city to be Beersheba was a huge stroke of luck. It would mean that he was just that closer to getting to Marozia, no matter what Dita said about its questionable existence.

“Well I'll be damned,” whistled Dita. “So this place does exist. And it does connect straight to Despina. I wonder why people aren't coming here any more, aside from the fact that the city is in ruins.”

“It could be that the inhabitants of Beersheba are giant cockroaches.”

“Giant cockroaches?” Mendel mused. “I have heard of that term before, but I don't quite recall.” After a moment of clicking noises to itself, Mendel tapped two of his legs together. “Ah, I remember now. Cockroaches were one of our ancestor species. But from what we know about our own physiology, the Ancients must have done quite a bit of engineering, because our body plan differs quite a bit from those small creatures.”

“What do you mean differs a lot?” asked Dita.

Mendel began explaining that the Ancients wanted to design a race of intelligent creatures that could survive in harsh environments, particularly environments that had high levels of radiation that could kill off other kinds of creatures. In attempting to design such creatures, they turned to one that had already been proven to be resistant to radiation as a basis for their new creation.

That particular creature proved to be the cockroach. However, in their experiments, one of the Ancients had probably decided that they wanted a much larger creature. But because of the physical limitations of an exoskeleton, there was a lot of modification involved. Mendel's race possessed an internal skeleton to help support the bulk and the exoskeleton became more of an exterior armor. While the gigantic cockroaches were smart and able to withstand the damage that radiation could cause, there were less obvious changes that occurred when the Ancients scaled the body type up by several magnitudes. For one, the gigantic cockroaches could no longer move very fast. What seemed like an efficient vascular system in the smaller insects was not so efficient in the larger organism. Also because of the weight, Mendel and his brethren could not run up walls or stick to ceilings without the aid of specific technologies.

“While that might be a really interesting super power,” Mendel mused. “I don't think it really matters in the long term. I mean, what use do I have to stick to walls and ceilings when some of my

friends can design technology to do that?” At those words, he showed the small spherical glow light that served as his light source in the dark ruins. “My friend hiss-hiss-click-click, well, you could call him Faraday, invented this and gave this to me on my birthday. I can program it so that it will follow me around.”

“What sort of power source does it use?” Dita asked.

“Solar power,” Mendel replied. “To recharge it, all I have to do is to leave it on the roof of my house on a sunny day. That gives it enough power to last me for about a month.”

“That's really useful. Especially if you need to work during the night,” said Wray.

“Yes.” Mendel wiggled his antennae. “My elders had described what the Ancients must have looked like. They never saw the Ancients themselves, but the description had been passed down through the generations. And from those descriptions, they looked quite like what you do. That is why I assumed at first that you must be Ancients.”

Dita shook her head. “Like you, my kind was engineered by the Ancients to find knots.”

“And you must be the knot jumper?” Mendel asked Wray.

“I'm afraid not. However, I come from the same stock that she did.”

“I have heard about knot jumpers and knot finders,” said the giant cockroach. “But I heard that they were confined to particular species. When they all left, we were pretty much stranded here. We moved outward and Beersheba here went into decline even though we knew the anchor was located in the center of the city. While we prized knowledge, my kind also has some regrettable superstitions that kept this city in ruins.”

“Superstitions?”

Mendel motioned for them to follow him back out to the brighter atrium of the ruined library. As they walked, he continued to talk. “While the Ancients designed us to be intelligent, I'm afraid after the Great Rending, much of our civilization fell into what you would call a Dark Ages. Much of

the knowledge has been lost even though a special caste, to which I belong, has been trying to keep the knowledge alive. The rest of the populace believe that the Ancients were strange, inexplicable gods and that the anchor is the entrance to the Otherworld. The afterlife. And that this ruined city is haunted by ghosts and spirits. That's why this whole place isn't looted.”

“Is that what you're doing?” said Wray as they finally stepped out of the library. “Looting?”

“What? Me? Oh no.” Mendel shook his head vigorously. “I was merely trying to find more information in my area of study. I am a student and I am trying to write a dissertation on the genetic knowledge of the Ancients. I was trying to find some original documentation before you interrupted me.”

“Then we apologize for interrupting you.” Dita prodded Wray who only scowled. “I hope you have good luck with trying to find what you're trying to find. We'll be on our way.”

He grabbed her wrist before she walked off. It was her turn to give him a dirty look. “I do have one question for you, though. Do you know anything about the anchor in the center of the city? We're curious as to where all the rest of the knots lead.”

“I'm the wrong cockroach to ask,” said Mendel. “However, my advisor may know someone who is a better expert about knots and anchors. You can come with me and we can talk to him.”

“But I thought you were trying to find some sort of document back there in the library. Wouldn't this disrupt your work?” asked Dita.

“No. This is not a problem.” Mendel clacked his mandibles again in laughter. “Besides, you two are more interesting. My advisor would forget all about me being unsuccessful in this latest venture if I bring you to him. You see, he is very interested in foreign species. He is mostly a scientific historian. Most of his research involves looking at texts written by the Ancients. But he will be ecstatic if he finds that there are now actually live specimens to study.”

“I don't like the sound of that,” said Dita. “Is he going to cut us open?”

“Oh, most certainly not!” Mendel sounded horrified. “But he will probably want to ask you many questions. He's never traveled outside of this universe, you know. Then again, none of us alive today have, but not all of us care about such things, you know.”

“That's fortunate,” said Dita. “I'm not sure what people in the other universes would make of you. I've never heard of a giant cockroach race made by the Ancients. But then again, there are a lot of things we don't know about the Ancients. And there aren't any around so we could question them.”

Mendel looked up into the clear sky and then clicked to himself before saying, “It is close to the second meal time. I don't know what kind of food that you two will eat, but I'm sure we'll find something.”

“We could always go back to Despina,” said Dita hopefully. “And, you know, get food for ourselves.”

“We are what the Ancients would call omnivores,” said Mendel. “So even if you cannot eat some things, you could possibly eat some vegetables. If, that is, it is not poisonous to your physiology. I'm sure my advisor would know for sure since he has studied up on such things.”

Chapter 8

Wray and Dita followed Mendel down an alleyway past the ruined library and several other axillary buildings until they found themselves just outside the downtown area. Around them, there were smaller buildings that appeared to be residential dwellings. These buildings, too, had the air of ruins, long left uninhabited. At the end of the road, Mendel stopped in front of a two story building

that appeared slightly newer than the others. While there were no glass panes in the windows, there were unbroken lattices. The door to the building was unbroken and coated with unchipped red paint. Mendel scratched on the door in a series of taps before opening the door. The round floating light followed the giant cockroach into the building, lighting the room up, revealing an entrance foyer with strangely shaped furniture. One of the pieces looked like a coat rack. And something else resembled a stool with five legs.

Mendel called out into an adjoining hallway in a loud series of clicks and hisses. After he was finished, he turned to Wray and Dita and told them, “I just called to my advisor telling him that I have brought guests who knew the Ancient language. That, I think, should be warning enough. What should I introduce you two as?”

They told the giant cockroach their names. A moment later, another giant cockroach appeared on the threshold of the hallway. While Mendel possessed a smooth black carapace that had a slight green sheen under the light, the other cockroach was about a head taller and thinner. Its carapace was a plain brown and was covered by a dusting of fine hairs, making it look like it had the texture of a peach. The brown cockroach gave a series of surprised hisses and clicks before saying in a discernible Ancient tongue, “Mendel, what have you brought back?”

“These are creatures from another universe. They traveled the tethers, I think. This one is called Dita. She is a knot finder,” said Mendel, waving an appendage towards her. “And the taller one is called Wray. I'm not quite sure what he is.”

“I'm a judge in my home city,” said Wray. “But I also have oracular abilities. I don't know enough my own history to know for sure if I'm a special breed of human that the Ancients made.”

Mendel's advisor nodded at that, but kept his attention on Dita. “A knot finder, huh? I don't know how many centuries it had been since a knot jumper or a knot finder came through Beersheba. I have so many questions! My name is hiss-hiss-hiss-click. Or you can call me Bell. Exactly which

city are you from?"

"Despina," said Wray.

"Despina! That's one of the cities that the Ancients originally connected to Beersheba," said Bell. "But then it was just assumed that the tether broke. Or maybe people just didn't go any more. There aren't any knot jumpers or knot finders born to our kind, you know. Although we have plenty of engineers who might know a thing or two about knots and anchors."

"That's great," exclaimed Wray, suddenly getting excited. "Could you introduce us to one of your engineers? I'm trying to get to this city called Marozia."

This time, Bell also gave a laugh. "You must be kidding, right? That's a myth."

"I told you," Dita said smugly.

"Shut up." Wray crossed his arms and frowned. "I know what I've read. I had an text written by an Ancient traveler and it indicated that Marozia was indeed real."

"Even if it is real, there is no way to get to it, I don't think," said Bell. "We have many stories. And one of them is that Marozia was deliberately made into an orphaned city by the Ancients for one reason or another. The reason why varies depending on who is telling the story. But enough about that. It is for the second meal time. We must go to the kitchen. And let me introduce you to my other students."

Beyond the foyer and past the hallway, they eventually emerged into what looked like a kitchen built in the old Ancient architectural style. There was only long stone counter centered in the room. To one side were a series of built in hearths, four of them, each of them already lit with several metal pots hanging on spits and bubbling away. To the opposite side were the windows, each barred with a wood lattice that was carved in strange intricate designs that resembled the gnawing bores of termites. But the designs, far from being random, gave a fractal appearance that resembled that of the edge of snowflakes.

In the kitchen, there were several other gigantic cockroaches, each busy with a task. Two of the gigantic cockroaches were seated on high stools at the end of the long counter, arguing in hisses and clicks over something written on a piece of parchment paper. A third cockroach was diligently stirring one of the larger pots hanging in a hearth. And a fourth was tossing what looked like a salad. Except it wasn't green. It appeared brown and gray. And upon closer inspection, the bits of brown and gray wriggled as if they were alive. Wray shuddered and hoped that these creatures would not make him eat that particular dish due to some obscure custom that was required of guests.

When Wray and Dita made an appearance in the kitchen, all activity stopped as the other cockroaches turned to stare at them. Wray became aware of Dita when she not so subtly moved closer to him. Then, after a moment of stunned silence, all of the other cockroaches began to chatter.

Bell shook his arms. "Quiet!" he bellowed. "These are not Ancients. They are travelers from another city." He introduced Wray and Dita to the rest of the cockroaches.

"I was the first one to meet them," said Mendel. "Although I was scared to death when I first met them."

The two cockroaches sitting at the central table seemed larger than the other cockroaches, even larger than Bell. Their carapaces had a slight purple sheen and Wray could only tell them apart because one of them had a pair of black antennae and the other one brown. They called themselves Southern Roaches, a particular subspecies normally living in the warmer parts of the world, but they had immigrated up north because they wanted to do their studies with Bell. The one with the black antennae called himself Sanger. The other one with brown antennae was Sanger's sister, Franklin. The cockroach stirring the pot on the hearth appeared to be a slightly shorter version of Mendel, but in addition to the green carapace, there was an edge of gold along the underside of his armor. He called himself Haldane. And the last of Bell's students, was the blue-backed Gamow who was on

“chopping duty”, whatever that meant.

“Please sit down,” Haldane said, waving a ladle about. Bits of food dripped onto the floor, causing Franklin to berate him. He chittered in surprise and then rushed off to a cupboard to pull out a rag to wipe the mess. Looking up from his efforts, he continued, “I want to know all about how you got here!”

It was Dita who related their travels when they sat down. The cockroaches seemed rapt at her tale. When Gamow finished with “chopping duty,” he helped Haldane set the table with bowls of soup. Bell immediately entreated them to eat their fill, emphasizing that everything in the soup was made from natural vegetable ingredients found around their location. With another shared glance, Wray and Dita decided to open their hoods and take a breath of the outside atmosphere.

The place smelled dry and a little stale. There was a slight musky smell that reminded Wray of a wet forest. The soup was another matter. It smelled very familiar. Like chicken soup.

“This smells really good,” said Dita in surprise.

The other cockroaches picked up their bowls to pour it into their mouths. After watching them for a moment, Wray followed suit. The bowl itself felt like glazed ceramic. It was warm from the soup. He took it up in his hands and took a sip. The soup itself felt smooth and thick in his mouth and the chunks in the broth had the fibered texture of vegetables. On his tongue, the vegetables tasted not unlike the cross between a potato and celery. Beside him, Dita was sipping the soup and then wiping her mouth with her sleeve after a particularly long drought.

“So all of you live in this house?” said Dita. “I thought Mendel told us that this whole city was in ruins and that your people lived beyond this place, on the outside because they think that ghosts reside here.”

“That's true,” said Bell. “But we are all in the scholar class. I'm not sure if that translates well to what is in your culture.”

“We have a scholar class,” said Wray. “But in our city, at least, and a couple others, the scholar class isn't particularly all that different from any other class other than education and possibly wealth.”

“It is similar here,” said Bell, nodding. “But we are also a bit more of a scientific bunch. I got a grant to work here in this ruined city, looking for research materials. And of course, I took my students with me. We are not afraid of ghosts since we do not believe in them. But for the rest of society, well, that is why they are not here. I've found that taking over one of these old houses near the center of the city is ideal for our studies.”

“It took a little work, but I think we've got it habitable,” said Franklin. She tapped one of the manuscripts in front of her. “So you say you're from Despina, huh? I've only read about it in books. Ancient books. I'm sure it's all outdated now. What is it like?”

“The architecture is very similar to Beersheba,” said Wray. “I assume it's because it was all built by the Ancients. But that's not why we're here. We're on our way to Marozia.”

Dita slanted him another one of her looks again, but at least this time, she did not vociferously object. But even if she did not say anything, the other cockroaches made noises of disbelief.

“You must be mad, human,” said Franklin. “Why, I have this map here.” She pushed her half finished bowl of soup aside and rummaged around in her stack of papers before pulling one out to show everyone. “This map was made by an Ancient was was known to be psychologically unstable after traveling through the tethers unaided by a knot jumper or a knot finder. So we don't know how much about it is true. But despite his mental instability, he wrote this.” Franklin tapped the bottom of the paper where there was a dot and a bit of almost illegible writing in Ancient script. “This is Marozia. It is imaginary, he says. And even if it is real, it has been orphaned, cutting off all avenues of entrance and exit to that particular universe.”

Wray sat back, sighing. “Still, I want to try to get to it.”

“I've been trying to convince him that the mission is impossible,” Dita said.

Franklin's brother, Sanger, wiggled his antennae. “Perhaps you could get more information about the city that you seek at another city on the web.”

“So what city would you suggest?” Wray asked.

The cockroaches looked at each other without speaking although they wiggled their antennae at each other as if talking in some kind of silent sign language. Finally, their advisor, Bell, said, “There are many cities connected to Beersheba via the tethers. Or theoretically anyway. There has been no one of our kind to come here to the center of the city for centuries to check to see if any of those tethers remained unbroken. You two are the first visitors that we know of who have traveled here.”

“And the tether was a bit frayed,” he murmured.

Dita glared at him, perhaps silently telling him that she was in no mood to travel another frayed tether, no matter how safe he might consider it, but he diligently ignored her.

“We have several sources in our library talking about various cities that Beersheba used to trade with,” said Franklin. She gestured with her first pair of arms to indicate some place beyond the main part of the ruined city. “Our scholar class keeps a library filled with some of the more Ancient documents at our university. Most of our kind don't care for any of the 'old stuff' so we haven't been able to transport everything to the library yet.”

“That's why you found me there in that Ancient library,” Mendel added. “I was trying to find the volumes that were important for my own research. Or at least volumes that we would want to conserve the most.”

His advisor nodded. “It is slow work. Right now, our group is the only group in the city right now. And we don't have the funds to do any of that conservatory work on top of what we are here

for.”

“Would there be any chance for me to see this map?” Wray asked. “Perhaps from that map, we can make our way to the next city to see if we could find the information that we need.”

“You can see it for yourself.” Franklin slid the map over to him.

Wray peered more closely at the map, paying close attention to the glyphs. As the giant cockroach had mentioned that the author of the map had been mentally unstable, the handwriting had an odd, angular style to it, reminiscent of someone with a compulsive personality. On the corner of the map, he noticed the glyph for Beersheba. From Beersheba there were two lines indicating two tethers radiating from that particular anchor. One of the tethers connected to something that the Ancients called the Leona web. Since Despina was ultimately connected to Leona via Valdrada, he assumed that the connection was to Despina. The other connection was to another city that he was unfamiliar with. From the Ancient glyph, the city sounded something similar to Argia.

Beside him, Dita looked over his shoulder at the map. “That looks familiar,” she said.

“What? It looks familiar to you? You've traveled here?”

She shook her head. “No. It looks familiar to that map that you showed me before that was from that book by that Ancient traveler. I don't really have a head for names unless I encounter them often, but the shape of the web looks very familiar. I suspect that the map from that book and from this document is one and the same.”

“Really?” exclaimed Haldane who had taken the seat across from them. “You've seen a map just like this in an Ancient book? Maybe they're from the same source. Or perhaps one of the authors copied the map from the other. Or from an even older source.”

“That sounds entirely possible,” said Wray. “But whatever the case, we'll need to get to this place called Argia.”

“So you're planning on heading out as soon as possible?” asked Mendel. He sounded a little

disappointed. “I was sort of hoping that you might stay a couple of days here before you leave. I, I mean we, have a lot of questions about the other cities that I'm sure you could answer.”

“We would love to stay,” said Wray, “But we're on a tight schedule.”

“What he means to say,” Dita said wryly, “is that we're in a race to find a manuscript before some other people do.”

This time, Wray glared at her. She simply smiled, not caring that she was spilling all of his secrets to these strange creatures. But the giant cockroaches didn't appear to be particularly interested in the human's concern. They were talking with each other again, using their antennae. At the end of the conversation, Haldane and Sanger squeaked and clicked in outrage as Mendel hissed. Their advisor beat his scratched his claw against the table to get their attention.

“Well, it's decided,” Bell said finally to Wray and Dita. “I think we would benefit quite a bit from your perspective. I know it's probably not a popular opinion with the rest of our race, but I think it's probably time that we stop being isolationists. If more knot jumpers and knot finders come to Beersheba, perhaps we will resume trade with the other cities. We would benefit from the addition of new technologies and knowledge that will inevitably come. Since you need an engineer to perhaps figure out if a tether is traversable or not, you need to have a visit with Faraday. And once you do decide to travel, I think Mendel should come with you. He has the most knowledge of all of my students about what the Ancients knew about the connected cities.”

“I can take you to Faraday, as well,” said Mendel. “He's one of my friends and he made this for me.” He finally took hold of the light that had followed him and somehow deactivated it so that it stopped glowing and landed into his claw as a small round lump of gunmetal with strange cracks covering it. “All I would need is to pack a few of my things which might help you in your navigation.”

The blue-backed cockroach named Gamow wiggled his antennae in excitement. “Just think of

it! Mendel will be the first of our kind to jump to another city! You'll go into our history for sure.”

Mendel gave a dry cackle. “Don't be so confident. History has been lost before. We're just trying to recover what we've lost since the Great Rending.”

“If it makes you feel better,” said Dita, leaning back on her chair, “we've lost quite a bit, too, with the Great Rending. For one thing, we didn't know that your kind even existed.”

Chapter 9

After what the giant cockroaches termed “the second meal,” Bell gave the orders to the rest of his students with the exception of Mendel to continue with their studies. It became apparent that Sanger and Haldane, the two students who had hissed in irritation in the earlier conversation, were jealous of Mendel for being the one chosen by Bell to be the first of their kind to travel with the humans to another city. The rest of the students, however, tried to give Mendel advice as he attempted to pack for the trip.

Once the cockroach had packed a few instruments and books in a satchel that he slung over his shoulder, Mendel took Wray and Dita out of the house that the researchers were using as a base and led them out of the old city, heading north. As they headed towards the edge of the city, the ruins progressively became shorter and smaller until there was nothing but bits of rubble scattered across a dusty road. Beyond was a forest consisting of trees growing in odd twisting shapes, similar to the vines that infested the underground complex in the center of Beersheba.

“No one knows quite sure when the rumors that ghosts lived in the Ancient city started circulating among our kind,” Mendel told them conversationally as they walked down the road to

the north where the new city that the giant cockroaches had built lay. “Probably the rumors started as early as a hundred years after the Great Rending. Some of our kind can be quite superstitious. Probably because there is some kind of preference in our species to ascribe strange happenings to something supernatural rather than scientific. Which, I think, is a great failing on our part.”

“Why do you say that?” Wray asked. He and Dita had decided to leave their hoods off since it didn't appear that the air on this world was killing them. Dita lagged behind a pace, perhaps because she seemed particularly sullen after Wray had told her in no uncertain terms that they were going to be jumping to Argia as soon as they got an engineer to look at the knots in the underground complex. But when he glanced back at her, she seemed engrossed in examining the vegetation around them.

“I say it's a failing because our psychologists have consistently shown in various experiments that those of our kind prefer irrational explanations. Perhaps because they sound more impressive,” said Mendel. “A lot of us who are more scientifically minded think that it may be an unintended consequence when the Ancients engineered us. Of course, there aren't any Ancients about, so we can't ask them.”

“Perhaps,” said Dita finally speaking up, “we might find an Ancient on our travels of jumping around in strange cities. Then we can ask him why everything is what they are. Assuming that the Ancients still have the knowledge.”

“Oh?” said Mendel. “You think the Ancients weren't immune to the Great Rending?”

Dita laughed at that. “Well, just consider what that traumatic event was called. The Great Rending. Sure, literally it meant that many of the tethers connected the cities founded by the Ancients were destroyed. But I think the Great Rending referred to a lot of other things as well. Knowledge was lost. Civilizations destroyed. No one that we know of knows, really, what an Ancient looked like. No one now has ever met or has been in contact with the Ancients. For all we know, the

Ancients are all dead, if they haven't withdrawn back to their home city. And if there are any Ancients around, it's been centuries since that event. Any of them around now certainly weren't around back then to have any knowledge of what had happened.”

“That's true,” said Mendel. “A lot of our historians speculate that the Great Rending resulted from an unintended consequence. Perhaps the Ancients had created some new technology which ripped apart the bonds that held together certain universes. Or perhaps someone had used this technology for more malicious purposes. Maybe there was a war, even though there hasn't really been much evidence for that particularly on Beersheba. We were simply cut off from the other cities.”

The road that they traveled cut through the dense forest which cut off most of their vision of the horizon. So when they finally arrived at the city, it was a surprise. The road widened as it approached a strange archway molded out of pebbled mud that rose above their heads like a soaring edifice, proclaiming the entrance to the city. The buildings in this city were nothing like the ruins back in the main part of Beersheba. Instead of the familiar angular and clean lines of the Ancient architecture, the architecture of the giant cockroaches was of a more organic nature.

This city, which Mendel had mentioned was called Click-click-click in their own native language, or translated as Forest Edge, had been built and modified by the giant cockroaches over the centuries until what used to be a small village grew into a sprawling, maze-like structure. The buildings themselves reminded Wray of termite mounds he had seen once as a boy when his parents had taken him to the sea for a holiday. On their way there, they had passed a savannah and plain where towering mounds peppered with holes leading to winding passages sat in the desert like weird misshapen fingers.

Except unlike those termite mounds, however, these buildings were enormous. He guessed that these organic shaped buildings were probably five or six stories tall at the very least. Many

were probably much higher than that. In Despina, buildings were rarely over five stories tall, due to the fact that the architects and engineers who worked in that city had yet to figure out how to build taller buildings. Much of that could be blamed from the lost knowledge of the Ancients.

But the giant cockroaches had somehow solved that problem. Idly, Wray figured that perhaps part of the solution was that the cockroaches had an organic sense of aesthetics unlike the more square, artificial lines of the Ancients that the rest of the cities populated by humans tended to imitate. But while the Ancients had figured out a way to build tall, straight buildings, to everyone else it was a mystery.

On the streets, there were few other cockroaches traveling from one building to the other. The ones that they passed, predictably, stopped in their tracks and stared at Wray and Dita, dittering in surprise. Mendel called out in their language, explaining the humans' presence, but still the cockroaches seemed fascinated.

"I'm explaining to them that I'm showing you travelers around our city," Mendel told them, when the third giant cockroach they met finally tottered off, staggered at their presence. "Your presence will probably spread throughout the city in a matter of hours if not minutes. But you will not have to be worried that you will be detained, especially since I explained to them that you will be leaving soon."

"I should certainly hope so," said Dita as she peered back at the cockroach that just left. When that cockroach noticed that Dita was looking at him, he uttered a squeal and scampered off. "I would not want a legion of your kind coming out calling for our heads. I've had enough of that from the city I was from."

"No, no," said Mendel. "There's no worry there." Finally, they reached one of the mound buildings which sat in a winding alleyway branching off from the main road. To human eyes, it didn't look particularly different from any of the other buildings. There were no signs distinguishing

any of the buildings from each other either. “Ah, here we are. This is the engineering workshop that my friend Faraday runs. Come on in, he'll be really curious to meet you.”

Wray followed Mendel into the building with Dita trailing behind, as usual, somewhat reluctantly. There was no door to the building, just another archway similar to the archway built at the entrance to the city. Inside, the air was noticeably cooler and drier than the air outside. It was also darker, and it took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the dimness. The entrance to the building was a long smooth tunnel made of the same mud that the exterior of the building. It had been pounded into a sheen by the many feet that had traversed the same tunnel. Like the alleyway just outside of the building, the tunnel wound around the building in a circuitous way. Wray had the sense that the hallway was slowly spiraling towards the center.

The tunnel sloped downward. There was outside light that was occasionally punctuated by oblong shaped windows, but most of the light was provided by small lanterns hanging from pegs in intervals along the wall. The glow coming out of the lanterns had a slight green tinge, rendering the surroundings with a verdant feel. The cool air was scented with the mustiness of the mud that made the building.

Finally, the tunnel terminated in a large central room with a vaulting ceiling that seemed to go as high as the top of the building. At the very top, there was a small circular opening where a little sunlight was able to filter down to a point at the center of the room. The floor in this room was different than the floor in the tunnels. While the outer edge was also pounded of smooth mud, the rest of the floor was slightly raised with glazed clay tiles. These tiles appeared to be painted with a black and blue pattern which converged to a green star at the center where the sunlight illuminated. Around the tiled floor were tables where machines in various states of repair sat.

One cockroach stood at the end of the room, slightly in shadow. It appeared to be busy screwing something onto one of the machines and did not notice Mendel or the humans until

Mendel made a loud clicking sound in greeting. When the cockroach looked up, it wiggled its antennae as if irritated, but upon seeing Wray and Dita, it jumped up and began speaking in its own tongue quickly. Mendel replied.

Finally, the cockroach stepped forward and gave a little twirl which Mendel explained to them was their race's traditional way of greeting guests. From the light available in the room, the cockroach appeared slightly taller and broader than Mendel. And while Mendel was mostly black with some green highlights, this cockroach had a carapace that gleamed bronze, almost gold. It reminded Wray of the gold scarabs that lived in small burrows in the desert outside of Despina. There were insect collectors who would go out to the desert for months at a time in an attempt to collect as much of the elusive creatures as possible to sell to other collectors. Or to sell to jewelry makers who often used the golden shells to make intricate broaches that gleamed like sunlight. His mother once had a broach made of those golden scarabs. But after her death, when he had tried to find it, it had disappeared.

“Hello,” said the golden cockroach. Its accent of the Ancient tongue was slightly different than Mendel's raspy voice. Instead, the accent was a lot more melodic, almost singing. It was beautiful to listen to, almost like the sonorous chiming of a large temple bell. “I am called Faraday in the Ancient language. I am, well, I suppose my job could be translated as the master bridge engineer. I help repair the archways at the entrances to the buildings.”

Wray and Dita introduced themselves. Unsure if it was taboo to shake hands, or rather shake hand and claw, with Faraday, Wray ended up performing a small bow. Dita followed suit without complaint.

“I am pleased to meet you humans,” Faraday said. “I had read about your kind when I studied the histories of the cities when I was a young one. I must admit, I had thought that perhaps you were Ancients. But I was mistaken.”

“That is not an unusual mistake,” chittered Mendel. “The research team out in Beersheba thought so, too.”

“So what brings you here to my humble workshop?” Faraday asked.

Mendel explained to his friend that Wray and Dita were travelers looking to jump to the next city, Argia, but would like to have an engineer to check the knots in Beersheba first as the tether they traveled to get to their city had been frayed.

“Hm. Now that is an interesting job,” the golden cockroach finally said after Mendel finished with his explanation. “I've never had any reason to go into the Ancient city before even though I've been pretty curious. I've always thought that maybe the Ancients had left some artifacts in the city before they left but that no one else had ever bothered to find. But then again, I don't have any grant money to launch an expedition to the place.”

“Well, take this as an opportunity to explore,” said Mendel excitedly as he waved his antennae. “I'll be traveling with Wray and Dita to the next city. I know, if you want to, you can travel with us, if they have room in their vessel.”

Wray thought about that. “I don't think lack of room will be too much of a problem. We have seats for four more passengers.”

At that, Dita shrugged. “I don't care. He's in charge. If you want to risk your neck jumping tethers that might be broken, it's your choice. I'm just the knot finder.”

“Really?” Faraday clicked to himself and then said, “I'm due for a vacation and my schedule is free. And jumping cities sounds like an adventure. And it's not like anyone would miss me.”

At that comment, Mendel seemed to pause for a moment and then give a hiss that sounded like the cockroach equivalent of a sigh. The type of sigh that said that the other individual was completely clueless about certain things. But Faraday didn't particularly seem to notice Mendel's unsaid remark. Instead, he wandered off muttering about needing to pack if he was to go jumping off

to another city.

“We just want you to check the knots!” Mendel called out when his friend wandered out of a doorway at the opposite side of the main room. When Faraday just replied that he would be back in a couple minutes, Mendel gave an exasperated series of clicks. “I apologize. I'm sure you two did not expect tagalongs for your trip.”

Wray just crossed his arms and gave the cockroach an amused smile. “It is all right. Besides, I'm sure you will have a lot of information about these cities that I don't. And having an engineer along will be useful, too, especially when determining if the tethers are unbroken.”

Mendel tittered, not entirely convinced with Wray's reasoning. But as they waited, they waited in the main room. There weren't any chairs except for the odd footed stools that they had seen before in the house that the research cockroaches had commandeered at the main part of Beersheba. Dita didn't have any compunction about sitting down and waiting with a frown on her face as if she expected to wait for Faraday for quite a while. Wray, on the other hand, took the opportunity to examine everything else in the main room.

“I don't really understand half the things in here,” Mendel admitted when he noticed that Wray was walking toward one of the benches to examine one of the machines that Faraday was working on. The machine looked like a flat square piece of metal that had many strange knobs and switches attached to the top of it. The knobs and switches themselves weren't they types that Wray was accustomed to, but they were shaped in such a way that they were optimized for use by a cockroach, especially since they had claws instead of hands. “I'm just an academic scholar, not an engineer.”

“But you said that Faraday is your friend?” Wray said. He reached out to touch one of the knobs. It felt like cold metal, even though it was colored a bright red. “Has he been your friend for long?”

“For quite a long time,” Mendel assured him, with a wave of his antennae. “I first met him when I was very young. We were both creche mates.”

“Creche mates?”

“It is how our young are raised,” the giant cockroach explained. “After parents have their young, they often bring their young to a nursery which we call the creche where the young can often stay while the parents are out doing their jobs or need to leave their young for one reason or another. This nursery also serves as place where the young can get educated, but I think it depends more on the type of creche that the young is placed in than anything. There are some creches where the parents just dump their young and forget about them.”

“It sounds a bit like an orphanage,” Wray murmured.

“It is not like an orphanage if your parents come back for you,” Dita said loudly. Apparently she had overheard their conversation.

“That's correct,” said Mendel. “I am somewhat familiar with the Ancient term for orphanage, but in our language, we don't have a term which distinguishes creches from orphanages. Both are the same thing. However, for me and Faraday, the creche was merely a temporary home while our parents went to work. I met Faraday there and we became friends. He, however, went into engineering while I decided to become a scholar. But we've managed to always stay in touch.”

Wray moved on to another machine sitting on the bench top. This one, instead of being flat, appeared to be a metal cube with its corners cut off. There were no switches or knobs on this particular mechanism, but there was writings and etchings on the surfaces. As he peered closer, the etchings appeared to have some sort of pattern to it, but he couldn't make any sense of it. Either it was a pattern that was too complicated for his mind to work out immediately, or it was a different sort of writing, invented by the giant cockroaches. He reached out to touch this machine, too, but unlike the one with switches, something immediately started to happen. A certain sequences of the

glyphs on the surface began glowing with a faint blue light. Reflexively, Wray jumped away and swore.

In the background, he could hear Dita snickering at his surprise.

Mendel, however, didn't appear to notice Wray's unusual behavior. Instead, the giant cockroach moved closer to see what Wray was examining. Mendel gave a dry hiss in astonishment and then translated back into the Ancient tongue, "This isn't something that I've seen before. I'm not sure if Faraday actually made this or not, but it appears, from the writing on it, that it may be some kind of weather sensor."

"A weather sensor?" Wray scoffed. "Why would you need a weather sensor? All you would really need is a pair of eyes to look up at the sky."

Dita laughed at his comment. "You sound like a heathen."

Mendel looked back and forth from Wray to Dita, clicking to himself as he was unsure about the byplay between the two humans, but a moment later, said, "Well, I think a weather sensor would be very useful. Just think about it. It could probably tell the atmospheric pressure or the humidity and precipitation and may you could make certain predictions about what the weather would be like a couple days from now, let alone a few hours. Think about how useful that would be. If you knew it was going to rain, wouldn't you bring an umbrella to work with you?"

"I suppose that would be useful," Wray conceded. "I can tell the future, but only sometimes. And almost never about the weather."

"That sounds like a limited skill," the giant cockroach remarked, somewhat sympathetically.

A few moments later, after Wray poked around on a third mechanism which appeared to resemble a small mound house that was completely made out of gears, Faraday finally came back to the main room, carrying what looked like a carpet bag that was made of some kind of shiny purple metal that had been pounded and alloyed into the thinness and suppleness of a piece of fabric.

"I've gotten everything, I think," Faraday announced. "And if I don't have everything, my assistant probably has it."

"Your assistant?" Mendel said. His tone was strange. "What do you mean, your assistant?"

"Well, the humans did say that they had extra room in their vessel," Faraday said blithely.

"So I thought, well, since there's extra room, we could bring someone else along. And my assistant would be very useful."

"I thought Resnick was working on her own projects and had stopped assisting you full time," said Mendel.

"That's true. But once I told her about the trip and that I might have need of her, she readily agreed to go. Besides, you don't understand, engineers always need assistants. You just read books. You don't need an assistant."

"That's because I'm still a student and my project doesn't need extra help," Mendel said, exasperated. The giant cockroach turned to Wray. "So is it all right with you for another cockroach to come along?"

Wray shrugged. "I suppose it's all right. We do have room, after all."

"If you keep being so amendable," Dita said, in their own language, "we'll soon have no room at all."

"Am I deciding this or not?"

She put out her in supplication. "It's your vessel, not mine."

Everyone finally headed down the tunnel back out of the engineering building. The third cockroach named Resnick was waiting for them in the front foyer with several more bags packed. Unlike any of the other cockroaches that Wray and Dita had encountered so far, she was colored entirely in white, with a faint white tinge. Her eyes, however, were the color of amethysts. And also unlike any of the other cockroaches, she didn't seem fazed by the appearance of the humans. To her,

it was as if Wray and Dita were like anyone else. She greeted them briefly, before turning around to berate Faraday.

“I can't really believe that you've decided to leave right at this instant! What would your family think about your sudden disappearance?” Resnick's voice was noticeably different than Mendel's rasp or Faraday's sonorous bell. It had a clipped, no nonsense tone that reminded Wray of a persistent songbird. “They're going to worry about you! They're going to think that you were kidnapped by the Southerners or something.”

“Calm down, Resnick,” Faraday replied. “They're not going to think anything of the sort. They're only going to think I'm risking my fool antennae by jumping the knots. I sent them a message earlier while I was packing. I used the telegram machine.”

“Right.”

“Didn't you contact your own family?” Dita asked Resnick.

The albino cockroach suddenly turned on her and said in a cold tone, “I don't have any family.”

Dita didn't seem worried about the cockroach's attitude. “That's fine. I know how it is. I don't have any family either. One of the reasons why I'm stuck working for him.” She jerked a thumb in Wray's direction. “I don't even understand why he wants me to work for him. I killed my last employer.”

Resnick seemed to digest that for a moment before saying, “Well. That's certainly something.”

“Enough chitchat,” Mendel said impatiently. “We're going, yes?”

“Definitely,” said Wray. “We need to check the other knots and tethers first, though. No sense jumping off to the next city before we know it's safe or not.”

“Spoken like a true dilettante,” Dita murmured under her breath, only loud enough for

Wray's ears. "You only know what I've explained to you."

"Be quiet," he told her as they and the three cockroaches exited the engineering building.

Back through the city, they encountered few pedestrians. The only incident of note was when they passed a building near the main street where a couple of cockroaches stood looking out of a second story window. At the sight of the humans, they started making loud hissing and clicking noises as if they were encountering a predator.

"Pay no attention to them," Mendel told them. "They are just a bunch of idiots who don't know better."

Seeing as Wray didn't understand what those hissing giant cockroaches were talking about anyway, he just nodded and continued following Mendel out of the city. But then a moment later, something hit the back of his head. He yelped at the sudden pain and whirled behind him to see what was the matter. On the ground, he saw something round and flat. A small disc made of some sort of shiny, flexible material. It looked almost like a mirror.

"For the goodness of the Great Beetle," Resnick said in exasperation. "What are those idiots up to?"

"Pay no attention to them," Mendel said again. "They're just afraid of something they don't know about."

One of the giant cockroaches hanging out the window threw something else and managed to clip Dita on the shoulder.

"All right, that's it," she said. She pulled out something from a hidden pocket in her suit and aimed it at the window where the hooligans were standing at. She pressed a lever on the contraption she held and a bright beam was emitted from the device. The beam hit a point just above the window, emitting a bunch of sparks and a loud noise. The hooligan cockroaches squealed in terror and quickly ran away from the window.

“I think that's enough of that,” Wray declared as he reached out to take Dita's arm. “Put that away. You're going to have the authorities after us in no time. And then we'll never get away from this city.”

“Sorry,” she replied as she tucked the weapon back into her pocket. But she didn't sound particularly sorry. “Sometimes my temper gets the better of me.”

“Well, try not to have it get the better of you next time when someone does something that annoys you.”

“Wray is right,” said Mendel as he beckoned for them to follow him at a quicker pace. “I don't know those particular ones, but I'm sure if they are particularly frightened, they would probably try to get the police to come and investigate. And the police around here aren't particularly friendly towards cockroaches from different cities let alone someone who is of a completely different species.”

“I'm actually very interested in that hand held weapon of yours,” remarked Faraday as they passed the archway that separated the city from the rest of the countryside. “What is it made of? How does it work?”

Dita shrugged. “I have no idea. I'm just a knot finder. I also sometimes find other random things. And I just found this in my pocket when I put this suit on. It looked familiar to something else that I had seen before, so I just decided to use it.”

“That's irresponsible,” Wray lectured her. “What if it did nothing like what you thought it might have done? It could have, I don't know, blown us up instead of them. Or blown up the entire city, for that matter.”

“You're talking to a woman who laughs in the face of death,” she told him. “I don't particularly care if it blows the entire city up. If it does, who cares? It's not as if I was going to have a very long life otherwise, you know.”

Chapter 10

Wray almost slipped on a vine that had grown around one of the steps that was on the stairway leading down into the underground complex in the middle of the ancient city of Beersheba. The only thing that kept him from tumbling head first down the stairs was a bit of stone that jutted up out of the wall where he had grabbed to gain his balance. It was strange, Wray mused as they continued through the underground complex towards the center where they had left the vessel. He was sure that when he and Dita arrived at the place, there weren't so much vegetation crowding the stone corridors. Or perhaps he was just imagining everything.

Dita, on the other hand, didn't appear to notice that anything was wrong. She confidently strolled down the corridor, brushing away any leaves that got in the way. On the part of the cockroaches, they followed Dita's example and chatted together in their own tongue, perhaps excited about the upcoming travels.

Once they reached the anchor point, however, Wray had to stop to stare at the place in astonishment. When he and Dita had first arrived, the platform of the anchor was relatively clear. But now, it was completely covered in vines. Even some of the vines were attempting to encroach into the space close to the vessel that they used to jump the tethers.

“This was not like that when we first got here,” Dita said flatly, echoing his sentiments.

“What do you mean?” said Mendel.

“These vines,” said Wray. “They were not on this anchor platform at all when we arrived.”

“These vines?” Resnick walked close to one and kicked at it. The plant seemed to slowly uncoil from her touch. “I think they're called sississi vines. They're a native of this world. And they are also a damned nuisance. They're a weed. If you don't manage to kill all of them off, they'll invade your fields and kill your crops. It's one of the big problems in our agricultural society.”

“Don't worry too much about it,” Faraday said as he began to walk toward the shuttle. “They're probably just attracted by the change in the environment.”

“If you ask me, it's a little creepy,” Dita replied. “In my city, plants don't move that fast. It was, what, only a couple hours since we arrived? How can you be so cavalier about this?”

“It's because they're only a nuisance. If they become a menace, then I think we should start being worried.”

“In any case, do you think you can navigate this vessel despite all this vegetation?” asked Wray.

Dita frowned. “I will need to see some of the markings on the anchor in order to align the vessel with the correct knot.” With that, she took out her emergency weapon again and aimed it at the vegetation despite Wray's disapproval. “We will have to clear off the vines in as efficient a way as possible.”

“I agree,” said Mendel. And to Wray as reassurance, “At least she's not aiming that thing at you.”

“At the moment,” Wray grumbled.

“So which knot do you want examined for structural integrity?” Faraday asked?

In response to that, Dita pressed the trigger on the ray gun and fried a couple of the vines lurking on the periphery of the platform anchor. The vines immediately vaporized, leaving nothing but a faint trace of gray smoke and a smell not unlike that of burned cabbage. The vines in the vicinity reacted to the trauma by suddenly withdrawing their leafy tendrils from that part of the

platform.

“It's like those plants are intelligent,” said Dita.

“Nah,” said Mendel. “They're pretty dumb. It's all just reaction to stimuli. I know some botanists who have run extensive tests on them and they don't particularly seem intelligent. Not even as intelligent as some lower animals like worms.”

“Whatever the case, it's creepy,” she repeated. She went over to where she had destroyed the vines and glanced at the coordinates etched into the stone. Frowning, she walked along the edge of the platform, kicking vines away to see what the marks revealed. Finally, she found what she was looking for and used her weapon to clear that particular area. She beckoned to the giant cockroaches to come see what she revealed.

“From the map that one of Mendel's friends showed us, this is the coordinates to Argia,” she said. “This particular hash marks line up with the glyphs on this knot across the way.”

With those directions, the giant cockroaches examined the knot archway that was located right across from the indicated hash marks. Unlike the archway back in Despina, the stones that made up the archway in Beersheba was made of a local stone that had a similar color but a slightly different texture. It was far more grainy and at certain vantage points, it seemed to shimmer because the stone was not completely homogenous. The stone itself was composed of many different minerals, some of which was shiny quartz.

But for the Ancients, Wray mused, perhaps it was the structure rather than the composition of materials that mattered. But he was no engineer. That was why Faraday and Resnick were there to examine its structural integrity.

Beyond the stone archway, there was a slight alcove that terminated into a thick wall. He wondered how in that state they would be able to examine the knot and the tether. It was impossible to find out unless the archway was activated. But it seemed that Dita had the same idea, because she

told the cockroaches as much and headed back to the vessel where she made her way to the cockpit to fire up what she called “a test run.” In the test run, she moved the vessel so that it aligned with the hash marks on the anchor and the designated knot. Then she grounded the vessel back on the anchor so that when she ran the test, it would not be automatically sucked into the tether. Then she engaged the navigational and targeting devices. With that in place, the normally opaque knot archway began to glow. Unlike before where one could easily tell if a tether was functional if it shone red or green, this particular knot began to glow a strange orange color.

At that sign, the cockroaches conferred in their own language for a moment. Then Mendel broke away to tell Wray, “I’m really more of a biomedical historian, so I can’t really explain the technical details to you, but Faraday and Resnick think that this tether is conditional.”

Wray watched as Resnick pulled out a strange octagonal device out of one of her bags and pointed it to the knot. Various glyphs glittered on the device as it detected various readings from the partially activated knot. Looking at the glyphs, the two cockroach engineers continued to talk in their own language, giving the impression that whatever they saw on the device was very serious.

“What does it mean that the tether is conditional?” he asked.

Mendel waved his antennae in the cockroach version of the shrug.

The hatch to the vessel opened back up and Dita emerged from the cockpit to see what was the matter. “Well?” she demanded. “What’s the verdict?”

“They said the tether is conditional,” Mendel repeated. “Right now, they’re trying to decide whether or not they can repair it or if it is safe enough to go through as it is.”

“I did see that it was shining a shade of orange. Back in Despina, when the archway was red, we were still able to go through even though the tether was frayed. I am guessing that orange means that it is close to fraying. And that it’s quite possible to travel it, even though there is, of course, some risk.”

“What sort of risk?” Mendel asked, his curiosity piqued.

“Oh, the usual sort of things whenever you're knot jumping,” Dita replied blithely. “Even on tethers that you might consider pretty solidly bound, there's always a chance of breakage. If a tether breaks during transit, there's a possibility that you would be 'lost between the spaces.' That's a theory that they teach all knot jumpers and knot finders. Being lost between the spaces means that you're going to be stuck in that area between universes. The Ancients probably had more idea about what it is, but we can only speculate. They say that if you end up in such spaces, the lack of physical parameters would mean that you would be immediately destroyed. Crushed out of existence.”

“Oh my,” tittered Mendel. “That doesn't sound like a pleasant way to go.”

“It doesn't sound pleasant,” said Dita, “but the theorists say that if that happened, you wouldn't even feel it because it would be completely instantaneous.”

“How high is the risk?” Wray found himself asking.

“You would have to ask the geniuses over there,” Dita said, with a nod towards Faraday and Resnick. The two giant cockroaches seemed completely oblivious to their conversation, but a minute later, they finished their own discussion and then walked back to see them.

It was Faraday who spoke first. His melodic voice sounded fairly confident. “I think it is possible to traverse this tether without too much problems, according to our readings with the knot barometer. The tether that is currently connected from Beersheba to this city called Argia seems to be stable enough for fairly light traffic. With just this one vessel, we should be able to make it through very easily without mishap. I would only be worried if heavy traffic was to go through. In that case, the tether would have to be shored up. And that would be another problem in itself.”

That verdict cheered Wray immensely. Finally, they were getting somewhere! “Great,” he said. “Let's go then.”

Dita gave yet another exasperated sigh but she made no more sarcastic remarks. She simply

went back into the vessel to take off her emergency environmental suit and head back to the cockpit. Wray motioned for Mendel, Faraday, and Resnick to enter the vessel. Once they were all inside and settled, Wray went back to the cockpit to help Dita check out all of the controls. From the view screen, he saw the glow of the knot to Argia.

“We're going to enter the tether in a few minutes,” Dita said to him. “If you want to keep awake this time, I suggest you not look up until we get to our destination.”

“I will take that under advisement,” he replied dryly.

In the background, he could hear the giant cockroaches chatting among themselves in their own tongue. Perhaps they were excited about the trip. After all, they were going to be the first of their kind, after many centuries, to traverse the tethers and enter another city. The giant cockroaches, unfortunately, had never been engineered by the Ancients with the ability to knot jump or knot find. And because of that, they had been stuck for all of those years in that one city.

Dita made a few more last minute adjustments and then said, “All right, we're heading in. Be prepared for the worst, I'd say.”

“Well, that's certainly reassuring,” he said with a dry laugh.

And with one last glimpse up to see the sly twist of her mouth, the engine shuddered as it powered up and propelled their vessel past the archway and through the tether to another city which no human in the known web had visited in centuries.

Chapter 11

The arrival to their next destination wasn't as hard as the arrival to Beersheba, but it wasn't

as smooth as Wray would have liked, despite the fact that this time, he carefully kept his gaze averted from the view screen.

“So, we're here,” Dita said. And then she said no more as she checked the rest of the controls, seemingly oblivious to his presence next to her.

Cautiously, he lifted his head to see what was now on the view screen. The now familiar architecture of the underground complex made of knots and an anchor platform greeted his eyes. But unlike Beersheba's verdant ruins or relative cleanliness of the one back in Despina, the stones making up this particular anchor were made of a darker stone.

The entire place had the look of a location that had been abruptly abandoned. There were objects lying around. Some of them were recognizable. There was part of a vessel that looked like half of it had been sheared away, leaving the interior exposed to the rest of the environment. Pieces of cargo, that the vessel had originally held, were strewn across the anchor platform, bits of small things like combs and mirrors and shoes. Then there were things that weren't so familiar, but one could easily guess. These things glinted in the dim artificial light overhead that the Ancients had installed to last for most of time. Primitive blades and other weapons, most likely.

“It looks like an accident happened out there,” Wray remarked.

“Hm,” murmured Dita. “Looks like. I suggest we try to jump to the next city on that map that one of those giant cockroaches gave us that matched up with the map from your book. We don't really have any reason to stay here, don't we?”

“Are we there yet?” called out one of the cockroaches in the back. Wray thought it was probably Mendel. He seemed to be the most impatient of the three about traveling to another city.

“We're there,” said Wray, “But I'm not sure if we're going to be staying here for very much longer.”

“What do you mean?” Mendel had gotten out of his seat to see what the two humans were

about in the cockpit. The giant cockroach peered at the view screen and began chittering in surprise before he switched back to the Ancient tongue. “My, that certainly doesn't look promising, does it?”

“No,” said Dita. She pressed something on the controls and then turned to look at both of them. “I was trying to get a handle on the situation so I was having the sensors do a couple of diagnostics on the environment out there.” She tilted her head back to the view screen to indicate what she was talking about. “I mean, what you see with your eyes doesn't look promising on the face of it anyway. But it could be explained away by several things.”

“Like what?” Wray asked.

“An accident of some sort.” She waved her hand as if that particular explanation, however, was silly. “Which could happen to anyone. But there's something else at work here, too. If it had been an accident and the people who were operating that vessel were there, you'd expect to see bodies. And if those particular people had been taken away to be treated for injuries, that would mean that there would be others in the city, too. But if they were treated for injuries, that would also mean there are other people who might be able to take the damaged vessel away for repairs. But judging from the age of that thing, no one's attempted to do that.”

“But there are no bodies,” said Mendel. “If no one took the vessel...”

“Whoever took the bodies weren't interested in the vessel. I have a feeling that this particular place may be hostile to us,” said Dita.

“And there are weapons on the anchor platform,” Wray added. “What did your sensor diagnostics tell you?”

“There were living beings who used to be in this place,” said Dita. “And fairly recently, too. What sort of beings, however, I cannot tell you. Except that they left heat signatures.”

“What do you mean by heat signatures?” he asked.

“Every living thing generates heat,” said Mendel. “Or at least that's what the theory is. Every

living thing that I've seen and most things the Ancients created follow general biological principles. And in order for something to live, they need to burn energy. Of course, who knows. With the mass loss of knowledge with the Great Rending, it could be quite possible that there are beings out there who do not need to burn energy so they would never leave a heat signature for anyone to detect.”

“Unfortunately, the sensors cannot say for certain how long that wreck has been here,” Dita continued. “Only that the vessel has been sitting here on this anchor for at least the past two hundred years.”

A bit of movement outside caught Wray's eye. He turned his head to examine the view screen more closely. “What is that?” he finally asked.

The other two turned to see what he was looking at. In the underground complex, something along the walls was stirring. At first, it appeared as if the stone walls themselves had come alive, rippling and shimmering, but in another moment, they realized that that was not the case. Instead, something was coming out of the walls. Several somethings. These creatures were strange and unnatural to Wray's eyes. Just looking at them gave him a headache and a deep sense of dread. On a superficial level, they looked like dead trees that had been covered with a gleaming layer of tar. On the tips of what looked like branches, were round globules that resembled balls as big as one's fist.

The oily tar that served as the creatures' skin, seemed to peel away at the round globules, revealing bright red eyes studded with dark pupils.

Mendel uttered a squeak and began to flail his arms in fright. “What the hell is that thing?”

“I have no idea.” Dita didn't seem fazed.

Wray sat frozen in his seat, unable to say anything. The creatures brought him back to his dream, the one he had before the journey started. He could die right here and right now. He could imagine it then, what had happened to those previous travelers who had left their vessel to decompose on the anchor platform. These horrible creatures had ambushed the travelers, tearing

apart their vessel to figure out what sort of strange thing had arrived on their world. And finding people on board, killed them.

“What's going on?” Faraday demanded and Mendel squealed again and rushed back to the main part of the cabin with the passenger seat.

“Calm down,” Resnick exclaimed. “I can't make out what you're saying with all the gibbering that you're doing. Snap out of it!” There was an audible smack as Resnick wacked Mendel on the head in an attempt to get him to pull himself together.

“Weird monsters,” Mendel finally gasped. “They're going to kill and eat us all!”

“Good grief. Now that was a useful explanation,” Resnick replied sarcastically.

Dita's fingers flew over the controls even as she spoke. “You know, it could all be a misunderstanding. They could be quite friendly. And we just don't think about it because they look ugly to our eyes. We're just stereotyping them.”

One of the oil-tree creatures began to stretch out its branch and probe the vessel. Wray thought he could hear a screech that was loud enough to penetrate the hull of the vessel. “I don't think so,” he finally managed to say. “It looks like they're hostile.”

“If so, then prepare for another jump,” she remarked. “I'm putting in the coordinates to the next city. I can't tell if the tether is broken or not, but it's probably not a good idea to get out right now to check.”

“Not a good idea? It's a terrible idea. Let's risk the tether.”

She nodded and the vessel turned around to face one of the knots that appeared on the side of their screen. Unfortunately, there appeared to be one of those monsters blocking the archway. It lumbered towards them, the red eyes fixed upon their vessel. Maliciously, Wray thought. They were never going to get through.

“Well, that's not going to work,” Dita muttered underneath her breath. She reached up to

touch one of the controls that appeared to be hiding at the corner of the control panel. “This counts as an emergency, right?”

“What do you think you're doing?”

“This will get that out of our way,” she said instead. She pressed the control and something shot out of the front of the vessel, temporarily blinding Wray. When he blinked and looked again, the creature standing in front of the knot was gone. But there was a flat oil slick where it used to be. The vessel shuddered when one of the creatures standing behind their vessel whacked it on its side. The giant cockroaches in the passenger cabin began hissing defensively.

“You're crazy,” shouted Wray. “You've just angered them even more. We're going to die.”

“Not if I have anything to do with it.” The vessel jerked forward, just as the knot in front of them began glowing green. With the opening of the knot and tether, they were sucked into the tether just as one of the other oil tree creatures began reaching towards them again.

Despite the green knot that had indicated an intact tether, Wray got knocked out of his seat while they traversed the pathway to the next city. He lay on the floor of the vessel, gasping. When he looked back up, Dita was looking down at him with a curious expression on her face.

“You're crazy,” he repeated.

“What's new?” she replied. “Everyone thinks I'm mad. You knew that before you decided to make me do this. Besides, I just saved your life.”

“As much as I hate to admit it, you're right.” Slowly, he got up and rubbed his head. The after effects of his headache were still slowly fading away. “It hurt my eyes just to look at those things. It was as if my mind found them too horrible to contemplate.”

“A lot of things outside one's comprehension could do that to a person.” She glanced out to the view screen, but it did not appear that she was actually looking at anything outside. Instead, she

sounded contemplative. “It's not an easy thing to experience. And you're never the same afterward.”

“Is that what happened to you?” he asked, suddenly understanding. He sat back in his seat to look at the controls in front of him. He was no knot jumper, but intellectually, he understood the readings that the instruments were giving him well enough. This new anchor that they had jumped to appeared to be in working order. And there didn't appear to be anything in the vicinity at the moment, that they could see anyway. “Did you see something that you weren't meant to see?”

Instead of directly answering him, she said, “Some people think that knot jumpers and knot finders are entirely different creatures. They think that just because they were engineered by the Ancients to withstand the rigors of traveling the tethers, they're also hardy enough to withstand pretty much everything else. But that's not true. Knot jumpers and knot finders were created from the same stock as every other human.” She finally turned back to him and said, “You're lucky that those things back there had a relatively mild psychological effect on you. You'll live.”

Chapter 12

“I can't wait to see what's up there,” declared Mendel as he scuttled ahead of them.

The giant cockroaches had been itching to get out to see a new city and Dita had pronounced the place safe, as far as she could see, so Wray had decided to let everyone go out and explore a bit. He was hoping that they would encounter some intelligent creature who could tell him more about the place he was looking for, Marozia, and possibly even the Ancient text that was his ultimate goal.

“We've been cut off from the rest of the cities for so long, who knows what kinds of creatures

live here,” Mendel continued to jabber. “It would be a scientific bonanza to catalog all of that.”

“You wouldn't be thinking that if you happen to get eaten by some large strange creature,” Resnick remarked. She walked slightly behind the other two giant cockroaches, more cautiously. She was holding out a strange device in one of her claws which emitted soft beeps and blinking lights. When she had taken it out of one of her pouches, she had exclaimed that it was a sensor that would tell them if they were going into a dangerous environment filled with toxic gases or radiation.

“We're relatively safe here,” said Mendel blithely.

“As far as we know,” Dita smirked. She and Wray had put their emergency suits back on before getting out of the vessel. But since the sensors didn't detect anything harmful in the immediate atmosphere, they had decided to leave their hoods off.

“What is this place called anyway?” asked Faraday.

“No idea,” Wray replied. “The glyph for this city on the map isn't one that I recognized.”

The giant cockroach seemed more interested in the building of the underground complex itself. Not surprising since he was an engineer. He paused periodically to poke his claws into the surrounding stone crevices. “It appears that the Ancients were definitely here. Same architecture. And I think it's the same kind of material that they used to build the complex in Beersheba. Mostly local granite and some kind of strange mortar that none of our engineers have ever discovered how to replicate.”

“I don't believe any of our kind ever figured out how the Ancients made the mortar either,” Dita remarked. “There have been many chemists and material engineers who tried to replicate the material but failed. We think that the Ancients must have produced some kind of synthetic polymer that helped strengthen the material so that it would last virtually forever.”

“That makes sense,” Faraday nodded. “I'd love to meet with an Ancient to ask how it was done. Unfortunately, that seems very unlikely ever since the Great Rending.”

“This is the end of the tunnel!” Mendel exclaimed as he rushed ahead. “I can smell the fresh air!”

“Shouldn't you be a little more cautious?” Resnick called out.

But it didn't appear that Mendel had heard her. Instead, he ran out of the tunnel, too eager to see what another city was like. The others followed in a more sedate place. Wray noticed that Dita had discretely put her hand in her suit pocket, no doubt to keep her small weapon handy. When he had asked her about it while they were preparing to debark. Instead, she had reiterated that she had simply found it in her suit pocket earlier and that everything she knew about it was probably about as much as he knew about it.

Wray wasn't convinced with her explanation. She must have known something more about it. She must have known that it was a weapon of some sort when she first fired it at the hecklers back in Beersheba. But she was keeping the information close to her chest.

The tunnel from the underground complex widened out. The exit was rough as if something had started sheering away at the rock but had stopped halfway through and had let the weather erode the rest of it.

Outside, there was a slight breeze, bringing in fresh, almost briny air towards them. But what immediately struck Wray was the sky. It was the color of dark lilacs. Few wispy clouds dotted the upper atmosphere, but otherwise, it was completely clear. There were no air creatures to be seen either.

On either side of the underground complex exit were bushes of some sort even though they looked more like bits of brown furry carpet that had been sculpted to resemble the bushes of other cities. To be honest, though, Wray wasn't really quite sure if they were even plants. When he walked a little too close to one, the feathery leaves moved and appeared to reach towards him. At that movement, he took a step back so that the plant could not touch him.

The ground appeared to have been, at one time, paved. But the cobblestones had cracked and degraded so much that they were nothing but bits of pebbles only held at that location by inertia. The rubble was spread all about the entrance to the underground complex and spread outward in faint concentric rings into an area that was probably as big as a the square in other cities. But because the paving was broken, vegetation had begun to take root there. Aside from the strange, shaggy bushes, there were black trees with bright green leaves and yellow fruit. When Dita moved towards one and brushed a leaf with a gloved hand, Wray was relieved that the tree did nothing.

Past the square was a knoll covered in short purple and blue grass that on first glance looked like shards of glass that could bend with the wind. But when they walked on this grass, the material easily gave way with a sound like crumpled paper.

Mendel had gone much farther than the rest of them. He had walked past the knoll and was standing on a small clearing that dropped off into a sheer cliff. Below the cliff were the crashing waves of the sea. When Wray finally came to stand beside Mendel, he looked around to see that the cliff's edge stretched over and around. He had the uncomfortable feeling that what was left of this city was now an island surrounded by water.

"It doesn't appear like there's anyone around," said Resnick. "Which is a bit of good luck, I suppose."

"Or bad luck," countered Faraday. "Weren't you trying to find someone who could tell you about something that you are looking for?"

Wray nodded. "Yes. But this is just a short walk from the anchor. I'm sure there's more out there. Why don't we go ahead and explore this place? We can divide into two teams. I'll go with Mendel over here. And Dita can go with you two in the other direction. Let's meet back at the anchor in about two hours."

"That sounds good to me," said Mendel.

“What are we going to do if one team doesn't make it back at the appointed time?” Dita asked.

“I suppose the other team will try to find the other,” said Wray. “But obviously, if something like that happens, we'll have to be cautious.”

“Cautious would be putting it mildly,” remarked Resnick. “I think you'll have to assume the worse.”

“Whatever the case, we should probably take the risk,” announced Mendel.

With final last minute warnings from Resnick, the two groups split up and started walking in opposite directions. Wray found himself walking near the edge of the cliff, looking down to where the sea met the land. The waves weren't particularly ferocious, an indication that the weather at the moment was for the most part calm. That was corroborated by the mostly clear sky. But he was struck by the lack of creatures in the place. He didn't notice any air creatures or any ground creatures like insects in the grass.

“Doesn't it strike you as strange that there aren't any birds or insects around here?” mused Wray. “Or anything that would be moving?”

“It wouldn't be that unusual if this was an island that somehow suddenly got isolated,” Mendel said. “But you're right. It is a little weird that there aren't any moving creatures about. Even if some sort of natural disaster wiped out the larger creatures and the people who used to live here, there still would be other kinds of creatures that perhaps would have been able to ride out the storm.”

A few paces further, the clearing where the anchor and its underground shelter lay disappeared from view. The rest of the land appeared to be completely barren except for the type of vegetation that they had passed earlier. The ground dipped and swayed beneath their feet, gently rolling like the waves out in the ocean. Wray briefly wondered what sort of seasons this land had, whether it was temperate all year round or they were just fortunate not to arrive during winter time.

Up in the sky, they could see no sun. Perhaps it had already dipped under the horizon as night time drew closer. When they came across a copse of strange trees, there was a thin grassy path snaking down between the trees. They went down the path and came across another clearing where they saw what was left of stone buildings. The ruins had completely collapsed, leaving nothing but the crumbling foundation. At this new vantage point, Wray saw that a moon was up in the lower quadrant of the sky, large and blue.

“Well, this is pretty strong evidence that there isn't anyone here. Or at least any population of an appreciable size,” Mendel said. “If there was anyone here, this would have been maintained somehow. Even on Beersheba, it was not as bad as this.”

“Or it could have been destroyed by some kind of natural disaster. A flood. A tsunami. An earthquake.” Wray made his way into the ruins and tried to envision what the building would have looked like. His mind came up with a blank. Which was as well since he was no engineer. Past a low, broken stone wall, he came across something that caught his eye. He bent down to pick it up. Brushing some of the dirt off of it, he said, “Whoever used to live here definitely left some things behind.”

Mendel ventured around the stone wall and came over to see what Wray held in his hands. “That looks rather strange. I've never seen anything like that before.”

The object that Wray had picked up resembled a cylinder. It was perhaps as long as one of the Ancient texts, but with a thin width. It was made of some kind of a dull black material that neither of them had seen before.

Wray tapped the black cylinder, but it was difficult to tell if it was hollow or solid. He couldn't detect any seams or indentations on its surface either. But when he grasped both ends and pulled, something gave way. The cylinder began to slide apart revealing two halves. The interior was hollow, but it wasn't empty. Inside, there was a piece of paper made with a semi-transparent

material that had a soft texture to it.

Mendel made a clicking noise in surprise. “It appears to be some sort of container. And that looks like synth-paper.”

“Synth-paper?” Wray carefully took the semi-transparent material out and unrolled it, revealing markings on it in some kind of foreign language. The glyphs were not of the Ancient tongue so it might have been another language, perhaps native to this particular ruined city. “I’ve never seen anything like this.”

“Well, we call it synth-paper,” said Mendel, referring to his cockroach race. “It might have another name. But researchers have occasionally come across such artifacts as we cataloged whatever we found in Beersheba. A lot of the things we find written on the synth-paper are usually graphs or diagrams of unknown provenance. We still haven’t deciphered the language on it either.”

“If you’ve found such things in Beersheba, then maybe this isn’t native to this particular city.”

“That’s a distinct possibility.” Mendel waved his antennae, thinking. “There have been scholars who have speculated that perhaps this writing is even older than the Ancient tongue. But so far, all the linguists have yet to decipher it or to find any similarities between it and the Ancient tongue. Which leaves another possibility. That there is another race with advanced technology. After all, we never find the Ancient glyphs on such material.”

“How interesting.” Wray examined the writing on the synth-paper, but nothing looked familiar to him. “I wonder what this says.”

“Could be anything. It could be an important document or something as random as a grocery list.”

Wray tucked the synth-paper back into the canister and slid it closed. He put it under his arm as they continued on their way past the ruins and down another grassy knoll. “Perhaps,” he said, “Dita would know something about it.”

“Your companion, the knot finder?” Mendel cocked his head. “Why do you think that? Isn't she from your city?”

“Not exactly, but close enough. However, knot jumpers and knot finders have been educated in a way that the rest of us haven't. And she has probably seen far more cities that I will ever see. So it is possible that she has seen such a thing before and may be able to explain it.” Down at the bottom of the knoll, they saw another line of vegetation ahead. Past that was a long stretch of field covered in more of the native grass. “I would be curious as to what it says, but I doubt it would have anything of importance. Or rather of any importance to me.”

“Well, you would never know.” As they reached the field, Mendel continued, “It looks as if this entire place has been abandoned. We don't see any evidence of bodies lying around, so I assume, perhaps, that they escaped by going across the sea.”

“I doubt we would have that much time to explore all that much anyway. And even if there were boats still around, it would probably be a waste of time to row out there, especially since we don't know how wide the sea is. For all we know, we could be in the middle of an ocean.”

As they walked, the sky deepened to a dark blue. The first moon that Wray had noticed was soon joined by another, a small pink crescent, that slowly hedged over the horizon. A couple of stars began to appear. But the pattern of stars overhead resembled no pattern that he was familiar with.

Soon, their walk passed a ridge and they saw a couple of dark figures ahead. Three figures. Dita, Resnick, and Faraday. Mendel waved to the others. Faraday waved back. When they finally met, they stood at the edge of a clearing which also dropped off into a sheer cliff like the other side of the island, into the ocean. After a brief conversation, they determined that there was nothing on the island, or at least nothing on the island that came out while they were there, and that it was probably not worth while to pursue this place any further. They decided to walk back to the underground complex and perhaps spend the night there before jumping to the next city. Resnick

easily nixed Mendel's idea for camping out with the reasoning that perhaps there were predators out there in the night that they were simply not detecting.

Since the sensors on the vessel did not detect any anomalies in the underground complex, the group decided to set up a makeshift camp on the anchor platform. There were enough materials in the cargo area of the vessel to set up camp for at least ten people, but Wray and Dita only took out two sleeping bags and enough rations for everyone. The giant cockroaches decided to gather up some of the vegetation growing outside of the underground complex to make a sort of bed or nest on the anchor platform on which they would sleep on. Fortunately, the temperature in the underground complex was pleasant and constant so they did not need to bother with building a fire. While Dita declared that she felt better sleeping in the vessel itself, Wray decided to bring his own sleeping bag out onto the anchor platform.

The next morning, when Wray woke up, he discovered that Mendel had awakened before everyone else and had ventured out on his own without telling anyone. Resnick was already berating the other giant cockroach on his recklessness, but Mendel declared that he had discovered a small, steep bath that led to the ocean shore. Dita seemed intrigued, even though the others were skeptical, and she was the second one to venture out to wash up before coming back to their base camp. After Dita came back without incident, the others went one by one to go wash up as well.

Wray was the last one to go out. It took him a minute, but he soon saw the trail that Mendel had described. It started a few paces away from the far side of the ruined cobblestone square above the underground complex. If one had not been looking for it, it would have been easy to miss. It was a thin dirt path overgrown with grass and weeds and it led down to the cliff side at a steep, but manageable slope. Once at the shore, Wray did his business and washed up, acutely aware that all he heard was the sound of the water crashing on the shore. Otherwise, there was no sound. No animal to break the monotony. It was both strange and unsettling.

That very thought made Wray hurry in his absolutions. He made his way back up the cliff and back to the underground complex. By the time he arrived back at the vessel, the giant cockroaches had cleared away their makeshift nests and they had all gone back inside the vessel. In the passenger area, the giant cockroaches were puzzling over a copy of the anchor platform on a piece of parchment that Faraday had managed to make with one of his devices. Dita seemed consumed with monitoring the devices on the cockpit.

“I've plotted our next course,” she remarked, without looking up. “According to the Ancients' map, the tether should be unbroken. But that was back before the Great Rending. Who knows what it is like now.”

“Is the next course easy to navigate?”

“We'll see.” She finally glanced back up at him. “While you were washing up, the others were checking the knots on this place. They appear to be intact, but that is just on this end.”

After checking all the systems to see that they were in working order, she finally aligned the vessel with the next trajectory. As the vessel lined up with one of the tick marks on the anchor platform, he noticed that she began operating some controls that he did not see her touch before. Most of the controls were white switches and black touch screens. But these were a set of knobs that were colored blue.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“We have to align the platform,” she replied.

“But I thought that was what you were already doing.”

“No,” she replied with forced patience. “Before, I was aligning the vessel because that was all that I needed to do. This anchor, however, needs to be rotated so that the marked coordinates on the platform are in alignment with the knots.” With those words, she pressed one of the colored controls and something outside started to grind loudly. He felt the movement of the vessel, but it

wasn't the vessel itself that was moving, but the platform. It began to rotate along like an enormous gear.

After a long moment, it stopped and the vessel appeared to be facing another knot. As Dita fired up the engine, the stones making up the knot archway began to glow a dull red. At the sight, Wray's hands tightened on the arms of his chair. The last time he saw a knot glowing red, they had had quite a bumpy ride. The tether to the next city was at best, frayed.

“We could always go back,” Dita told him with her eyebrows raised. “How much do you want this thing that you're searching for?”

“This is a small risk to pay,” he told her. “Let's go.”

Chapter 13

“Welcome to Perinthia!”

Wray opened one eye and discovered a hideous face standing over him. He couldn't help himself. He screamed.

A little ways away, he heard someone groan. “Stop squealing like a girl.” A pillow smacked him in the face and his scream ended in a choked gurgled.

The hideous face above him twitched into a different configuration. Wray held the pillow out in defense, hoping that the horrid face would go away. It didn't. Instead, its mouth widened, revealing sharp black teeth. The creature could either be smiling or thinking about eating him.

“Welcome to Perinthia!” the face repeated. “I hope you've had an excellent night's sleep. Breakfast will be served downstairs until noon. And the concierge will be available for any questions you might have.” Finally, the face moved away. Wray peered out from behind his pillow to see a

short squat creature that resembled a dwarf in height but looked more like a gelatin blob in a strange bright orange outfit waddle out of their room.

Once the creature was gone, Wray looked about the room. It was a large room filled with several beds lined against a wall. Against the opposite wall, there were other pieces of strange furniture.

One bed over, he saw a familiar form curled up under the covers with only one pillow smashed over her head, probably to block out his screams. Across the way, on several sleeping platforms covered in what could only be called nests of fabric, were the giant cockroaches. Resnick and Faraday slept on their stomachs, but Mendel preferred to sleep on his back. Apparently, they had been sleeping too deeply to hear Wray as the only movement he saw from them were the occasional twitch of an antennae or leg.

As he stared up at the ceiling for a moment, Wray tried to piece together what had happened to get them to this hostel. The last thing he could clearly remember was when Dita had prepared for knot jumping from that abandoned island city to the next one. The knot archway had glowed red, but they had seen that before and had simply assumed that it was just an indication that the tether tying one city to the other was only frayed. But that had not been the case.

When the knot had sucked the vessel into the tether, or rather what they thought was the tether, there had been an enormous jolt that had nearly thrown Wray from his seat. Back in the passenger bay, he had heard the panicked chirps of the giant cockroaches. Dita had been swearing in a language that he had not heard of before.

He had tried to be careful not to look at the view screen, but he couldn't help it when he struggled back into his seat as the vessel zoomed down a tunnel that appeared to consist of bright white and blue light. It had immediately nauseated him, and reflexively, he had closed his eyes and had asked Dita exactly what was going on.

“I have no idea what the hell is going on,” she had shouted back at him. “This isn't normal. I don't even think we're even traveling on a tether. Maybe some kind of damn vortex. But who knows, the theory of vortexes is supposed to be just a thought experiment....damn it!”

The vessel had jolted again and Wray found himself slamming into the floor. He had passed out again. Once could have been excused, but twice? His man card was just revoked, if it hadn't already.

When he came to, no one was paying him any attention. Dita had gotten out of her seat to help the giant cockroaches get something from the back cargo area. He had gotten up, rubbing his head and dusted himself off before venturing to the back to see what they were doing.

There was a large box in the cargo area that Wray hadn't noticed before. It appeared to be made out of some kind of wood that had been planed into slats and then nailed together into a semblance of a box. Someone had managed to pry open the top of the box and they were pulling out a long white sheet that appeared to be made of some kind of iridescent white material that looked as fine as silk.

“What is that?” he had inquired.

Dita had looked back at him with an almost dismissive expression. “So you decided to wake up? I told you not to look at the view screen when we were knot jumping.”

“It was an accident, I swear.” He had glowered at her, but she did not appear to notice his expression. Instead, she said, “Here hold this.”

A bunch of the white material had been shoved into his hands. Mendel had waved one of his free arms, indicating that Wray should walk backward to help them get the entire material out of the box.

“What is this?” he had asked again. “This looks like one long table cloth. What's it doing in the emergency supplies?”

“It's a piece of tarp,” Dita explained. “This 'table cloth' as you say, is actually a protective covering. What we can do is to rig up some kind of framework and then drape this over it to make a tent where we can stay.”

“Why use it if we can stay here inside the vessel?”

“We could,” said Faraday, “but it looks like rather fine day out there, doesn't it?”

That was when Wray peered out of the view screen to see what sort of city they had arrived at. But instead of the familiar underground complex built of stone in the style of the Ancients that he had seen in every other city that they had visited, there was no structure at all. Apparently, the vessel was sitting on top of a grassy hill that was crowned with a series of free standing stone arches that looked more like rectangular doorways than arches. The grassy hill itself was overlain with a strange glimmering sheet crisscrossed with the Ancient navigational symbols. This particular anchor was built in an entirely different style.

But aside from that surprise, Faraday had been right. It was a rather fine day in this strange anchor point. The sky above was tinged a bright orange as that particular world's sun was setting below the horizon. And there were birds in the sky, as a contrast to the previous city. But all he saw of the birds were dark silhouettes against the clouds. He was too far away to really make out if the birds really were birds. Or just creatures that happened to fly like birds. The rest of the atmosphere was clear and beyond the free standing knots were trees that were shaped like trees.

“So you're thinking of camping outside?” Wray had asked. He had looked back at Dita. “I thought you didn't want to camp outside. You didn't when we were back at that island.”

“I'm just helping them,” Dita had replied.

After a few more minutes, the five of them managed to take out the entire tarp out of the box and take it outside. But that was when things had gotten a little odd.

As they were attempting to set up the tarp into a tent structure, a small cart had rolled up the

hill, stopping just short of one the archway knots. The small cart looked almost like a child's toy. It was a box that had been painted with bright purple flowers and a strange flowing design that Wray couldn't tell if it was writing or just a design. There was a small engine attached to the cart at the back which belched out pink colored smoke which smelled like a mixture of roses and old bread. The cart could be steered by a three-pronged handle at the front. The driver was a creature that Wray had not seen before.

The creature was short and squat, almost like a dwarf in stature, but not nearly as humanoid. Instead, it had the resemblance more of a gigantic pastry roll with stubby feet and long spindly arms which were used to steer the cart. The head looked like a smaller pastry roll attached to the larger body. There were small black eyes and a mouth filled with sharp teeth. It had stopped the cart and was staring at them. They had stared back.

After a long moment, the creature in the cart started babbling in a strange language that sounded like a mix between a bubbling cauldron of soup and the pattering of rain on a rooftop. As it was completely incomprehensible to them, Mendel had decided to take the initiative and greet the creature in the Ancient tongue. At the sound of Mendel's voice, the creature stopped talking and rotated its head around, perhaps in curiosity, perhaps in a genuine attempt to try to understand the giant cockroach.

“Do you think it's friendly?” Resnick had whispered to Faraday. The large golden cockroach had just given her the equivalent of a shrug.

At that moment, the creature had wheeled its head back again and had waved its spindly arms before speaking again. This time, it was saying something discernibly in the Ancient tongue. It was hard to hear because the accent also resembled the creature's native tongue which sounded like a burbling brook. But after thinking about it, Wray had thought that he could decipher the words.

“Welcome strangers,” the creature said. “Did you come through the portal?”

“Portal?” Dita had said in confusion. But then she had looked around and spotted the archway knots. “Oh, you mean the knots. Yes, we just traveled by tether. Or what was left of it. I'm not sure if it was even frayed. More like fragmented.”

“I am Ran, one of the constables for this region,” the creature said. “You surprised me since we rarely have visitors from the other cities. And I have never seen or heard of your kind before. Who are you and what is your purpose here?”

Since Wray was their default leader, he decided to step forth and address this particular dignitary. “We are travelers, Constable Ran. I'm Wray and this is Dita. We are humans from a city called Despina. These are our fellow travelers, Mendel, Faraday, and Resnick. They are giant cockroaches and they are from another city called Beersheba. We are on our way to another city, but this place is on our way there.”

“Welcome to Perinthia,” said the constable. “If you are just passing through, then you are welcome to visit our own city. The main part of the city is down this hill and down that road for about a mile.” The creature pointed his spindly arm in the direction of his city. Wray squinted and thought he saw a paved path winding down among the hills. “There are many places to stay in the city if you are just visiting for the day. There are even older hostels open where they cater to a number of different species that occasionally stop through here since we're in the middle of a trading route.”

“Perhaps we will take you up on your hospitality,” Dita had said, before Wray could get in another word. “Your hostel sounds lovely.”

“Unfortunately, I need to continue making my rounds,” Constable Ran said. “You are welcome to leave your vessel here until your departure. I will get some of my workers to come to keep watch over it. Our city has never seen any humans or giant cockroaches, come to think of it. Not since the Great Rending, I think. But I'm sure someone in the city will have heard of you. I am

just a constable, after all.”

After the ritual good-byes, Dita had persuaded everyone to go down to the city to stay for the night before venturing forth again on their journey to the fabled Marozia. Mendel, Resnick, and Faraday didn't have any quibble with that decision since they came on the trip to see foreign cities anyway. Wray, however, was mostly of the mind that Dita didn't want to sleep out in the open again. It was apparent that she wasn't the camping type.

It took a couple more long minutes to take the tarp back into the vessel. But once that was packed away, they took up small overnight packs and started off in the direction that the strange constable had pointed them to.

The road itself had been also very oddly paved. Instead of cobblestones or other kinds of flat rock like in other cities, the road had been paved with a gleaming, almost shimmering stone. Wray had not paid much attention to it since he was no geologist and assumed that the inhabitants of this city merely had finished the rock with a unique kind of technology that they had developed. But one of the other giant cockroaches had been more observant. Faraday had taken to crawling on the ground a little ways on all of his legs. After a moment, he had righted himself up again.

“It is quite unusual,” Faraday had declared. “And I wouldn't have expected it. But who knows. Maybe this material is extremely common on this world.”

“What's the material?” Mendel had asked.

“It's what the Ancients call opal,” Faraday had said. “It has the same sort of sheen that they described. It's a strange kind of material. It's actually an amalgam of several minerals. But most of it is silica. And there's quite a bit of water in the material, too.”

“The technical term is hydrated,” Resnick had replied. She had waved her antennae in an exasperated manner. “On our world, there isn't much opal. It's shiny and pretty, but had no practical use other than making random baubles. It's pretty much useless since it is not as hard or as

durable as other materials.”

“I've never seen anything like this before,” Wray had remarked. “I don't think we have anything like this in Despina.”

“I've seen opal once,” Dita had said. She had been frowning in thought. “It was a long time ago. When I was a child. I saw it in some jewelry that a grand lady had been wearing. This was not in Despina, though. It was in another city. Leona, I think. But even then, I didn't think it was all that common.”

“Well, it's either common here or the residents of this city are very rich,” Faraday had concluded. “You know, I've heard of legends and fairy tales from Ancient texts about a fabled city called El Dorado where the roads were paved with gold and the buildings built of diamonds.”

“I've heard of those stories, too,” said Mendel. “I think I've actually seen the Ancient text where that story was told. It's stored at the university library, and it's called the Encyclopedia of Fairy Tales. It's been a while since I've read it, though, so I can't tell you the plot.”

“I've heard of a book like that,” Wray had added. “It was probably one of the books I saw at an antiquarian shop. But I didn't get it.” He didn't mention that the reason he had not gotten it was because he had believed it to be useless. It wasn't related to what he was trying to find in the first place.

They continued on the road as the constable had described for about one mile. Because of the hill landscape, they didn't actually see the city until they rounded the last hill.

The city of Perinthia stood like a black beacon in the middle of the verdant surroundings. Unlike human cities, which mimicked the angular style of the Ancients, or the natural rounded forms of the cockroach architecture, the buildings in this city were composed of a strange material that appeared gray at one vantage point and dark blue at another. The material had a glassy look, similar to smoky quartz, but also appeared to be opaque since one couldn't see through it. The buildings

were shaped like cylinders and silos with a multitude of thin short windows littering the walls.

There were other odd creatures similar to the constable. The Perinthians, unlike the giant cockroaches in Beersheba, had paid no attention whatsoever to the strange travelers in their midst. In fact, several of the natives who were walking in their direction, had berated them in their own native tongue for being in their way before being forced to walk around them.

Eventually tired of being ignored, Wray had finally stopped one of the Perinthians and asked them in the Ancient tongue where to find an inn. Or at least a local tourist bureau. The Perinthian who Wray had stopped had seemed extremely put out that he had been interrupted in the middle of his walk to another building, but he had readily answered, giving him directions to a tall blue-black building at the end of the lane.

The building that they had been directed to had turned out to be a hostel where the employees all spoke in the Ancient tongue. They seemed happy enough that they were coming to stay there for the night. The concierge had claimed that they were the first visitors for the season. Of course, what he had meant by “season” was anyone's guess.

It was fortunate for them that the owners of the hostel accepted the currency that Wray and the giant cockroaches were carrying. They were shown into a dorm style room where they immediately settled in. Dita had declared that she was going to sleep to shore up her energy for the next day and had promptly chosen one of the beds and gone to sleep. Wray, however, had felt hungry so he and Mendel had gone off in search of food. Resnick and Faraday had decided to do a bit of exploring elsewhere and had promised to be back in a little while.

Not far from the hostel, Mendel and Wray had found a little restaurant which served a variety of “foreign” foods. Foreign because it was foreign to the natives. But even this was strange to Wray and Mendel. So they both chose a porridge that looked rather benign and had that for dinner before turning back to the hostel. And that was when Wray had gone to sleep before being woken up by the

hostel employee who was apparently their wake up call.

Chapter 14

Wray would have never noticed that anything was wrong with the vessel except for the expression on Dita's face right before they were about to open the hatch. It was an expression that was both puzzled and angry.

“Someone's attempted to get into the vessel,” she said. “They might even have succeeded.”

“Why would you think that?”

She pointed out the very edge where the hatchway met the rest of the vessel. Wray could hardly see anything except the scratches that had been incurred on the vessel during travel, but it seemed to have alarmed the giant cockroaches when they actually examined the bit of the outside where she indicated.

“It was not there before,” Resnick said with a definite tone. “Do you think the natives in this city tried to get in to search for through our things?”

“It's quite possible,” said Dita.

“But that constable said that he had his people watching our vessel while we were back at the city,” said Wray. “Wouldn't they have seen anything?”

“Not necessarily,” said Mendel. “Besides, what if the constable's people were in on it? Perhaps the constable was just being nice to us so they could get into the vessel.”

Faraday nodded at his companion's comment. “I agree. If the constable's people were in on it, then we can't trust them. Besides, why should we really trust anyone in this city? They could all be trying to figure out what and who we are by trying to discover as much as they could by getting

into this vessel. Besides, how are we to know that their sense of morality is the same as ours?"

"I suppose that's a good point," Wray admitted. "Should we expect the worse, then?"

"The worst would be if they decided to shoot first and ask questions later," said Dita. "We might as well take a look and see what's left inside. Hopefully they haven't sabotaged the mechanics of the vessel either."

At that notion, Wray felt his blood run cold. He supposed he didn't really care all that much if they ended up stranded in this particular world. It was habitable albeit strange. But that also meant that he couldn't travel to any other city and find what he was looking for. He would be forever out of reach of the revenge that he so longed for. But he had to think positive, he told himself as Dita operated a remote that she had kept in her pocket to open the hatch. Surely she and the giant cockroaches were mistaken about someone breaking into the vessel.

Once the hatch was opened, Wray went in first to see if he could spot anything out of place. On a cursory glance, it didn't appear that anything had been moved. The giant cockroaches didn't sense that anything had been moved either. And when Dita went to peruse the controls, she didn't see anything had been tampered.

"Hopefully they only attempted to get in and didn't succeed," she said darkly. "I certainly hope that they didn't, anyway. It would be a disaster if that happened."

"So you said that you found something interesting at the local library?" Faraday asked when they finally closed the hatch. Wray had taken his customary seat at the cockpit and had taken out a slip of a strange paper-like substance that one of the Perinthian librarians had given him with a couple notes about the cities that were closely tethered to this one. "You mentioned that the librarian had given you the coordinates to several cities?"

Wray gave the slip to Dita who frowned over the coordinates before beginning to input them into the vessel's computer. "Yes. Apparently Perinthia does some trade with a few of the

neighboring tethered cities. And as far as they know, there are actually only a couple cities that they ever come in contact with. Ever since the Great Rending, or the Great Broken as they call it, they've pretty much broken contact with every other city. And no one here has ever seen an Ancient. They even lost the knowledge that there were other kinds of beings other than the ones in the cities tethered to Perinthia.”

“I don't get it,” said Resnick. “If they lost all the knowledge, then why do they still have a library?”

“As far as I could tell,” said Wray, “most of the books in the Perinthian library were newer books. They have very few books left over from before the Great Rending. It's a wonder, actually, that they still remember the Ancients at all. Otherwise, all they would have known was that they were the only sentient creatures in their universe.” Then Wray shook his head. “To be honest, I was hoping that I would get more information out of them. Since, theoretically, considering all of those Ancient maps, Marozia shouldn't be far from here.”

Resnick shook her head at his comment. “The fabled city of Marozia might not be far from here, but if it has been orphaned as every other Ancient text had indicated, it might as well be in the next dimension.”

“Is everyone ready?” said Dita. “I've finished putting in the coordinates. If my calculations are correct, this next tether, if it's still functioning, won't be as long or as dangerous as the previous one.”

“Let's go,” said Mendel. “There's only so much to see here, isn't there?”

The other giant cockroaches agreed. It appeared that they weren't overly impressed with the strange rotund beings that populated Perinthia, especially with their lack of curiosity at the sudden appearance of some strange beings that could have quite possibly been hostile to their civilization.

In the next moment, Dita manipulated the controls and the vessel headed towards one of the

free standing knots in the grassy hilltop where the city's anchor was located. Unlike the other times that they traveled the tethers, getting to the next city was next to instantaneous. In one minute, they were looking at the hilly expanse of the area just outside of Perinthia. And then they were inside another underground complex, another anchor that had the obvious markings that the Ancients had once visited the place.

“What is this place called?” Faraday asked as Dita brought the vessel to a rest at the center of the anchor platform.

“According to what the Perinthian librarians told me, it is called Rika,” Wray replied. “But if you go by the old Ancient pronunciation, it is called Raissa.”

“So what kind of people are supposed to live in Raissa?”

Wray got out of his seat and shrugged as the rest of them began preparing to get out of the vessel. “As far as I could determine from the librarian's explanation, the people in Raissa are somewhat similar to the ones in Perinthia. They are genetically similar. They might have been descended from the same race at one time or another, but now they couldn't interbreed even if they wanted to.”

When they finally stepped out of the vessel and onto the anchor platform in Raissa, they were struck by the distinctive odor of the atmosphere. It smelled musty and dank, like a closet that had not been aired for several years. The stone masonry making up the underground complex that enclosed the anchor and its surrounding knots was composed of a dark stone, similar to a mix of granite and marble in texture but the color of banded agate, giving the whole structure a strange rippled look like dark water.

The anchor platform itself was clear of anything else. There was no indication that there had been any other recent travelers coming through Raissa. For that matter, there didn't appear to be anyone in the underground complex there to see their arrival, let alone greet them. And this was

one of the major cities that Perinthia traded with, wondered Wray. If this was a typical busy day, it was a wonder that the Perinthians saw any foreigners in their city at all. Unfortunately, the librarian back in Perinthia had said little about what to expect from the inhabitants of Raissa except for the fact that in appearance, they superficially looked similar to the Perinthians.

Mendel, as usual, led the charge up to the outside. He and the other giant cockroaches decided that they were more interested in exploring the city above ground than really looking for anything that Wray was more interested in. So they decided that they would split up and later meet up at the end of the day outside the entrance to the underground complex and decide from there whether they wanted to jump to the next city or stay in this city overnight.

They climbed a long stairwell up to the entrance of the underground complex and found that it was situated similarly to most of the other cities that they had visited. The anchor in Raissa had been built underneath a large paved square which looked like a public garden. The plants were strange and unfamiliar to any of them, but the arrangement was not completely alien. On top of the underground complex was a memorial of some sort where a series of concrete platforms was arranged on top of each other like steps, leading to a large statue of a rotund creature with small beady eyes and long arms. It looked very similar to the creatures on Perinthia and Wray was hard pressed to really say that he saw any difference. A plaque sat next to the statue with strange writing on it that looked like wispy lines crisscrossed with occasional hash marks. He assumed that it was probably in the native Raissan tongue.

“That looks quite interesting,” exclaimed Faraday. “I wonder what that is.”

They looked up to see what the giant cockroach was pointing at. Faraday had walked over to the other side of the statue and was pointing to the far end of the city where there were tall spiraling structures jutting out of the ground like solid smoke. In the afternoon sunlight, the structures appeared to be made of pure gold.

“Who knows,” Resnick said as she raised a claw to shield her eyes from the glare. “It could be anything. Maybe it's an apartment building. Or a skyscraper. A monument. Or some piece of technology that we have no idea about.”

“Well, it certainly doesn't look like anything that the Ancients would have built,” remarked Mendel. “It doesn't appear to be their style. I say, let's go investigate.”

The other two giant cockroaches concurred with Mendel's assessment.

Mendel twitched his antennae in excitement, “Come on. I would be very interested in seeing what that thing is. Are you two coming with us?”

“I've gotten directions from the librarian in Perinthia to a sort of tourist information board that would help me try to find what I'm looking for,” said Wray.

“I should probably go with him to make sure that he doesn't get into trouble,” Dita added.

He gave her a doubtful look. If anyone were to get in trouble, it would be her. He hoped that her trigger finger wasn't feeling particularly itchy at the moment. He didn't want to explain to the authorities on Raissa that exceptions had to be made for his companion because she was a little mad. “It would be fairly simple, I think,” he said. “You three can go explore the city and we can go find information on the thing I'm trying to find. We can meet back here in this square later in the day. We should probably set our time pieces to about, say, five hours from now.”

“That sounds reasonable,” said Faraday.

While time was counted differently in Beersheba than Despina, they had discovered that it was possible for the giant cockroaches to sync their own clocks with that of the humans, especially since Faraday and Resnick were both engineers. So after they had their clocks set, the giant cockroaches gave them a traditional wave with their antennae and then set off towards the large towering gold structures at the other end of the city.

Wray took out the scrap of synthetic parchment that the Perinthian librarian had given him.

On it were scribbled directions, in Ancient glyphs, to the nearest tourist and information center in Raissa. According to the hastily drawn map, from the square, there was a large main road leading directly south. At the first intersection, they were supposed to see a round building with a sign declaring that it was the center of tourist information in several languages, including that of the Ancient tongue.

He and Dita easily found the main road and made their way south towards the tourist building. The architecture in Raissa was a little different than that of Perinthia even though the two species that populated the cities were supposedly similar. While the Perinthians preferred dark stones and opal to build their tall, square buildings, the Raissans used whiter material that stood in contrast to the stone that had been used to build the underground complex housing the city's anchor. In the sunlight, the material even seemed to glitter as if there were tiny crystals embedded into the rock. The style that the Raissans preferred was curvilinear. They weren't worried about running out of space so most of the buildings were round and cylindrical in style. Instead of flat roofs, they preferred domes and points.

The people of Raissa, however, were not as lackadaisical as the Perinthians about the appearance of strangers on their streets. Many of the short squat creatures gave double takes as Wray and Dita walked down the main thoroughfare. Some of them even when so far as to run away, most likely in fright.

As the third creature they encountered fled at their appearance, Dita remarked, "I hope they aren't running away to tell the authorities. It's awkward enough as it is being the only humans in this entire city without being arrested as well. I've already had enough experience being arrested to last me several lifetimes."

"I'm sure he was just startled at our presence," he said.

"Well, if I was startled, my first instinct would not be running away."

Yes, he thought dourly. Her first instinct would be to shoot someone. “You forget,” he told her. “You're not like most people.”

She shrugged. “I'm always looking out for myself. The easiest way to be safe from a possible threat is to get rid of it.”

The tourist information building that the librarian in Perinthia had mentioned to Wray was a round building with a domed roof with a slight overhang. The building itself was made of the white, sparkling rock. The roof, however, was painted a bright red. From the roof appeared to be several round windows, seemingly spaced in random intervals. In the main part of the building, there was one door with a sign next to it with the words 'Tourist Information' printed in several languages. The entire building reminded Wray of a mushroom. When they got to the door. He knocked, but they didn't hear anyone answering. He knocked again.

“Maybe they're busy,” Dita suggested.

“Or closed.”

She reached out to turn the oddly shaped knob on the door that looked more like a flat rectangular lever than a knob. It moved easily under her hand and the door swung open, revealing a dim interior. Wray walked in first, noticing that the interior appeared to be made entirely of stone, hollowed out like a cave. Lights were attached to the sides of the wall in small alcoves. The rest of the room was lined with shelves that appeared to be made of some sort of wood. There were books and pamphlets stacked on the shelves. There was also a counter at one side of the room, but other than that, the entire place appeared empty.

“It doesn't look like there's anyone here,” said Dita. “Maybe it's closed. Let's go and try to find someone out there who can probably answer your questions.”

“You're probably right,” said Wray. “Let's go.” He moved towards the entrance of the building, but the door suddenly slammed closed by itself. He frowned at the closed door and then

reached out to pull on the handle. But the door did not budge. “Or maybe not.”

Dita automatically pulled out the laser weapon she had tucked in her pocket. “Who's there?” she shouted.

In a more calm voice, Wray called out, “We're just travelers looking for information. That's it. We're not here for anything else.”

In response, a loud screeching noise permeated the air, forcing Wray and Dita to cover their ears. But almost as soon as it sounded, it died away and a voice began speaking in an unfamiliar language that sounded like most of its consonants had a familiarity with scratching metal. The voice sounded as if it was coming from everywhere, echoing and reverberating around the stone room making the sounds even worse than they probably were. The noise was so painful that Wray was forced to close his eyes.

After a moment, the scratching voice stopped and another voice began speaking in a familiar language. It was the language of the Ancients. Hesitatingly, Wray lowered his hands from his ears to catch the remaining words.

“Welcome to the tourist information bureau! Please have a seat and a tourist board representative will be with you momentarily.”

Chapter 15

The so-called tourist board representative was a Raissan wearing a strange hat that resembled a pillow that had exploded. The feathery material on top of the Raissan's head was dyed a variety of colors and waved in the air even though there was no wind in the room.

“Good day, good day!” the tourist board representative said in the Ancient tongue, thankfully. “I am Pong, the local tourist board representative for this part of the city. You are here visiting Raissa, yes?”

“Yes, we're here visiting,” said Wray. “I had some people in Perinthia tell me that this is where I may be able to get some information?”

“What sort of information are you looking for?” Pong asked as he, she, it, moved towards the counter and waddled around it to take an authoritative stance.

“I'm looking for a book that may or may not be located in Marozia. I was hoping to get to Marozia first and then ask there where the book was located.”

“Marozia, huh? I've never heard of such a place as Marozia. It is certainly not in Raissa.”

“Are there any scholars or libraries in Raissa where I could go to get more information about Marozia?”

Pong shook his head in a strange twisting motion that was slightly unnerving. It appeared that he was rotating his head completely around like a top. “There are scholars and libraries in Raissa,” said Pong. “And you are in luck. There is a university at the end of the main road. You can't miss it. The building will be obvious because it has three domes which are all painted in black. At the entrance to the university, there will be an information desk. You can ask the secretary there to direct you to the university library or to a scholar who may be able to help you about the book you are trying to find.”

Wray nodded. “Thank you. That is very helpful.”

“I am glad to be of help!” Pong bounced, making the feather things on his head bob even more madly. “By the way, if you don't mind me asking, what sort of creatures are you two? I have never encountered anyone of your kind before during all my time as a tourist board representative. And believe me, I've seen all sorts of people during my time here.”

“We call ourselves humans,” said Wray. “We're from a distant city called Despina. We're just traveling through this city on our way elsewhere.”

“Well, good luck on your travels!”

Fortunately, the door leading outside opened again and quickly they both exited the tourist information bureau. Outside, the streets seemed far more populated than before they had gone into the tourist bureau. But the inhabitants of the city did not appear any less skittish of the humans. Wherever they walked, the Raissans avoided them so that they seemed to have a wide clearance of several paces between them and the rest of the crowd.

“That was rather strange,” Dita remarked. “But now that I think of it, they must have knot jumpers and knot finders around here. Especially if they do a lot of trading between the cities in this particular part of the web. You don't suppose that there are humans lurking about, do you? As far as I know, the only race that the Ancients modified to become knot jumpers and knot finders were humans.”

“Don't be too sure of that,” Wray replied. “We've never seen any of these creatures before, have we? And after the Great Rending a great amount of knowledge was lost. It wouldn't surprise me if the Ancients made bred knot jumpers and knot finders from several races. That would make more sense, actually. Especially since humans don't live in every universe.”

“Nor do the Ancients.”

“Well, that's why they bred the knot jumpers and knot finders in the first place, didn't they?”

She shrugged. “Your guess is as good as mine. And as you said, we have no idea what the Ancients really did back in the day. Especially not after the Great Rending.”

A few blocks away from the tourist information bureau, the main road widened out into a small roundabout which was located in front of a large building which appeared to consist of several smaller round buildings interconnected by several stone corridors. The front part of the building,

which appeared to be sort of an entrance guard house patrolled by several Raissans wearing a yellow uniform that looked like short togas edged with silver trim, was topped with the three black domes that the tourist information bureau representative had described earlier. The guards eyed the appearance of the strange humans, but since Wray and Dita did not appear to be coming to attack the place, they continued on their rounds as they approached the entrance.

From the roundabout, there was a short walkway that led directly to the entrance which consisted of an archway connected to a glass door that slid open at their approach. They found themselves in a small round atrium with a dark floor that appeared to be made of a dark opal that was very similar to what the roads were paved with back in Perinthia. The walls consisted of the white stone that was used in building the rest of the structures in the city. On one side, there was a small alcove with a thin bench that served as a desk. There was a Raissan sitting on a short stool at this bench, writing on something. Perhaps the university secretary.

Wray walked over to the Raissan and inquired about the university library. At the sound of Wray's voice, the university secretary made a screeching noise that forced Wray and Dita to cover their ears again. The secretary hopped over the bench and waddled at remarkable speed out of the atrium.

“What the hell was that?” Wray said.

“I believe the university secretary screamed when it saw us,” Dita replied. “If everyone here is like that, I doubt we'll get any information out of them. Maybe we should have hired that tourist representative as a guide to take us around the city. Then, maybe it would be less likely that these people would scream at us and run away.”

“Maybe.” Wray gave a sigh. “I guess we should go back and impose upon that tourist representative again, shouldn't we?”

But before they could turn around, the secretary came back with another Raissan, this one

wearing a peculiar outfit that looked like a series of white bandages stitched together with black thread.

The university secretary was babbling incessantly with its strange native tongue that hurt their ears, but apparently, the Raissan with the white clothes didn't seem particularly amused with the secretary's ranting. In response, the Raissan made a motion with its long spindly arms and uttered one sharp syllable which shut the secretary up. The secretary then made a strange bobbing of its head and made its way back to its desk alcove, as if cowed by the reprimand.

The Raissan with white clothes approached Wray and Dita and said in a strange accented Ancient tongue, "Welcome to our university. I must apologize for my assistant's rude welcome. He is not used to strangers coming to the university, let alone someone of a different species. He believed that you were coming to take over the university if you could believe it or not."

"I would be surprised by strangers as well," Wray said. "I am Wray and this is my companion, Dita. We are both travelers. The tourist information representative back at the bureau down the street told me that this is where we might be able to find the information that we would need."

The Raissan made another bob of his head and said, "I am Wat. I am one of the professors here at the university. I specialize in cross cultural communications. I love talking to beings from other cities. I shall try to help you with what I can."

"Thank you very much, professor." With that Wray began explaining why they were traveling through different cities and that they were looking for a book that supposedly was located in the fabled city of Marozia.

"Ah, Marozia!" exclaimed the professor. "I have heard of such a city. But we all believe that it was orphaned by the Ancients for a certain reason. It was probably because they had tried to do some kind of experiment and the experiment failed spectacularly so they had to seal off that universe from the others in some kind of fashion. So as a result, they orphaned the city by

destroying all of the tethers to it. However, that is one of the theories that the scholars at this university think. There are plenty of other theories, although we don't think that they are as likely.”

“That's interesting information, but it is what we had guessed so far, too,” said Wray. “We do have some documents from the Ancients that show us a theoretical pathway to Marozia, but I was wondering if anyone at your university has any maps that corroborate that particular path, or even better, have information about the book that I'm looking for.”

“What sort of book are you looking for?” the Raissan professor asked.

“It is an Ancient book about tethers, anchors, and knots,” he replied. “I am not sure what the title is, but supposedly it is a definitive guide to these things.”

“Hm. Well, I am only an expert in languages and not in all things that belonged to the Ancients. Why don't I take you to the university library? The librarian there probably had a better idea about what you are looking for. And if that doesn't work, I can try to ask some of my colleagues who work with Ancient literature.”

Professor Wat beckoned for them to follow him through the university. They walked past several stone corridors that wound around several rooms that were similar to the atrium in size and shape. They also passed several other Raissans, some of the other professors and some of them students. A few of them squeaked in surprise when they saw the two humans, but most of them regarded the two strangers warily. But since the professor was taking them to the library, their reactions were not as extreme as the university secretary.

The university library was located at one end of the university in a large octagon shaped room lined with shelves where all the books, both Ancient and more modern were stacked. There were several Raissans already in the library, some of them shelving books and others taking down notes with styluses shaped like twisting horns. The professor made his way toward one of the Raissans shelving the books. After a brief quiet conversation in their own native tongue, the

professor turned back to them and said, "Well, there's a book room off to the side where there are some Ancient texts. I can take you to them and perhaps you can take a look at them yourselves."

"That's great. Thank you for all of your help."

"It is no problem. I think it was a treat for me to see you visitors here. I've only read about the humans that the Ancients had used to populate some of the cities that they had connected by tethers into a grand web before the Great Rending. It's one thing to read about the descriptions. It's another thing to see you in person."

"Unfortunately, after the Great Rending, we lost all information about your kind," said Wray. "So we are grateful that you have been rather gracious hosts rather than, say, shooting and asking questions later."

The professor gave a screeching noise that was probably the Raissan equivalent to a laugh. "What a wonderful saying! I will have to remember that the next time I'm forced to go to another one of those damned committee meetings. That would certainly shake things up." He then pointed them down a corridor. "The room is over there. The librarian tells me that it will be open until sundown."

When they reached the room filled with Ancient texts, Wray was somewhat surprised that the Raissans did not have anyone standing by watching to make sure that no one would steal or deface any of the old books. Then again, the Raissans probably had very different notions of what was right or wrong, depending on their moral code. Perhaps stealing and defacing were virtually unheard of here.

Or stealing and defacing carried extremely stiff penalties. It was only then that it crossed his mind that there were probably certain things that they couldn't do in Raissa. And that if they broke the law, it could be quite possible that the punishment could be death. And especially in foreign places, ignorance of the law was no excuse for breaking any of the rules. But whatever the case, no

one had called the authorities on them yet, so Wray assumed that they were still regarded as relatively harmless travelers.

“There are a lot of books in here, even if the Great Rending destroyed most of them,” said Dita. “I assume you want help going through all of these?”

“There's no way to really tell what sort of order these books are in. And even if they are in any sort of obvious order, we would still have to go through every one of them since the titles are not on the spines, as in more modern texts,” said Wray. “Why don't you start on the other side? If you see anything that looks like an atlas or text on Marozia, be sure to save that one so we can look at it.”

“Aye, aye, captain.” But she said it with a smirk, so he did not take her sudden bow to authority with any seriousness.

Wray went over to the closest shelf and began going through all of the Ancient texts that he saw. As he went through each text, turning the covers so he could see the title pages and coming up with all sorts of things from gardening to engineering, he wondered how the Ancients could have distinguished the books themselves if they had never bothered to put titles on the covers in the first place. Did the Ancients have advanced technology that allowed them to detect which book was which before they laid hands on any of them? Or perhaps the Ancients did label the covers of the books. But humans like him or any other creature that he had come across so far lacked a certain sense to actually detect what was on the covers. In any case, he lacked the technology and the sense and so was relegated to this slow process of going through all of the books one by one.

He had finally reached the second shelf when he heard Dita make an exclamation from the other side of the room. Thinking that she had found the holy grail to Marozia, he rushed over to her only to see that she had discovered something entirely different on the shelves.

It wasn't a book at all but a device. To Wray, it didn't appear to be anything of particular interest. It was a small rectangular block made of some kind of red stone with strange indentations

on the top. If he had to guess what it was, he would have said that it was some kind of book end. But Dita didn't see it that way.

“I can't believe that this is here,” she said. “I thought these things were all but gone. Or at least in the hands of the very wealthy.”

“What is it?”

“You can't tell what it is?” she said with surprise. “I would have thought that you would have seen something like this before in your stint as a small claims judge in the Hall of Justice in Despina. Doesn't the Hall of Justice have devices that date back to before the Great Rending? I thought you had lie detectors, for instance.”

“The Hall of Justice does have lie detectors,” he replied. “But they don't look like that. The lie detectors we have are gray in color and they are more thin and curving. They fit over one's head and send signals to another device which has several controls and outputs which tell the operator whether or not a person is lying or telling the truth. That looks more like a brick to me.”

“It's not just a brick.” She pressed one of the indentations and a secret panel slid out, revealing several controls and a screen which flickered with unknown outputs. “This is a brain wave analyzer. It's used by some people to help detect whether certain people are knot jumpers or knot finders, apart from the normal population. I saw one of these when I was much younger. One was used on me to determine if I was a knot finder or not.”

“Really? Well, that's really interesting. I wonder what the Raissans need it for.”

“They probably need it for the same reason that humans need it. To find knot jumpers and knot finders among their own kind.” Dita closed the panel back up and put it back on the shelf where she found it. “Although why this particular device is here is anyone's guess. Maybe they classify it as a book so put it in here with all the other Ancient stuff.”

“Hm.” He then turned to the pile of books that she had started accumulating at the foot of

one of the shelves. “So did you find anything that would be of interest?”

“Some of these books appear to have maps in them,” she said offhandedly. “But I didn't look too closely at them. I decided to put them all in a stack so we could look at them in detail after we went through all of these books. How are you doing on your side?”

“I'm not having much luck,” he admitted. “But there are quite a few shelves left.” At that, he left her to her stash and went back to his side of the room.

After a long hour of finding nothing, he went back over to Dita's stack and began to go through those books in a more slowly and thorough fashion. Most of the maps in the books appeared to be depicting a few of Raissa's neighboring cities, such as Perinthia, but none of them made mention of Marozia. As he went through yet another book, he wondered if they had somehow been misled by the Ancient texts that he had found earlier back in Despina. Perhaps Marozia did not exist on this part of the web. Perhaps it was as Dita said, a fairy tale that some Ancient had made up in order to make a story to scare the young ones into behaving properly.

But finally, as he neared the bottom of the book stack, he found something that he thought probably corroborated his theory that they were going in the right direction towards Marozia. In this map, that had apparently been made by the Ancients several centuries before the Great Rending, there was a city that was attached to a single tether to a city close to Raissa. On the map, it was called Marona. But he had a hunch that it probably meant Marozia.

“Maybe it's another city entirely,” Dita had remarked when he showed her the map. “That's always a possibility.”

“Sure, but the name is close enough to what we're looking for that I think we're on the right track,” he said decisively. “Besides, don't languages change through the years? This map was made many, many centuries before the Great Rending. According to the date on this text, it was probably made almost a thousand years before the Great Rending. The name of the city probably changed

during that interim.”

“That's possible, too,” she said. She looked doubtful at that, but after a moment, she just shrugged and said, “You're the boss. You get to do whatever you want. I'm just your pet knot finder.”

Wray took out a piece of paper and a pen that he had in his travel pack and began to take notes down from the Ancient text. There were some interesting remarks in the text, mostly about the geography of this city that the text called Marona. According to the text, Marona was situated at the edge of a cliff on a peninsula that was attached to a large flat continent that the people there used to farm their food. The city itself was built on top of a rock foundation around the anchor and the Ancients had constructed a very distinctive lighthouse at the very edge of the cliff to warn any passing ships that were heading to a harbor a few miles south from that point.

“Ah hah!” exclaimed Dita, momentarily distracting him from his transcription. “Here's something about Marozia, not Marona. But this text was written a couple centuries after the text you have. And this has a story about Marozia. About how it was going into decline and the Ancients were contemplating about abandoning the city for greener pastures.”

“What's the story about?” he asked.

“It's kind of vague about it in here,” she frowned. “It says something about a great darkness that blankets the land and that the crops were beginning to mutate into something that no one, well no one who hadn't been engineered by the Ancients, could eat. The climate was changing and I think they had exploited too much of the land's natural resources. The city was falling into decline and people were already moving out. Other than that, there isn't anything concrete as to what this 'great darkness' was. It could be anything from an eclipse, to climate change, to a herd of locusts decimating the crop.”

“Right, that doesn't tell much about it.”

“It says here, though, that there were a contingent of people who didn't want to leave Marozia. They thought that they could develop a spell that could keep the great darkness at bay.”

“What spell?”

She gave a shake of her head. “No idea. This is the Ancient glyph for 'spell', the kind of spell that one would use in magical rites. But we all know there really isn't anything like magic in the tethered cities. Or at least any of the cities that the Ancients had been to. So all I can guess about it is that it's probably a group filled with cranks who had turned to superstition to help them hold onto a dying city.”

“That's a good guess as any,” he replied. He finished transcribing the information about Marona and tucked the piece of paper back into his travel pouch. “And I guess that's as much information as we can get out of this library.” He glanced at his time piece. “We should probably meet the others soon.”

Chapter 16

Something was wrong when they arrived back at the meeting point.

When Wray and Dita neared the paved square above the underground complex that contained the anchor to Raissa, they found the giant cockroaches already waiting for them at the entrance. But all did not look well. One thing that Wray immediately noticed was that Resnick and Faraday was supporting Mendel. He was barely keeping upright. If he had not held on to the arms of his companions, he would have slid straight to the ground.

“What happened?” Wray demanded.

Mendel only managed an unintelligible chirp at Wray's question. Resnick sighed. It was Faraday who related their adventures on the other side of the city.

“We went to the part of the city where the inhabitants of Raissa had erected that large gold structure that we were so intrigued about,” Faraday began. “Most of the Raissans seemed rather indifferent to us even though there were some that seemed very frightened of us even though it was obvious that we were only visitors.”

“We encountered some frightened Raissans as well,” said Dita. “Perhaps it is characteristic of their race, to be afraid of unknown things.”

“Who knows,” said Faraday. “We didn't question it too much. Everyone is different. So we made our way along one of the main roads which led to one of the large buildings. We manage to communicate with one of the natives and asked about the building. Unfortunately, all that we could understand was that the buildings were some sort of entertainment center for the natives.”

“Entertainment center?” asked Wray. “Does that mean that they play games and other recreation there?”

“Probably,” said Resnick. “Although there aren't really games there that we would understand very well. And I think that is the problem. Mendel was curious about everything. And before we could plan on how to explore the place, the silly cockroach went off on his own and it took us a while to find him again.”

“And apparently he got into some trouble,” said Faraday, clicking in exasperation. “As far as we could tell, Mendel had decided to try one of the Raissan games which involved playing some kind of gambling game that also included drinking a kind of beverage that many of the Raissans seemed fond of. Unfortunately, it acted as an intoxicant on Mendel's body. And we had to drag him away from the game, drunk.”

“Oh dear,” remarked Dita. “That wasn't fun, was it? I didn't know your kind got drunk.”

“We do get drunk,” Resnick informed her. “We get intoxicated with certain fermented sugars. I had a scanner with me and I was able to analyze the drink that Mendel had. It definitely had a lot of fermented sugar in it. I could smell it from several paces away, which, I think, warning enough. Mendel should never have tried it.”

“Well, this is a new city,” said Wray. “Perhaps he intended on only trying a sip but things spiraled out of control.”

“It spiraled way out of control.” Resnick nodded toward the entrance to the underground complex. “I'm thinking we should probably take Mendel back to the vessel and let him sleep it off. He's no good to us in the state that he's in.”

“We might as well take a nap,” Dita suggested. “And maybe in an hour or two, we can start making plans for the next jump. Theoretically, it's supposed to be Marozia, isn't it?”

“According to the old maps, yes,” said Wray. “But I think we have to make sure, especially since there may not be a tether connecting this city to that city after the Great Rending.”

A loud bang and a hard jolt that sent Wray rolling into the bulkhead was a harsh wake up call in the morning. As he tried to put his hands on his temples to hold a developing headache at bay, something clanged loudly outside of the knot jumping vessel again and then started howling like an angry wolf.

In the other part of the vessel, he heard the others stirring at the noise. There was an irritated hiss from one of the giant cockroaches, probably Mendel, attempting to recover from the massive hangover he had sustained the previous day when he had unwittingly consumed an intoxicating drink in downtown Raissa. The other giant cockroaches, Faraday and Resnick, were similarly unhappy. Probably because they had been woken up from their sleep with the loud noise. It wasn't as if Wray liked it either.

Dita was as blunt as ever. "What the hell was that?"

"I don't know. It sounded as if all the fishwives in Despina had come to serenade us."

"Funny," she said flatly, "I never thought of Despina as having fishwives."

"It's a joke. You know, Despina being a desert city and all."

"Keep your jokes to yourself, your honor," she sneered. She had made herself a little bed on the floor near the knot finder's chair at the cockpit. In the darkness of the vessel, all he could hear was her voice and the sound she made as she struggled out of her sleeping bag to see what was going on. She must have activated a control somewhere, because a faint gray glow illuminated the cockpit control panel.

The howling outside grew louder and something started rocking the vessel as if it were a small toy boat in a tub.

Dita pressed something on the controls and the view screen turned on, showing what was outside. Wray did not know exactly to expect. From the noises and movements that they were experiencing, he had a vague thought that perhaps the Raissans had decided that these strange visitors were a nuisance and that it was time to get rid of them. Perhaps there was a large contingent of them outside shouting and wailing as they tried to pry open the vessel with the Raissan equivalent of pitchforks.

But that was not what they saw.

Instead, there was a sickly pink glow inundating the entirety of the underground complex containing the knots and the anchor platform. Aside from the pink glow, the structure of the underground complex appeared unchanged. And there didn't appear to be anyone on the anchor aside from their own vessel. It was as if they were alone. But they still heard the noise and the vessel continued to rock.

Dita's fingers were flying over the controls and she seemed remarkably awake for being

awoken in the middle of the night. "Something's out there."

"That's obvious," he replied, with no little sarcasm. "I wouldn't have guessed with that racket and rocking going about."

"What's happening?" called out one of the giant cockroaches in the passenger area. It sounded like Faraday.

"I have no idea," Wray called back. "Dita is looking into it right now."

"There's some sort of force field out there," Dita continued as she scanned the readings from her cockpit controls. "It's not visible to the naked eye, but if I try scanning at a higher frequency, it becomes a lot more clear."

"A force field?" Wray asked dumbly.

"You don't have any background on quantum theory, do you?" she asked.

"I was trained as a judge and a seer," he reminded her.

She sighed at his inadequate answer. "All right. Then think of it as a bunch of very small particles that you cannot see with your naked eye. These particles can't exert very much force individually, but when there are a lot of them around and they are directed in one particular direction, they can exert a force. Sort of like gravity which holds you down to the earth. But this particular force has a repulsion quality to it." As if to emphasize her words, whatever force was out there shoved against the vessel.

"So there's an invisible force out there, that I assume can be explained by science that I don't understand," Wray said. "Why is it directed to us?"

"I'm not sure if it's directly directed to us, if you know what I mean," she said. "The readings from these sensors tell me that this force is coming out of several of the knots."

"What? It's coming out of the knots?" he said, alarmed. "I thought the knots were only activated when the vessel was aligned. And then, only one at a time."

“That's how I understood it, too,” she said. “But this is really strange phenomena. I'm not sure it's even safe out there.”

“Are we safe in here?”

Faraday finally made his way up to near the cockpit so he could glance out of the view screen as well. “You say that it's not safe here? Should we leave?”

“If we leave, we need to take the vessel with us,” Dita said grimly. “If the knots are temporarily being unstable, if we leave the vessel here, it could get destroyed and we would not have another way of getting back home unless the Raissans have their own vessels that they are not telling us about.”

“But we could die if we stay here, too, then,” said Faraday.

“Not necessarily.”

Wray glanced away from the pink scene in the view screen back to Dita. “Not necessarily? Do you mean you think you have a solution to this?”

“I don't even know if it's really a solution. It's more of a status quo kind of thing, as the Ancients would say. My suggestion is to stay here in the vessel. And see what happens.”

“In this kind of situation?” Wray looked back at the view screen. “All right, so there's some sort of force coming out of the knots. What's the noise?”

“According to the readings, the noise is caused by the winds and the forces coming out of the knots. It's the friction of the air and the stone that's causing the shrieking that, as you say, sound like fishwives.”

“And the strange color?”

“That's from the knots, the archways themselves,” she explained. “You know how the stone archways glow when the knots are activated for a vessel to jump to a tether? This is sort of like that. But the strange forces coming out of the knots are activating the knots to some extent.”

“If something's coming out of the knots,” Faraday slowly reasoned, there must be something coming out of the knots to make this happen. Something must be on the tethers to make this happen.”

Dita shrugged. “Perhaps. But I have no idea what it might be.”

Something rocked the vessel again, so strongly that it began spinning on the platform. Back in the passenger area, Resnick shrieked in surprise and Mendel started hissing in irritation. Wray, Dita, and Faraday simply tried to grasp onto the nearest surface to prevent themselves from being flung about the interior like so many rag dolls. The spinning was so sudden and quick that Wray thought he might become ill himself. But slowly the vessel slowed down and they found themselves still sitting on the anchor platform, although in a different orientation. On the view screen, they saw one of the knots come into view and it began turning noticeably black in the midst of the other pink archways.

“Is that thing activating?” Wray asked. He dragged himself into the pilot's seat, but he let Dita continue scanning the controls.

“I don't know.” He heard a slight thread of panic creeping into her voice. “I thought that this sort of storm would probably pass in a while. The color that the archways are showing now don't really ring any alarm bells for me. But that is very unusual. We're aligned on particular coordinates to go knot jumping, but I haven't activated the vessel at all. And the knot seems to have activated itself.”

“What does black mean?” Faraday asked.

Dita's expression was grim. “I suppose it means that we should pray to the gods that we don't get ripped to shreds. When a knot turns black, it's what a lot of knot jumpers call a black hole. It leads to a tether that is very powerful but also wildly unstable.”

“You have the coordinates,” said Wray. “Where is it supposed to go?”

She gave a short laugh. "I guess it's your lucky day. It's where you wanted to go to the most." And with that, the black knot seemed bulge into the anchor space and swallow them down into darkness.

Chapter 17

Wray began to understand how the knot jumpers earned their reputation as macho travelers. Knot jumping and traveling the tethers was dangerous work, as his face could attest. Gingerly, he lifted his head and touched his face with his fingers. His flesh hurt. It even hurt when he tried to wince with the effort. During their travel through the black knot, his face had somehow rammed into the control panel. He was sure he would have at least one black eye in a couple of hours.

Beside him, Dita didn't seem any better. She was lying on the floor on her side, groaning. Her right arm was lifted up with one finger touching one of the controls but not actually pressing it. From his vantage point, he saw that her eyes were closed and she slightly twitched, attempting to get upright again. Against the side of the vessel, he saw that Faraday had rolled into a protective ball. And beyond him, in the passenger area, Resnick and Mendel appeared to have done a similar thing.

"What happened?" he croaked.

Dita moaned at his question and cracked open an eye. "A moment, please." Slowly, she slid upright so that she was in a sitting position. Then she retrieved her arm which had gotten into an awkward position and slowly got up to sit in the navigator's seat. Her bones popped and she rolled her neck in an attempt to get some of the kinks out. "I feel like I've gone through several rounds with the gentlemen's boxing league."

“I felt like I went through several rounds and lost badly,” he replied.

Her mouth briefly curved at that, but she quickly bent her head to look at the controls.

“There's some damage to the shields,” she replied, “But it's nothing that a couple days of regeneration won't fix. Otherwise, we're remarkably intact.”

“What does that mean?”

“We made it through relatively unscathed. Look.” She pointed up to the view screen which flickered and then showed them what was outside the vessel. An underground complex. The anchor and knots were made of a dark stone and carved in the Ancient style. But it was underwater. The light from the vessel illuminated a dark blue-green world filled with strange sea plants clinging to the rocks and occasional fish that slithered through the waters like silver worms.

“You don't suppose that this was deliberate, do you?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Well, from all of the Ancient texts, they say that Marozia was orphaned from all of the other cities. Do you think that this was one of the ways that they did it? To orphan it, they also had to make the anchor and knots on Marozia inaccessible?”

“Oh, I don't know about that,” she said as she conferred with the sensor readouts. “That's just water. And water may be an inconvenience, but not really a deterrent to most knot jumpers and knot finders. I suppose this is why one of the reasons that knot jumping vessels were designed by the Ancients to be completely enclosed. One never knows what sort of environment one will encounter when you travel a tether.”

“All right, so this isn't so unusual in your estimation,” he said. “But what about the other side?”

“What about the other side?”

“Over on the side of Raissa. Why do you suppose we were sucked through the knot that

supposedly led to Marozia as opposed to any of the other knots with known tethers? There wasn't supposed to be a tether from Raissa to Marozia. It was supposed to be broken, if not before the Great Rending, at least during that great cataclysm.”

She shrugged. “Who knows. You have to recall that a lot of knowledge was lost during the Great Rending, including knowledge about tethers and knots. It could very well be that Marozia is orphaned by typical tethers. Perhaps the strange anomaly that we encountered back on the Raissan anchor had reactivated the tether. Or created a new one. Whether that tether will still exist to help get us back home, though, will be anyone's guess.”

“We're in Marozia?” Faraday had uncurled from his position. “The fabled Marozia? Oh, how exciting! We should get out there now and explore! No one's been to Marozia for many centuries, maybe even a millennium. We'll be the first foreigners there in so long. And we'd be famous for rediscovering a so-called fabled city.”

“Not so fast,” said Dita. “We're still underwater.”

“How are we supposed to navigate that?” Wray said. “If we can't, we may end up trying to knot jump back again to Raissa simply because any part of Marozia outside of the anchor would be inaccessible.”

“Well, there is a solution to that.” Dita pressed a couple of controls and the vessel's engine began to rumble. The vessel itself began to move. And from their view from the view screen Wray saw that the vessel was somehow propelling itself through the water.

Despite the underground complex being completely underwater and the home to many strange sea creatures, the place seemed remarkably well preserved. Perhaps that indicated that there were few other influences in the place. Eventually, the vessel itself made its way to something that looked like a long stairwell heading up. It was wide and tall enough to accommodate the entire vessel as it made its way out of the complex. The entrance to the underground complex led out to a

shallow sea. Soon, they ascended up to the surface and they realized that what used to be Marozia was now completely underwater. The only things poking out of the water were particularly tall hills and Ancient buildings that were taller than three stories.

Dita directed the vessel towards one of the hills where she parked it on an outcropping of rock. When they opened the hatch and got out, Wray scented the briny air, indicated that the ocean had overtaken most of the land. He made his way on a higher part of the hill to take a look at the surroundings. Below, on the rock outcrop where the vessel sat, the rest of their group slowly made their way out. Dita seemed rather cautious as she made her way around the vessel to make sure that she had placed their conveyance on a stable platform. Resnick and Faraday seemed rather intrigued at the new surroundings as they helped Mendel out. The hungover cockroach chirped in his own language, letting his friends know that he just needed to sit down a bit to recover from their sudden knot jumping from before.

It was late noon in Marozia. The sun, a dark red globe in this universe, shone down on the waters making them look orange. The buildings that remained above the water line were already in severe decay, many of the roofs already collapsed and the rest of the structure overtaken by the native flora and fauna. Otherwise, the whole place appeared deserted.

Wray recalled the stories that he had read about Marozia in the Ancient texts. That the residents of the city sensed that a great darkness was coming to the city and that they had decided to cut off the city from the others. But then there had been a small contingent of the inhabitants who wanted to stick it out. Wray imagined that the great darkness that they talked about was possibly an Ancient metaphor for the incoming sea, the rise in sea waters from a warming world. Most of the inhabitants would have heeded the warning and left Marozia. But the others, the remaining people, would have attempted to eek out a living here. But with the waters this high, and now so many centuries after the Great Rending, he doubted that there was any survivors.

The rising ocean also posed another problem. If the book he was looking for in Marozia, there was every possibility that the book would have been destroyed in the great flood. Or if not outright destroyed, eventually destroyed as the city fell into decay.

“What is that?”

At the sound of Dita's surprised voice, he turned from his survey of the ruined city to look down at her. She had somehow climbed the vessel and was sitting on its roof. She had raised a hand to shield her eyes from the glare of the sun. And she was looking into the distance, in the direction of the hills. When he glanced at the direction that she was looking, he noticed that the hills poking out of the water eventually gave way to large and wider hills until it came to land that rose completely out of the waves. From his vantage point, he could see a strange, somewhat unnatural shadow on a bit of that distant land. If his guess was right, it would not take them very long to walk over there.

“I don't know,” he told her. “Perhaps we should go and see.”

She frowned at his remark but then said, “It's your call. You're in charge of this entire expedition.”

So with that, he called upon the giant cockroaches and briefed them on his idea to see what it was that Dita had detected in the distance. Still eager to explore a new place, the giant cockroaches readily agreed and they were soon off. It was easy enough to traverse the hills themselves, but it would be more difficult to attempt to cross any water that separated the hills. So they decided to get back into the vessel and pilot it closer to the bit of land that contained the strange dark spot.

As they neared, Wray realized that it wasn't just a dark spot on the land. It was actually caused by something else. Buildings. There was some sort of civilization eking out an existence in this distant and isolated world. Perhaps they were the descendants of all of those people who decided to stay on Marozia, Wray reasoned.

Dita piloted the vessel to a hidden cove at the edge of the main land mass that contained what they were looking for, with the explanation that if the residents of this city were hostile in any way, at least their ride home would be in a relatively hidden and safe spot. They got out and slowly made their way to the dark city. The sun had sunk very low in the horizon when they finally reached the edge of the city.

The buildings were of a very strange architecture. One couldn't tell if it was stone or sand that was used in its construction. But whatever the case, the buildings were constructed into strange seemingly unnatural angles that hurt the eyes if one tried to contemplate it for too long. In fact, the giant cockroaches found it even more unpleasant than Wray and Dita. Mendel even complained that it was making him feel even more hungover than how he felt when he woke up that morning.

But whatever their strange architecture, there were noticeable doors and windows. Some of the windows emitted a strange green glow which suggested that there were inhabitants in the city, utilizing energy of some sort. There were roads, although they were paved in a sandstone that seemed almost as slippery as ice. And they didn't see anyone on the street until they were walking down an alleyway and a door opened, revealing a creature that was vaguely humanoid.

The creature was both strange to the humans and the giant cockroaches. It was nothing that they had seen or heard of before. The creature had long spindly arms and legs with very angular joints. Its head was completely distorted, revealing long yellowing teeth, holes for nostrils, and red eyes. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Dita reaching for her weapon.

The creature spoke. But it was of no language that Wray had heard of before. The sounds were very dissonant, almost painful for his ears. The giant cockroaches twitched their antennae in irritation. But it was actually Resnick who spoke first, in the Ancient tongue with a tentative greeting since the creature did not appear to be making any move to harm them. At Resnick's greeting, the creature paused once and then resumed speaking, this time in a halting tongue in the

Ancient language.

“Come! Come inside! You must not be outside when the sun sets.”

“Why is that?” Resnick asked.

“It is obvious that you are visitors,” the creature said. “I mean you no harm. I do not want to see visitors harmed by the darkness that comes with the night.” In the Ancient tongue, there were many words for darkness. There was a word for darkness that meant the darkness of night. There was another word where darkness meant evil. The word that the creature used meant the latter. “Come! Come inside. For tonight at least.”

They looked at each other for a moment and then Faraday said, “What could it hurt? We should go in. If this person is right, there may be dangers lurking in this city that we don't know about.”

Wray nodded. “Very well.”

“If you try anything,” Dita added. “I won't hesitate to do what's best for us.”

“By shooting indiscriminately?” asked Wray.

“Don't joke about it,” she replied.

With that, the five of them went into the creature's house which appeared to be very bare of objects except for a few pieces of furniture that was as strangely shaped as the architecture. After they all came inside, the creature closed the front door and gestured for them to take seats in what one could guess was the living room. The giant cockroaches sat side by side on what looked like a long bench that had been nailed to the side of one wall. Dita and Wray took two stools with five legs that were next to a triangular table at the end of the bench.

The creature had scurried off to another room of the building and came back with another stool for itself. It placed the stool across from them before getting to the window to close the oddly shaped shutters. Once the shutters were closed, it was more easy to see that the rest of the room

were lit with black lamps that emitted a strange green glow. Curious as to what it was, Resnick and Faraday pulled out their recording instruments to analyze the nearest lamp. The creature that was their host did not appear to notice Resnick and Faraday's curiosity. Instead, it made its way back to its stool and sat down to look at them.

It spoke first. "You may call me Red. At least, that is what my name means in the Ancient tongue. It is probably easier for you to pronounce at any rate."

The rest of them nodded at that comment and they each in turn introduced themselves to their host.

"Thank you for taking us in," said Resnick. "We are visitors from very far away and we don't understand the customs of your city."

"That much is obvious," said Red. "You don't look anything like anyone here. Where are you from?"

"From distant cities," said Wray. "We came here by accident, I suppose. There was some knot jumping involved."

"Knot jumping?" said Red. He flapped his large mouth in what he supposed was surprise. "I thought it was impossible. Even if it was possible, the anchor for the city is located under the water."

"It is," confirmed Dita. "But we managed. What is this place called?"

"This is New Marozia," Red informed them. "It was built after the original city fell with the oncoming flood waters. Well, this is the newest incarnation of New Marozia, at any rate. The environment here is rather harsh, actually. New things, built after the Ancients, decay very quickly, in a few decades. And the buildings must be constantly renewed."

"So you know of the Ancients," said Wray.

"Yes." Red eyed Wray warily. "They founded Marozia, it was said. A long time ago, though, they decided that it was best to isolate this universe from the others. So they cut all ties, orphaning

it. Some people decided to stay here. And we've managed to survive. That's why I was surprised to see visitors from a different city here. Has the tethers reopened again?"

"Briefly, by accident, I think," said Dita.

"You would be greeted by great curiosity, then. No one in this generation has seen anyone outside of New Marozia."

"If the Ancients left you here," said Wray slowly. "Does that mean that you're one of the direct descendants of the Ancients?"

"Hm. Well, I suppose that would be technically true."

At that remark, the giant cockroaches and the humans glanced at each other in surprise. None of them had expected the Ancients to look like the creature that had taken them in. It did not make much sense, really, if one thought more about it. If Red and his people built the city of New Marozia, it was a strange city that had absolutely no resemblance to the straight clean lines of Ancient architecture. Even after hundreds or thousands of years, one would think that they would have at least conserved the basics of Ancient architecture which worked. While they were ruins now, the Ancient architecture still existed despite the flood. Whereas in New Marozia, everything was completely different. It was as if someone had decided on a completely different style and the entire society decided to adopt it.

"I know what you're thinking," said Red. "I probably don't look anything like what you think the Ancients looked like. And you know what? You would be right. I don't. I came from a stock of Ancient blood, but the people who decided to remain behind on this world after it got orphaned were tainted by the darkness and cursed. It changed us, both in mind, body, and culture. It happened within a generation. But we still survived."

"Cursed?" Dita sounded unbelieving. "Like a magic spell? Who would believe such a thing? I thought the Ancients were technologically advanced."

“Maybe so, but it was a curse,” said Red, clearly believing it. “There are many strange things about the universes that we still don't understand. Maybe one of those things are magic.”

“What's the saying that has probably been lost through time?” said Dita. “Sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic? You might say it's magic, but it's probably some kind of technology or science that you don't understand.”

“I concur,” said Mendel, clearly getting back to himself after resting for a bit on the bench. “There are a hundred different things that could explain what happened to Marozia and its people. “Maybe there was some sort of natural disaster that also altered how the Marozian descendants looked like. We know that mutation rates can increase in certain environments. Such as high radiation environments. That can explain some things. And then there's always natural cultural shift. Sometimes the shift is incremental, especially if the culture's been established for a long time. But if a population is isolated, as it clearly was in Marozia, it wouldn't be that surprising if strange things arose.”

“That may be,” said Red. “But many of us New Marozians believe that it was a curse that made us who we are. Of course, we've managed to survive and make a fairly good life with what we have. And none of us has known anything else, so one could say that we are content.”

“I have a question, though, and it was probably something we should have asked first,” said Resnick, “but you mentioned that we shouldn't be out at night. You said that there was a great darkness that came with the night.”

“A great darkness,” Wray murmured half to himself. “That's what the Ancient texts said was the reason that they wanted to have Marozia evacuated in the first place.”

“It's related to the curse I told you about,” said Red. “It's hard to describe the great darkness. Perhaps it will be easier once you experience it.”

Chapter 18

That sort of reasoning sounded rather crazy and nuts to Wray. Why would he want to experience something as ominous sounding as a great darkness in order to understand it? Couldn't someone just straightforwardly explain it to him? But Dita, apparently, didn't see it that way. Something strange lit up in her eyes. Something strange and a bit mad. Most of the time, he viewed her as something necessary. Someone who normally he would not have socialized with if he didn't need to. But someone who was able to function in most situations like any other individual. But there were certain situations where a normal person's reaction did not apply to her.

“What do you mean experience it?” Dita asked, her tone, strangely eager. “Do you mean we will have to stand outside and see it when it comes? I hope it isn't as disappointing as having night fall.”

“It isn't like that.” Red crossed his arms around his chest in a strange pattern. A sort of ritualistic pattern that Wray interpreted as some kind of superstitious sign that was unique to his species. “We don't call a simple phenomenon the great darkness.”

“No, of course not,” said Mendel. The giant cockroach appeared to be half talking to himself, thinking about what all of this meant. “No one would call it that unless it had great significance. Something that couldn't be explained away in a few words.”

“I'm not sure I want to see this great darkness,” said Resnick, echoing Wray's thoughts. “It sounds to weird to me by far. “The safest way to observe it would be to set up some sensor equipment outside. If we had some idea of what to expect, we could tailor the instruments to read certain things.”

“Exactly,” agreed Faraday. “We only brought a few things with us since we were just intent

on exploring the place, but I'm sure we could rig something up in the mean time.”

“You don't need any extra instruments,” Red declared. “We can sit in here and observe it.”

“What do you mean we sit in here and observe it?” demanded Wray. “It's not actually coming into here, is it?” He could not really see how that would be since they were in Red's living room where the doors and windows were closed. Not unless whatever this was, it could walk through walls.

“We will observe it by hearing it,” said Red.

Dita's expression fell. “Well, I suppose we could do that.” It was obvious that she was disappointed that all they would do would be sitting around in the living room, listening to what was going on outside. Maybe the great darkness would be some sort of nightly storm that came over New Marozia. It would make as much sense as anything.

One other thing in the living room, besides the bench and stools that they were sitting on, was an odd cupboard that was stashed in the corner. It didn't have the straight lines and right angles that one would expect from most furniture. Certainly not any furniture from Despina and definitely not from the Ancients. It did not curve naturally either like any of the giant cockroach's architecture back in Beersheeba. Instead, the cupboard was a mishmash of lines in acute and obtuse angles, none of them appearing to be the same. It had the effect that it was like looking at a child's inaccurate drawing of a cupboard, a few scratches on paper, a few blotches of color, in this case blotches of black and green, without the nostalgia that a young person had built it. One was quite sure that someone of age had built the cupboard and had instilled those particular angles and lines deliberately. It was an aesthetic of New Marozia that the travelers were beginning to recognize. A sort of style that made one slightly nauseous if one looked and contemplated it for too long.

But this seemed to catch Red's attention. He got up from his stool to go over to the cupboard where he pulled out a drawer and took something out of it. The object in his hand was remarkable

for the fact that it had regular lines in contrast to everything else in the room. It appeared to be a long cylinder and made of a silver material that was studded with small knobs made of brass. In his hand, a small knob with an indent colored in a slightly different shade of brass, moved in a counterclockwise fashion, lining up with strange markings on the edge of the cylinder.

“It's close to the time,” said Red as he made his way back to his stool with the object in his hands.

It was the giant cockroaches who were the most interested in the device. “What's that?” Mendel asked.

“It is what the Ancients would call a clock,” their host replied. “For the most part, this device is what they would have made many centuries ago. The knowledge for making a clock hasn't been lost here on New Marozia. And unlike everything else, I suppose our people have managed to keep the knowledge because it is one of the few things that we know still works.”

Wray could see that. Especially if the New Marozians were fond of strange angles and lines. He could not fathom how one would make precise instruments like a clock with the imprecise style that the people here seemed to have adopted. But he did not say that thought out loud. After all, this was an unknown city. And their host seemed congenial enough to have allowed them into his home. They knew nothing about the customs and the morals of this city. Because they had so changed from who the Ancients were, it was also quite likely that customs and laws also changed to fit the times as it were. And any little thing that they were ignorant of could be construed of as a crime. So it was best to hardly say or do anything at all until they knew something more about the world. But unfortunately for Wray, his companions did not particularly bother with that kind of caution.

It was Dita who said, “Well, no wonder. I can't see how your current style, judging from your architecture, would be amendable to precision instruments like a clock.”

“My thoughts exactly,” said Mendel. “Why on earth did this style develop? It's kind of giving me a headache, actually.”

Fortunately, Red did not seem to take offense. He just shrugged. “I don't know. You'll have to take that up with the historians at the university. The architecture was already here when I was born. Perhaps it was a natural evolution of style and custom. Who knows.”

“You have a university?” asked Wray.

“Yes, we do,” said Red. “Not that anyone goes there very much. Mostly just scholars. And young people who want to become scholars when they grow up. The university is mostly there to preserve what knowledge we have. I'm actually one of the librarians at the university. I help curate what we have left of the Ancient texts. And that is why you're fortunate that I actually know the Ancient tongue. Most New Marozians are ignorant of it. And they are ignorant of the fact that there are other cities. It was just as well, I suppose, that no one else came out of their houses to greet you. Or you were perhaps lucky that everyone was inside preparing for the evening already.”

“But...” Mendel did not have the chance to finish his sentence. A loud noise came up, silencing the conversation. Something wailed outside as if it was someone crying out in anguish.

It sounded a lot like when the anomaly back in Raissa, when they were on the anchor in the underground complex, just before they were to be pulled into the knot and tether leading into Marozia. Wray murmured his thoughts as such to Dita who was sitting closest to him.

She had an odd expression on her face as she sat there thinking about his words. Hesitatingly, she nodded. “I agree it sounds very similar. But any number of things could be making the same sound, I suppose. Even things that we have no knowledge about. If it was the same thing, it would mean that there is an anchor and some knots about on this street. But that's impossible. The anchor and knots in Marozia are underneath the sea, many miles from here.”

After her comment, a strong force began pounding against the closed window, rattling the

shutters and making the inhabitants of the house jump in surprise and not a little trepidation.

“That can't just be wind,” said Mendel.

“No. It's the great darkness.” At the blank expressions on his guests, Red said, “It's not something intangible. It's an actual thing. I guess the closest analog to it would be a swarm. This swarm is made of many little things, but it acts in concert as if it was one organism. In a sense, there's an enormous swarm outside, looking for any living thing out in the open. If there is any living thing out in the open, it will strip it to the bone in seconds.”

“That sounds like this swarm is alive. Perhaps it is made up of many little creatures that are out now, hunting for prey,” mused Mendel. “I've heard of such things on our world, but they mostly just consume any vegetation in their path. There are things like that in other worlds, I presume.”

“I've heard of such things before, too,” said Wray. “And on Despina, they also just consume vegetation. I haven't heard of any that could consume live flesh although I suppose if there is a creature consumes vegetation, it should follow that there should also be a predator to consume animals as well.”

“This thing arose several years after the Ancients began colonizing Marozia,” said Red. “The Ancients at the time considered it a hazard so they wanted to close the tethers to the city down. Some of the other colonists, my ancestors, decided that it was a hazard that they could live with.”

“So what exactly is this swarm?” asked Mendel. “Has anyone actually seen it with their own eyes other than listening to it battering the buildings?” The giant cockroach waved a claw to indicate the loud sounds.

“There have been reports,” Red replied. “But other than anecdotal evidence that really is not consistent, no one really knows....”

After a particularly loud bang on the window shutters, Wray looked on in horror as the shutters began to give way. The howling from outside became exponentially louder. Instinctively,

he jumped out of his seat in an attempt to keep the shutters closed, but they burst open before anyone could get to them. The first thing that Wray could sense was a strong smell that reminded him of damp earth and decaying flesh. A wild wind rushed into the room, dark, darker than the darkest night. He could not see anything. And it was as if his skin had gone completely numb. He heard screaming, seemingly from the distance, before he lost consciousness.

Chapter 19

Wray was beginning to think that he was getting into the habit of waking up after getting in some sort of violent situation. His skin still felt a bit numb, like he had been standing outside in the cold for a while, but he was also beginning to feel the sting, as if he had suddenly come in from the cold into a warmer interior. Cautiously, he opened his eyes, expecting to be lying on the floor of a New Marozian home and staring at the ceiling.

But it was not that at all. He was no longer in Red's house. Instead, he was looking up at a high beamed ceiling built of thick dark wood and planed into straight, orderly lines. The style was reminiscent of Ancient architecture, but it was also different to. And at the same time, very similar. It took a while for his brain to place it, but he realized that the style of the roof was exactly the same as the roofs built back in Despina, the architecture which was based upon but not exactly the same as the Ancients.

Why was he lying in a distinctly Despinan room?

He turned his head and he saw that he was lying upon a wooden floor that had been polished to a high sheen. A few feet away, he saw Dita lying on her back, one of her arms over her eyes. He

noticed that one of her feet was chained to a wall. For that matter, so was his. Further away from Dita were the three giant cockroaches who have been thrown into a large iron cage. They were curled into protective balls, either from their attack previously from the great darkness or from their imprisonment. In a separate cage was Red. He appeared as incapacitated as everyone else.

Something nudged him in his back. He craned his head around, but got a boot shoved in his face for his efforts.

“So, you're awake.”

The voice was familiar to him. Familiar enough that it sent shivers down his back. After a moment, his mind settled on one name. It was Drolius, the noble who was in charge of the House of the Black Cockatrice. If this was still New Marozia, how and why was he doing here? He thought he had sent some of his lackeys off to Valdrada to search in his stead. And if they weren't in New Marozia, how in the many universes did all of them end up back in Despina?

He could only think of one possibility. Since the sound of the supposed great darkness was similar to the sounds of the phenomena that had taken them to Marozia in the first place, maybe they had traveled another tether inadvertently back to Despina, despite the lack of anchor and knot.

“You surprise me.” When Drolius took his boot off his face, Wray saw that the man was wearing an odd outfit that looked like a gray suit with an attached white cloak. He had a crown on his head, a golden crest inlaid with black stones in the shape of the mythical cockatrice. His eyes glared down at him. His mouth in a sneer. “You managed to get all the way out here to Marozia without killing yourself.”

So, they were still in the same world that they were in before. That, then, begged the question of what exactly the great darkness was. Whatever it was, it had incapacitated everyone and given Drolius the opportunity to capture them. The question, then, of course was how he even figured out why they were there. And how Drolius was in this world if the tethers to Marozia, by all

accounts, were broken.

“I see the questions in your eyes.” The older man grinned. An ugly expression.

“Unfortunately for you, you and your friends were in the wrong place in the wrong time. The Ancients had a lot of technology aside from building the knots and anchors that connected the cities. They also built homing devices.”

Homing devices?

In response to his unspoken question, Drolius waved the black canister over him. The same black canister that he and Mendel had found on that unnamed island city. “This is one of those devices. It's a pity that you had never encountered one before. Otherwise, you would never have picked it up when you went to that island city. You would have understood immediately for what it was. But fortunately for me, it allowed me to follow you all the way here. You have no idea how hard it was for our House to figure out which coordinates to use to get to Raissa, the last city before Marozia.”

Wray frowned at his explanation. So Drolius had somehow followed them to Marozia using this homing beacon that had been manufactured by the Ancients. That also explained how Drolius was able to follow them. While a conventional homing beacon relied on radio waves that could not penetrate between the universes, the Ancients must have solved that problem a long time ago. It would also explain why Dita was alarmed that someone had broken into their vessel back at Raissa. It was obvious that Drolius and his lackeys had gotten into the vessel to determine where they were going next. And whatever that great darkness was, it didn't matter now. Somehow, Drolius had managed to take advantage of it to capture them.

“So you've found Marozia, congratulations,” said Wray. His throat was scratchy from his abuse. “Why bother taking us here, wherever this is, if you just wanted to get to the city? We never did anything to you.”

“Oh, on the contrary, my dear boy. You've done plenty. Or at least your father had done plenty.” Drolius sneered again. “He was an upstart who managed to get the Doge's ear. He had absolutely no right to do so. It was supposed to be me! I had the connections. I had the experience! I had the power!”

Wray didn't say anything to that. It was of no use to reason with an obsessive.

“When you're in a better frame of mind, you will lead us to the book,” he spat. “And then, maybe I'll spare you and your friends from a fate worse than death.” Drolius then stepped away and Wray listened to his retreating footsteps.

After a long moment, after the sound of the footsteps faded, he craned his head to look around the room again, to take stock of what was around. Upon closer inspection, while the architecture was very similar to Despina's, it wasn't quite the same. There were strange motifs painted and carved on the edges of the beams over head and on the window sills, or what was left of them. Because the room, while in fairly good shape, was also on the verge of becoming a ruin.

Wray sat up and attempted to edge himself as close to the window as he could despite the chain that held him to the wall. Outside the window, he saw the sea which covered most of the old Marozia. Somehow, Drolius had some of his lackeys secure a base on one of the old ruined buildings that still rose over the sea.

Alternate Timeline

Chapter 1

The floor was cold and hard and there was no noise except for the faint dripping of water in the distance. Dita had listened to the water for a long while until the sound of the water blurred in her ears and her bottom was numb from the cold floor. The air was cold, too. And smelled of burnt refuse. Dita wasn't particularly thinking of anything at the moment. There really wasn't anything to think about after they threw her in here. And what was the point, anyway? In some ways, it was a relief from the usual constant stirring of her thoughts.

Ten heartbeats later, the sound of the dripping water was broken by the slam of a door. There were footsteps. One person. Dita didn't look up from her huddle on the hard cot in her cell. She had heard the footsteps before. Probably one of the guards to double check that the prisoners weren't making a nuisance of themselves. Or perhaps someone with a food tray. Dita had counted three different trays so far, a day. But while other prisoners at this point would still have hope that they would be released, Dita didn't harbor any illusions on that score. Her crime was too heinous for the authorities to ignore. It would only be a matter of time before they came for her and her life, or what there was of it, would be gone.

The footsteps came closer from the hallway outside and passed her door. Perhaps the guard was going to see another prisoner. There were at least two other prisoners that she knew of down in the dungeons of the Hall of Justice. She knew because she heard their voices crying and yelling in the middle of the night. It annoyed her, because she had tried to get some sleep.

Most people wouldn't even think of sleeping with the threat of death hanging over their heads. They would be crying out like those other poor souls that Dita had heard in the night. But Dita wasn't like other people. She always knew that there was always someone out to get her. It might not be the same someone all the time, but it was someone nonetheless.

The footsteps stopped at the end of the hall and there was a pause. There was no noise except for the clank of a chain and then the footsteps traveled back towards the entrance. This wasn't particularly unusual either. Dita guessed that the guard was merely checking to see how many empty cells were left in the dungeon for new criminals.

As the sound of the footsteps disappeared with the closing of the dungeon, Dita quickly stretched her hands in front of her to look at them. There was little light in the cell except for the thin slivers of sunlight that trickled in from the narrow slits near the ceiling. The skin on her hands glimmered with faint silver lines that crisscrossed her flesh like a spider's web. Scars. An indication of what she did and who she was. The very first scar she had received, a slash branded on the palm of her right hand, had marked her on her path. In some ways, getting to this cell had been inevitable.

She finally stretched out on her cot and closed her eyes. She must have fallen asleep, because the next thing she knew, she was jerked awake by the dungeon door clanging open again. This time, she heard two pairs of footsteps. The walking pace was steady, so she expected them to pass her by again. But the footsteps stopped in front of her cell door. She heard the lock rattling.

This was it, she thought. The end. She didn't bother getting up from the filthy cot. What was the point anyway when her head was going to roll in a couple of hours?

“Edith of Valdrada.”

She didn't bother to respond to the guard.

Footsteps. And then a hand that shoved her over until the back of her head hit the wall. She

didn't make a sound from the pain. She was used to pain. And why give him the pleasure of knowing that he had hurt her? “Get up, wretch. There's someone to see you.”

Dita finally opened her eyes. The guard in his black and gray uniform did not surprise her. He had the jaded, cruel look of someone who had been at his station for a long while. Long enough that he no longer cared what happened to other human beings.

“Edith of Valdrada?” This time the other man spoke. She shifted her eyes to see a tall shadow draped in a gray-green hooded cloak. In the dim light of the cell, there was no hope of making out the features of this new man. The cloak was the sort that travelers wore. Which told her nothing of the man's disposition or rank. But his voice had the distinct accents of someone who had been educated by a private tutor. Or at least she assumed so. It could very well be that he was from another city where the commoners had such accents.

“There is no such person as Edith of Valdrada,” she finally replied, her voice cracking. The last time she had spoken, she had been yelling as they had pulled her from her employer's corpse and pried the knife from her hands. “I am Mad Dita.”

“Mad Dita, then,” said the cloaked figure. “I assume you know what you're up against.”

She just stared at him.

“Your trial is set for tomorrow,” he continued. “There are those in the Halls of Justice that would like to have you made an example of.”

The guard beside the figure gave an ugly laugh and made a motion against his throat with his hand. “They would like your head to be separated from your shoulders, wench. Murderesses don't fare well at the Halls of Justice.”

There was a movement of the hood, indicating that the man was looking at the guard. “You, be quiet. I'm having a conversation here.”

“It sounded rather one-sided to me.”

The figure turned back to Dita. "As much as it pains me to agree with him, he is right. Murderesses don't fare well at the Halls of Justice. Especially if there's no hint of extenuating circumstances. However, there is one way which you can escape death."

Dita crossed her arms and felt her lips tighten. She cared little for laws and rules, but she was somewhat familiar of the laws in this place. Murderers were often sentenced to death unless they were proved innocent or had proof that they had been doing it in self defense. While some other cities had an alternative punishments depending on the degree of the crime, such as life imprisonment, this city viewed most things in black and white. There was a contingency, though. Because in the eyes of this city's laws murderers were viewed as less than human, the criminal would be seen as fair game for any job that no one else would dare take. Jobs that were dangerous and risky. A multitude of possibilities crossed her mind, few of them offering the mercy and painlessness that a quick decapitation would involve.

Since she did not immediately reply to the figure's comment, he continued, "If you agree to work for me, the powers that be in the Halls of Justice will agree to erase any possible sentencing."

"What will I have to do?" she asked.

"What you've always done. What you're good at. What got you to this city in the first place."

"Knot jumping? It's child's play to anyone who's trained to do it. If you just want to get to Hyptia or Leona, you could ask any travel agent setting up shop on the street. Why ask me?"

"You should be jumping at the chance instead of asking why," said the guard.

She ignored him and continued to look at the figure.

"I don't want a navigator to help me to get to Hyptia or Leona. I need one to help me get to a city no one has gone to for the last five hundred years."

"You want me to jump a broken tether," she said flatly. "Everyone knows trying to find a broken tether would be suicidal."

The guard started chuckling.

“Even so,” said the figure. “Wouldn't you rather try to find a broken tether than to getting whatever punishment that is coming after tomorrow's trial?”

She supposed that he had a point. Even in her profession, knot jumping on unbroken tethers wasn't completely safe. If she refused the offer and stayed in the dungeon, it was quite certain that she would meet a definite, final end. If she accepted the offer, the risk of death was quite certain, too. And the type of death would have a higher probability of being worse. The sane person would choose the quick and easy way out. But she found herself saying, “I have no idea who you are, but if you can get me out of this freeze box, I'm all for it.”

Chapter 2

The fresh air outside wasn't much warmer than the dungeon. It was the wind, Dita thought, that was making it feel colder than it probably was. When they had arrested her, she had been splattered with her employer's blood. As a result, they had made her wear prisoner's rags which was nothing more than a pair of thin trousers and a shirt. She still wore her own boots, though.

She followed the cloaked figure down the steps of the Halls of Justice. Other than the guard who had led the figure to her cell, there were few other people at the Halls of Justice as it was late and most had probably gone home for the night. It was the same of the street right outside the where she had been imprisoned. Moonlight reflected off well-worn cobblestones that saw much traffic during the day. But now, there was only the soft echo of their own footsteps.

Dita followed the cloaked figure through the streets past the Hall of Justice and several other

government buildings. They turned down a thin alleyway that connected the main street off to a parallel street to the east. On this main street, tall residential buildings, with facades consisting of wide windows decorated with expensive wrought iron lattices and colored glass stood on either side. The living quarters of the wealthy, she thought as she continued onward.

The two of them passed by a patrolling guard. Instinctively, Dita walked a little faster so that she stood in the relative protection of the cloaked figure's shadow. The guard eyed her with some suspicion, especially concerning her clothes and her relative unkempt appearance, but he nodded to the cloaked figure who simply nodded back.

A few blocks further down the street, they finally entered the city center, and walked into a bare courtyard that consisted of nothing but the cobblestone paving and a water fountain over an entrance that led down below to a complex that contained structures that the Ancients had built to access different cities on other worlds. The knots and anchors.

In the darkness, with only thin moonlight filtering downward from the atmosphere, the fountain glinted eerily like a demon turned to stone. The fountain itself had been turned off, the water drained. All that was left was the stone sculpture in the center of a merman with his fishy tail curled up underneath him, his arms raised and his mouth in an ugly grimace. Around him, in smaller spouts, were sculptures of small twisting fish, shown in the rictus of death as they squirmed in the air. This was a physical depiction of part of Despina's mythology, the water god who also doubled as the god of death.

The cloaked figure made no sound as he made a straight line to the entrance to the underground. Considering the deal that she made with him, she was not surprised. Perhaps he meant to travel the tethers tonight. And that was why he was desperate enough to pull her out from the dungeons of the Hall of Justice at this time of night so he could travel.

Most people stayed in their home city, leaving the travel to other cities to more experienced

travelers and to those trained in such traveling such as knot jumpers and knot finders. Those particular travelers were almost always diplomats or merchants specializing in other city goods, people who had real reasons to travel. Everyone else didn't want to take the risk. Because traveling on established, unbroken tethers still did not guarantee safe travel. Dita herself knew the score on that.

The entrance was open and the stairs cold and black. There was faint light coming from the overhead in the tunnels, lights developed and built into the recesses of the structures by the Ancients. After a winding path through the main part of the complex, they finally arrived at the heart of the matter, the anchor.

The anchor was a slightly raised stone platform from the floor that was crisscrossed by a variety of lines and writing, all of it in Ancient glyphs. Dita had seen such anchors in a number of cities, all of them very similar. It reminded her of what she had seen in astronomy textbooks, star charts and tables all combined together. The anchor itself served as both a launching pad from going to one city to another and also as a navigational aid for knot finders. At the edge of the anchor were tick marks spaced at regular intervals. Some of these tick marks pointed toward archways which surrounded the anchor. These archways were technically known as knots which led to tethers that connected this city to others.

Despina, she thought, was peculiar in that after the Ancients had left after the Great Rending, there had been no engineers left to help maintain the anchor. In other cities, the anchors were able to rotate so that the tick marks could be aligned to the knots in a variety of combinations. In Despina, that had not been possible. And besides that, several of the tethers were missing or broken after many centuries of neglect. The only tether that existed for Despina now was to a city called Valdrada. A place that she preferred that she visit as few times as possible. For a variety of reasons.

On the anchor platform was a “tether cart”, a slang term for the vessels that traveled the

tethers. The Ancients had called them “ships”, but because traveling the tethers did not involve water at all, the term “tether cart” became common among many cities. Personally, Dita did not think that “cart” was as elegant a term as “ship”, but she was no expert about the vagaries of languages. The vessel appeared to be a bullet shape, white and built in a strange aesthetic that was common to all Ancient built devices. There was a single portal at the front of the ship to allow the knot jumper and the knot finder, the pilot and the navigator see where they were going. Otherwise, the rest of the vessel was completely enclosed. This was mostly for practical purposes. The Ancients built their vessels for structural integrity. And any passengers on the ship would not have needed to see what went on outside. In fact, anyone not bred to become a knot jumper or finder would most likely not be able to tolerate the visual stimuli that happened outside of the ship while it was in transit. Some things, some people did not know.

The cloaked figure made his way towards the singular vessel and then pulled out a small remote that he had tucked in a pocket. He pressed something and a hatch opened on the side of the ship. Without words, he made a motion with his hands that indicated that she should enter before he did. With a slight hesitation, she did. The interior was dark, but with a voice command, lights activated, illuminating the passenger cabin and bit of the cockpit at the front of the vessel. In the back, in the shadows, there were large boxes covered in tarp. Supplies, she guessed.

“We will be heading out tonight,” the cloaked figure finally said. He sat in the chair reserved for the knot jumper. Dita found herself walking to the seat where the knot finder usually took. She raised her hands to briefly touch the controls. Everything was there. Familiar. There was only one possible destination to go to. Unless he wanted to try the unthinkable now. “I have a place in Valdrada which is probably safer than any place here,” he continued. “My main residence is here, but there are reasons why I do not wish to remain here to explain things to you before we travel.”

“Very well.” She turned to examine the controls and navigational equipment. “I’ll put in the

coordinates to Valdrada. Are you a knot jumper?"

At that comment, he gave a low, cynical laugh. "No. I am no knot jumper. If I were, I wouldn't be taking you with me."

"You do know that those who are not knot jumpers or finders aren't really capable of operating this, don't you?"

"I know very well. That is why I will sit here and pretend to be the passenger while you drive this thing. They say that knot jumpers and knot finders can do so very well themselves and that it isn't necessary to have both unless you're being very paranoid. Is that true, is it not?"

"I suppose so. It would be easier if there was a knot jumper here too, but I doubt you'd have the luck of finding one in the dungeons of the Hall of Justice."

"True." The cloaked figure sat back and waited for her to check the controls.

Dita glanced back at this mysterious figure who had now become her savior and patron. She didn't particularly want a savior or patron, especially since she still had no idea who this was and that whatever he had planned could as likely be worse than what awaited her in the dungeons of the Hall of Justice, but she had made the fateful decision and she was here now. Whoever and whatever he was, it did appear that he did give a glimmer of hope that she might be free sometime in the future.

A distant city where no one could touch her, she thought. That was where she would ultimately go once all of this was over.

She started the ignition and the ship's engine rumbled into life. The vessel moved after she typed in the commands for it to go through the knot that was aligned to Valdrada. Since the ship was designed by the Ancients, the controls and panels inside of it was also of a peculiar design. On the outside, everything appeared to be slick, black panels that reflected little. However, these panels activated by touch. Lights and controls appeared on the panels once activated, all of these written in

the Ancient glyphs. From her prior training as a knot finder, Dita knew what the glyphs were and theoretically how to pronounce all the words. But at the present time, the Ancients' language was a dead language. The only people who knew anything about it were either knot jumpers and finders or linguists.

As the vessel turned its front towards one of the archways, that particular knot of stones began glowing a faint green, indicating that the threshold was activated and the tether properly made. A moment later, she braced herself in her seat as the vessel suddenly launched forward, through the archway and into the tether.

The Ancients bred knot jumpers and knot finders to specifically travel the tethers. Some of the knowledge had been lost through the Great Rending, but from what was passed down through the generations, Dita gleaned that she and others like her, had a peculiar neurological make up that allowed them to process certain extra-dimensional information. In other words, her brain was different compared to the average human. For the average person, however, they could comprehend, abstractly and in mathematical terms what the tether was, but on a practical stand point, their own brains could not make sense of the visual stimuli. If these people were to look out onto the tether, they wouldn't be able to make any sense of what was out there. It would be like turning around and around, spinning, at an extremely high speed with one's eyes open. The individuals with more hardy constitutions would merely get sick. Others would fall unconscious. And the more sensitive ones might even possibly die.

Looking over at the cloaked figure, she saw that he kept his head bowed, carefully out of sight of anything on the navigational screens. Dita herself looked back out. To her, the tether looked like a tunnel made of molten rock. Depending on the connections, sometimes the tunnel was black with only a faint sheen. Other times, it may be multicolored. On this particular tether from Despina to Valdrada, the tether appeared a dark blue with faint flashes of gold every so often. This particular

tether was solid and unbroken. Tethers in danger of being broken, she knew, appeared to have cracks. And in the cracks was an outside hyperspace which glowed blood red.

Soon enough, the vessel approached the end of the tether, which was signaled by the tunnel walls turning from a smooth appearance to one more ropy and pebbling. And in another second, before Dita's own senses could detect it, the vessel emerged out of a knot and slid onto an anchor platform that looked identical to the one back on Despina.

Because all anchors and knots had been made by the Ancients, there was a consistency in their architecture. Only the very observant could tell the difference between anchors in different cities. Here on Valdrada, though, the stone of the underground complex had a slightly darker sheen than the one in Despina.

“It appears that there are others here,” the cloaked figure said as he finally raised his head to look out of the view screen. He was right. Several other vessels were located on the anchor. But none of them seemed particularly positioned to any of the other knots. “Let us hope that those carts have just been left here and that their owners are not here right at this moment.”

Dita powered down the ship and followed the cloaked figure back out of the vessel. When they exited, he took the remote from his pocket again to lock it down. Then they stepped off the anchor and proceeded up a stairway to the surface. They emerged at the entrance to an alleyway in a city that was packed in many buildings, rising high to compensate for the lack of lateral space.

Valdrada had a distinct odor of brine and refuse. While Despina was a city built on the coast, trapped between a desert and a sea, Valdrada was literally built on the sea, supported by dikes and ancient pilings. Originally, the city had started as a village on a stone outcropping a few miles off the coast of a large continent in the northern hemisphere of this particular world. The settlers of the village were outcasts from their country, forced to make a meager living as fishermen on this out of the way, cold place in the middle of a surprisingly harsh yet shallow sea. But then, through trade

and historical accidents, Valdrada started to grow. And to grow, the island was enlarged by building upon pilings that were stuck in the surrounding much to provide a shaky foundation. The builders also added floors to all the buildings until most had on average six or seven stories. The weight of all these buildings also caused the foundation to sink and many streets, over time, had become canals. Only the central part of the city, where the anchor lay, had the distinction of still being solid ground.

They ventured out of the alleyway to a larger street. Several blocks over, they encountered a canal. Instead of hailing one of the numerous gondolas that clustered along the small platforms that served as loading docks, the cloaked figure made his way down further on the street to cross a foot bridge to the other side. Two more blocks through a winding alley and he finally stopped in front of a nondescript wooden door to a nondescript building painted in the same dark brown color and white trim like the other buildings beside it.

The cloaked figure took a key out of his pocket and opened the door. Inside was a dark entrance way that only flared with light once he lit a gas lamp sitting on a small table beside the door. After locking the door behind her, he finally took off his hood, revealing dark hair, dark eyes, and an angular, almost ascetic countenance that Dita associated with scholars, magicians, and oracles.

“Who are you?” she found herself asking him.

He gave her a tight smile. “You may simply call me Wray. That is all you need to know at the moment.”

There was more to it, she was sure. No simple man would have the resources to own a vessel that could travel the tethers. No simple man would possess a home in both Despina and Valdrada. And no simple man would have the clout to bail her out of the dungeons of the Hall of Justice, especially since she had a death sentence hanging over her head, without much trouble. But despite his obvious reluctance at disclosing his true identity, she was sure that eventually, he might trip up

and she might glean something more than what he was willing to tell her.

Dismissing her curiosity, he took up the gas lamp and proceeded down a narrow hallway to a small alcove which turned out to be the entrance to a narrow flight of stairs up. He walked up the stairs, forcing her to follow. On the second floor, there was a wider landing that branched off into several rooms. He pointed to the second room from the landing.

“This will be your room for the duration of your stay. There is a bathroom and fresh clothes inside. Once you are finished cleaning up, come downstairs. The kitchen is at the end of the hallway.” Once he saw her entering the guest room, she heard him step away and proceed down the stairs again.

Chapter 3

Despite its rather unassuming appearance, the house in Valdrada that Wray had brought her to was built to a fair number of technologically advanced specifications. The bathroom in the guestroom was small but equipped with a shower that was controlled by a panel that could have only been built by the Ancients. The bedroom itself was sparse yet comfortable. The floor was bare, polished wood that had almost a glow from the gas lights that stood at a bedside table and an empty vanity. The bed had one pillow and a quilted blanket made of a patchwork of blue and green squares arranged in an abstract pattern.

At the foot of the bed was a large chest where she found clean clothes that were a little large on her, but could be cinched at the waist with a belt. She picked a long woolen dress that came down to her toes. Her hair was still wet from the shower, but she bound it up anyways to get it out of her

face. She left her dungeon clothes on a chair next to the vanity and proceeded downstairs. When she reached the first floor, she found herself in the hallway that Wray had mentioned and proceeded down the corridor until she reached a narrow archway leading into a surprisingly spacious kitchen.

She found herself stepping into an atmosphere laden with the thick smells of soup, bread, and venison. Her stomach audibly growled and almost instinctively, she wrapped her arms around her middle. There had only been thin watery porridge that had been served in the dungeons and half of the time, she had not even bothered eating that considering her inevitable sentence. But now, suddenly, her appetite had returned in full force. Intellectually, she knew should could not eat all of it even if she wanted to. Unused to the sudden influx of food, her stomach would most certainly rebel.

Wray sat on a straight backed chair near the hearth where a large pot was sitting over the fire, slowly simmering. He had taken off his cloak, revealing casual brown shirt and black pants, traveling garb. With one hand, dangled a wine glass, half empty. He was sitting forward on the chair, leaning close to the hearth. With his other hand, he stirred a ladle in the soup. He glanced up at her entrance and with his glass hand, motioned for her to sit at a square table in the center of the kitchen, already filled with the food that she had scented.

“You made all of this yourself?” she found herself saying.

“Do you see any servants here?” he countered. His eyes glimmered, perhaps in irritation, before he turned back to the pot over the fire. “Sit down and eat. And while you do that, I will explain to you what I expect of you.”

“You want me to find, and perhaps jump, some broken tethers.” She began piling a bit of venison onto her plate. After a thought, she also added a bread roll and a few other vegetables that had been cooked with the venison. She poured herself some water into an earthenware mug from a nearby pitcher and then finally sat down.

“That is the ultimate goal.” He continued stirring the pot. After a while, he lifted the ladle and tasted it. Seemingly satisfied, he finally got up from his seat and rummaged in a cupboard for bowls and spoons. “I am trying to find a certain text. It is said to be located in a distant city. Which city, I do not know. In order to discover that, I need to find someone who is familiar with the text and its location. In my searches, I have discovered such a person, but he resides in a city that is not easily accessible from the current web of cities.”

“What do you mean by not easily accessible?” she said. She was only half way paying him any attention. Her focus was mostly on the food.

“I suppose it is a matter of interpretation.” He began ladling the soup into the bowls. “Often, cities are labeled as inaccessible because no one has tried to get to that particular city in decades or even centuries. And there aren't enough trained engineers in the known cities to check all of the knots and tethers to see if any or all of them are unbroken. So the conventional wisdom says that they aren't.”

“So that is why you want me to navigate broken tethers. Or rather tethers that are questionable.” With food slowly filling her stomach, the itchy panic that would have come from a notion that was so risky and most likely suicidal, did not come. Her mind told her that he was trying to make a convincing case by feeding her, but at the moment, she didn't particularly care.

Finally finished filling the soup bowls, he walked over the table and placed one of the bowls next to her plate. After he put his own bowl down, he pulled his chair back up to the table and began eating some of the soup himself. After a couple minutes of eating in silence, he said, “I have an itinerary already prepared to get to the places we need to go to. After dinner, you need to get your rest. Tomorrow morning, we will start out. I have only traveled to a few of the connected cities, but our travels will take us to places that I have not gone. So I do not know how long the travel itself will go.”

“Are there going to be quite a few jumps?” she inquired. She looked at the soup and took a sniff. It smelled like chicken soup, the kind that a certain sympathetic old woman had served her many years ago when she had still been a child. It gave her comforting memories. So without any hesitation, she spooned some in her mouth and gave a contented sigh. Perhaps in the morning, cold reality would hit her, but who cared if there was chicken soup?

“A few,” he said in a noncommittal tone. “I suspect you need rest now. You can look at the map tomorrow.”

“Hm.” She finished the bowl of soup. Without another comment, he took the bowl and filled it with more soup. But this time, she concentrated on finishing what she had put on her plate.

The next morning, Dita woke from strange, dark dreams. She lay in bed staring sightlessly up to the ceiling. She had been back in the dungeons of the Hall of Justice, but for some reason, instead of being back in the cell where she was, for the most part, left alone to wait for her inevitable execution, she had been thrust into a larger room that appeared to be an arena.

There had been lights shining onto the center of the arena and she had stood in the middle of it, feeling the cold heat of the lights on her face. She had been vaguely aware that in the outer parts of the arena, in the shadows, figures sat in their comfortable seats watching her. Judges, officials, spectators. There were murmurs and sneers but nothing that she could audibly make out. And then, when she had thought that that was all there was, something had appeared in the arena with her. Someone. After a moment, she realized that this person dressed in black rags was someone she knew. The employer of the knot jumping company she used to work for.

Knot jumpers had a certain cachet in society that knot finders didn't have. They were almost always charismatic individuals who ended up starting their own travel agencies because their services were always in high demand among those who were often required to travel between cities. While knot finders could and did pilot ships themselves to get from city to city, for various reasons,

they were not looked upon as “true experts” even though they knew far more about the mechanics and theory of how and why the cities were tethered. Perhaps it was because knot jumpers were more of the risk takers. If someone wanted to go somewhere, they would almost invariably say that they could get them there. Whereas knot finders would say that they would need time to map a course to that particular destination before they could say for sure that they could make it there within a reasonable time frame.

And because knot jumpers were often charismatic individuals, they were often attired in the latest fashion or at least very well groomed if fashion did not particularly interest them, even if they had the misfortune of not being particularly attractive. But Palmer, her former employer, had been both fashionable and attractive. And that, unfortunately, had initially blinded her to his faults. But now, in this dream, his outward appearance matched what she thought he was inside. In the arena, he had grinned at her, showing blackened teeth. And in another instant, he had leaped towards her, with hand knife gleaming.

She had found herself holding an ax, a rusty blade, and she had sidestepped his initial swipe. That had been the opening volley of a fast and furious fight with the spectators in the shadows yelling and screaming. The whole scene appeared to go in slow motion until her ax came down during an opening. The blade had sunk into the flesh and the warm blood spurted, splattering onto her in a familiar fashion. It was then that she woke up, heart pounding, breathing fast.

Dita wanted to huddle under the covers and wipe out her mind of the dream. But she knew that a better way of forgetting it would be getting up. He had deserved it, she told herself finally, before flinging the covers off herself. She went to the bathroom to wash up and then quickly folded the blankets on the bed. Afterward, she changed from her night gown to some plain clothes that she had found in the chest at the foot of the bed, a pair of gray trousers and a soft white linen shirt that buttoned up to her neck. There were also some woolen socks and a new pair of boots which she

found sitting just outside the door when she finally exited the guest room. See thing, she took it as a sign that Wray wanted her to wear them, so she took a few more minutes to exchange her slippers for those boots.

Her older prison clothes had disappeared, some time between when she had gone down to the kitchen the previous night for dinner and when she came back up for bed. Wray had probably taken them away when she had been concentrating on her food and had not paid any attention to whether or not he was still in the kitchen. She hoped that he had burned those clothes. She had no inclination to remember her time in the dungeons of the Hall of Justice.

She smelled breakfast even before she arrived in the kitchens again. She saw that Wray had already laid out the food on the table for her, a plate filled with eggs and sausage and a salad consisting of succulent winter melons and sea berries mixed with cucumber greens. There was a bowl of oat porridge sprinkled with brown sugar and a large cup of steaming coffee. Wray was nowhere to be found, but there was a brief note, written next to the cutlery, instructing her to put the dishes in the sink after she was finished with her meal, and to promptly report to the study in the first floor to be informed of the subsequent journey.

She sat down to the table and began to eat, not quickly, but not leisurely either as she was sure that her new patron was probably waiting impatiently for her to finish. The breakfast was probably to soften her up so she would agree to whatever strange plans that he would have. But whatever his motives, she found that she was far more better inclined towards him because he had taken the trouble to cook breakfast and dinner for her. As she sipped her coffee, she looked around in the kitchen, at its homey and clean appearance. There were no servants so he had to either keep all of this himself or he hired a maid to clean his house every so often. She thought, perhaps, it was more likely that the latter was the case since he had the means to own this dwelling and the vessel that they used to travel from Despina to Valdrada. But who knew.

Because of the stark surroundings, despite its cleanliness, Dita had the impression that this Wray lived as a bachelor. From what she had seen, he did not appear that old, although sometimes, she knew, looks could be deceiving. With all of his assets, she wondered why he was not married. Or, she mused, maybe he was a lot like other wealthy bachelors in Despina who kept mistresses in separate houses, for appearances sake.

Finally finishing her breakfast, she put the dishes away and then ventured out into the hall, following the directions that he had written on the note. The study was closer to the front of the house, two doors away from the kitchen. The entrance to the study was closed, with a large heavy oak door carved with strange signs that Dita had never seen before. They weren't the glyphs of the Ancients, that she knew for sure. And the symbols weren't from the alphabets used by any of the inhabitants of the cities that she had traveled to before either. But they didn't seem to be completely random either. She couldn't quite pick up the pattern at first glance. She would probably have to spend a little time studying it to be sure. But because she was there for a reason other than decoding odd signs on doors, she rapped her knuckles on the wood and was rewarded with the command, "Come in."

Dita thought she knew what a study looked like, but Wray's study was far more than that. Most studies, in her mind, were compared to other studies she had seen, consisting of shelves of books and a large desk where the occupant worked. Wray's study had books and a desk, but it also looked like it was part laboratory. The wall close to the entrance contained the prerequisite shelves of books, most of them covered in the same kind of synthetic binding that the Ancients used. A heavy desk with a green glass lamp and a single straight back chair hewn in the same style were shoved into a corner, next to the books. The rest of the room was taken up by two narrow work benches with devices in various states of repair sitting haphazardly on the surfaces. In the opposite corner, next to a narrow window covered by a heavy black drape was a pile of parts made of metal

and other synthetic products that Dita recognized was of Ancient origin.

Most of the light in the study came from the hearth located directly opposite of the door. This morning, Wray was dressed in a plain brown shirt and trousers that were of a slightly darker shade. He was standing next to the hearth with a magnifying glass, bent over a tall artifact that looked like some kind of pillar made of a dark gray material similar to stone.

At first, she couldn't see what was so interesting about the stone pillar, but as she walked closer to the hearth, she saw that the pillar slightly glimmered in the dim light. There were faint markings on the pillar. Ancient glyphs. The first word she saw clearly was a series of large glyphs etched near the top of the pillar. Translated, those glyphs spelled out the word for "signpost". At the sound of her footsteps, Wray looked up from his scrutiny of the artifact.

Seeing the question in her eyes, he said, "This is something that I picked up during my travels in a city called Isidora."

"It doesn't take that many knot jumps to reach Isidora," she said. She had been to Isidora two or three times. It was part of the web of cities that included Despina and Valdrada, but it was also known as a gateway city to another web. Unlike Leona which was a center of trading for this particular web of cities, Isidora was a major hub for trading between the webs. Beyond Isidora, was another set of cities which with a completely different set of cultures. Isidora was a busy, modern city. And finding anything by the Ancients in that city would be a rare thing. So it was a little surprising that he would say that he obtained the pillar from that particular city.

"This isn't originally from Isidora," he said, answering her mental question. "While I was there, I had visited one of the city's bazaars. A merchant from a distant city called Zirma had obtained this signpost from a stranger from who knows where. The signpost supposedly came from an anchor indicating directions to a variety of cities. I have no idea where these cities are since I've never heard or read about any of them."

“What does this have to do with where you want to travel?” she asked.

“Probably nothing,” he told her. “I was just looking at this earlier, hoping to see if I can puzzle out some of these Ancient scribbling. Perhaps as a knot finder, you might have more ideas.”

She reached out to touch the etched glyphs. Even without a magnifying glass, she could make out several navigational directions, coordinates that indicated where various cities were located.

“Some of these, I assume, you can read if you know the Ancient dialect. There are numbers indicating distances, although if you never had any training as a knot jumper or knot finder, they won't mean so much to you. The rest of these are, as you have guessed, names for cities.”

“Have you been to any of these cities?”

She shook her head. “Not that I can tell.” She moved her finger down the list of cities on the signpost until she stopped at a peculiar collection of glyphs. These glyphs were crossed out and then a message written next to it. “How strange.”

At her words, Wray turned to peer at what she was indicating. His head came close, almost touching, and she could scent the soap that he had used for his bath. “Yes, I've noticed that before, but I couldn't make heads or tails of it.”

“The word that's crossed out says 'Marozia',” she explained. “That's the name of a city.”

Chapter 4

Below the name of the city that was crossed out on the stone sign post, were a few more glyphs indicating a warning. She said as much to Wray. He looked thoughtful at that particular piece of information.

“Why would people want to warn others off of that particular city? Was the tether to that

city broken?" he asked.

"The warning about Marozia said as much," she confirmed. "It doesn't say anything about the city not existing or anything else. Just that the tethers to it were broken and that no one would be able to reach it with any detour."

"Is there any clue for which where this sign post originated?"

She shook her head. "I have no idea. There's no information about that particular city's name. But I suppose one could extrapolate where the sign post must have originally resided by triangulating all of these coordinates to other cities. Each city would have a peculiar set of connections and one could pinpoint the origin from that. However, that would take a while. And perhaps would not be particularly useful in the end, especially if you are only trying to determine this for curiosity's sake."

Wray shrugged. "I have a bit of curiosity about it, but not enough to really pursue it. There are more important things on my agenda." He finally stepped away from the sign post and motioned towards one of the benches standing on the side of the room where he worked with various devices. "Over here, I have a map."

Dita frowned at the mess on the bench. "What map are you talking about?"

From one of the strange metal devices lying on the bench that appeared to be a small rack, he pulled out a long tube made of gunmetal.

At first glance, the tube appeared to be completely smooth and solid. But upon closer inspection, Dita could see that there was a fine line in the center of the tube where both sides could slide out. Wray took hold of either end of the tube and pulled it apart, revealing a long sheet of paper rolled up inside. The paper itself had a slight yellowish tinge with the texture of papyrus and the sheen of something synthetic. It was a special type of paper that the Ancients called synth wood pulp which was virtually indestructible to all of the current level of technology available in most

cities. Which, of course, begged the question, why keep it in a metal tube if it was going to survive on its own? Unlike the metal tube, it wasn't in danger of rusting.

But despite these questions, she watched closely as Wray took the paper and unrolled it on the bit of free space on the work bench. He took small glass paperweights, the size of a human palm and colored in different patterns, and put them on the corners of the paper to get it to lay flat. Dita peered at what the paper revealed. It had a series of interlocking lines and marks. On the edges, there was a handwritten set of instructions in the Ancient glyphs. Dita frowned as she read the instructions. Apparently it was coded, using a particular key, or a second half of the map.

“What's the matter?” he asked, as he observed her expression.

“It needs a key,” she murmured. “Some kind of decoding key.”

“I figured as much,” he replied. “That was what I had tried to find out in the past couple of months. Fortunately, I know a couple of people who owed me favors who had helped me with that. I have the key in this other canister.” He set aside the gunmetal canister that he had taken out the map from and took out another canister from the rack, this one appearing to be made of polished copper. He opened this canister and pulled out another sheet of paper. But this one did not have the consistency of the one on the map. Instead, it appeared somewhat transparent. This one also had a series of lines on it with writing saying that it required another part in order to be read properly.

“Where did you get that?” Dita found herself asking.

“I originally found the map in an antiquities shop in Leona,” he said. “It was a curiosity for the owner who only knew a smattering of the Ancient tongue. He told me that it was a piece of art made by the Ancients in a style called avante guard. But I knew almost immediately that it was only part of the map after I saw the writing and recognized the glyph for map.”

“And where did you get the second half or the key for decoding it?”

“I was searching hard for it,” he admitted. “I assumed that the second half of the key might

be in Leona because the shop keeper had told me that this originally came in a set of two that was owned by an old man who was a scholar at the local university. That scholar had donated his stash to the antiquities shop and the shop owner had decided to sell them separately in order to gain more profit. The other half had been sold to a socialite in that city about a year prior to when I had bought this half. But when I went to talk with the socialite to see if I could obtain the other half of the map, I found out that the socialite had died in a town house fire and that all of her belongings had supposedly burned up with the house.”

“So you thought that you would never find the other half of the map. Why didn't you immediately try to sell it off if you thought that you wouldn't be able to use it?”

He smiled as he indicated everything around him. “Just look around you. Do I look like someone who would immediately get rid of something?”

“Is that a hint that you are actually a severe hoarder?” she replied. “Are there other rooms in your house, that I haven't seen where you've stashed everything else?”

“I don't keep everything in my house,” he said slyly. And she thought he implied that he had other houses or buildings where he stored everything. That wasn't completely inconceivable. Sometimes one's home wasn't the safest place to store one's valuables, especially if one lived in a questionable neighborhood. And in Valdrada, pretty much every neighborhood was questionable. “Anyways, I had already spent a considerable sum to purchase the first part of the map and I wasn't in any particular hurry to sell it off. But then, while I was visiting another shop in Leona, I spotted this canister.” He indicated the copper container where he had taken the transparent second map out. “It was stashed in the back of a stationary shop, in a box filled with remaindered papers. The owner of the stationary shop was completely ignorant of Ancient writing and it was relatively easy for me to convince him to sell it to me for a few credits.”

“Lucky for you.” She reached out to help him put the transparent second map on top of the

first map. Their hands accidentally brushed when they both reached for one of the paperweights to help lay it flat. She felt what seemed to be a zap of electricity against her skin at the contact, but he didn't appear to be aware that anything unusual had happened. Thinking that it was probably something strange on her part, she concentrated on looking at the two maps. The transparent map had a different feel than the other map. It had a slick, almost soft feel to it. Dita recognized it as another material that the Ancients had developed, called aero-plastic. That kind of material was very similar to another kind of plastic that one of the cities, Zirma, produced in large quantities. The large quantities made Zirma plastic very cheap and perhaps the reason why the stationary shopkeeper had sold the second map to Wray for very little money. Most people would not have been able to tell the difference between Zirma plastic and the aero-plastic made by the Ancients. However, Dita had had contact with aero-plastic before, in the form of emergency ration packaging in some Ancient designed vessels for jumping the knots. Aero-plastic had more give and was softer than Zirma plastic which was made from coarse polymers.

“It's really interesting how both of these maps line up,” he said as he looked down at the maps. “You can see how the addition of the key makes all of these connections become apparent.”

Dita nodded with that assessment. With the transparent second map on top, one could see the lines and markings from the lower map showing through. And with the addition of the second map, markings began appearing that weren't immediately apparent when one looked at the maps separately. She recognized that the connections must have been tethers that connected the points, or anchors. Several of the anchors had many knots radiating outward. The number of knots were far more numerous than those that currently existed in the known web of cities that people knew were connected.

“I tried to match this up with all the other existing maps that I could get a hold of,” he continued, “but nothing matched. And the writing on these maps don't help much either. I assumed

these,” and he pointed to the glyphs that appeared at each anchor on the map, “were names of the cities, but most of them were ones that I recognized.”

“I see.”

“The ones that I recognized are here.” He pointed to three cities on the map. Zirna, Hume and Lehmann. They were located at the corner of the map with Zirna possessing a connection to one of the unrecognizable cities. “We could easily get to Zirna, but as of now, I don't know of anyone who would know how to get to this other unknown city that is connected to a vast web of other cities.”

“I don't either,” she admitted. “And I've been to Zirna for a few times. But I didn't pay much attention then because I was busy with my work.” Too busy with work, she thought back. The last time she had been to Zirna, she had been traveling with a knot jumping crew, including her former employer. They had to get something delivered and her employer at the time had been twitchy and short tempered the entire time until the package was finally delivered. At the time, she had wondered about the package and why her employer was acting so strangely. But later, she realized that that had been one of the early signs that things were going downhill.

He pointed to one of the strange cities located on the rest of the map. According to the Ancient glyphs, the city was called Armilla. “I need to get here.”

“It's going to be tricky, if not suicidal if the link from Zirna to the rest of the cities doesn't really exist. Or if the tether connecting the known web to these cities is broken,” she replied.

“I know. That's why I pulled you out of the dungeons of the Hall of Justice,” he said. He looked up at her with narrowed eyes. “Unless you want to go back there.”

And face a certain death? He knew the answer to that, she thought. Despite the fact that there were certain risks traveling the tethers and definite risks, especially, if one were to attempt to travel a frayed or even broken tether, those were better odds at survival than what she had faced

back at the dungeons of the Hall of Justice. The prosecutors who roamed those halls had very little sympathy for anyone already branded a murderer. Especially a murderer with all of the evidence pointing against her.

“So you want to go to this place called Armilla,” she said. “What do you want to do there?”

“There is a person who supposedly lives in that city who knows about the text that I am searching for,” he replied. “I found the information about this person in an Ancient text that is located in the university library here in Valdrada.”

“If this person is named in an Ancient text,” she said, “it is with most certainty that that particular person is no longer alive.” The only Ancient texts that survived in the current web of cities, and particularly in Valdrada, were texts that existed before the Great Rending which was several centuries ago. And while the Ancients were known for their engineering prowess in creating powerful creatures, she did not think that they had been able to conquer the problem of aging and death to the point that any of their creations could live for several centuries. She herself, as a knot finder, was the product of Ancient genetic engineering, but she knew of no knot finder or knot jumper who ever lived past two hundred and fifty years.

“I had thought of that,” he said with a sigh. “It was one of the first thoughts in my mind, really. But then I reasoned that this person, who was called a Deputy of the City, probably passed on his knowledge to someone else in his profession. So we wouldn't have to really look for that particular person mentioned in the book. Just someone who was descended from him, so to speak.”

She could think of a million reasons why that particular line of reasoning wouldn't work. For one, what if everyone in that person's family had died out or if the line of people who would have inherited the knowledge had died, either from old age, by accident, or more malicious reasons? What if that person had never bothered to pass on the knowledge? Or if the information that he had gleaned from that particular book was not entirely accurate or completely false? But she did not

mention any of these things. He seemed particularly animated when he talked about his particular theory. And he was willing to break a murderer out of a dungeon and a death sentence to try to prove his particular theory right.

He didn't appear to notice her thoughtful silence. Instead, he continued, "We should start out to Armilla as soon as possible. I had already sent out a note to one of the local grocers to send food and emergency supplies to us as soon as possible."

Chapter 5

The supplies came faster than Dita had anticipated. A messenger came to Wray's house just after the noon day meal to announce that the shipment of goods that he had ordered had arrived at the anchor point in the center of the city. For the rest of that morning, Dita had tolerated her new patron's elaborations on his plans. She figured that she would do whatever he wanted, whether it was to simply go to the next city or to some uncharted universe, and if things didn't pan out, it wasn't any skin off her back.

Since she had no belongings with her when she had come to Valdrada, it was a simple matter for her to pack a bag with new changes of clothes that Wray had provided. Wray himself didn't particularly seem preoccupied with packing either. Apparently he had already prepared ahead of time for such contingencies. He already had two bags ready, one of his clothes and the other with various books and devices that he had claimed was necessary for his work.

Before heading out back to Valdrada's anchor, he had put on his cloak and hood again. She was given a coat of her own, a black overcoat with silver buttons. The overcoat did not have a hood.

Instead, she had been given a hat with a long brim, made in the style that Despinan sailors often wore during rainy days on the sea. Before going out, she had tied up her hair and coiled it into the hat so that on first glance, one might mistake her as a teenaged boy assisting his master.

The sky in Valdrada was overcast with dark, heavy clouds when they finally left Wray's house. The air smelled damp and heavy, too, an indication that rain was soon to come. In fact, it started raining once they entered the underground complex to Valdrada's anchor. It didn't particularly surprise Dita. Valdrada was often overcast as it was located a few miles away from the coast and was located in a strange zone where hot and cold air mixed, often to spectacular results. She wasn't particularly sorry to leave Valdrada, either. It held bitter and cold memories of her childhood here.

Someone had set all the supplies that Wray had ordered beside his vessel. They spent the next half hour loading everything into the ship's cargo hold at the back. Dita estimated that there was probably enough food and other supplies to last them for three weeks of traveling. She had peeked into one of the crates and discovered that most of the food that Wray had ordered were in rations of dry and canned food that were easy to store and remain preserved. A sensible decision, she thought, especially if he was planning on visiting strange cities where it was even unknown about whether or not they would have a habitable atmosphere.

Once everything was loaded, they settled themselves into the cockpit with Wray busy making notations in a notebook made of plain paper with a pencil. He was not looking up at the view screen, as he was not a knot jumper, but he left everything to her.

Before leaving his house, they had plotted a possible route to Armilla. It would involve knot jumping to several cities before reaching Zirma. And from Zirma, they would determine if a tether existed to Maurilia, the "closest" city in the collection of unknown cities in the Ancients' map that Wray had obtained from the antiquities dealer. Dita scanned the controls and made the necessary adjustments to their first jump from Valdrada.

Several hours later, Dita finally piloted the ship to a city called Zora.

It wasn't always necessary to have a knot jumper along with a knot finder piloting a ship, but it always made things easier. But with just herself, she had to make sure that she saw all of the controls, and not just the ones that a trained knot finder would usually pay attention to. The additional work, unfortunately, sapped a lot of energy, even if she had come from a line that the Ancients had specifically bred to do the job.

But, she thought, she wasn't completely exhausted. She had had those days when she had been completely exhausted and then she had been forced to make yet another jump. On those days, she was probably worse off than a normal person who had a bad case of the travel sickness. But she still did her job.

However, it did not appear that Wray was in any hurry to have her jump to yet another city. Instead, he had remarked that he had the curiosity to visit this particular city since he had never traveled to it before. Dita had been to Zora once before, but it had been a brief visit and she had had nothing but brief impressions of the few hours that she had spent there.

There were several other ships parked on Zora's anchor platform. Some of those ships appeared to be largely cargo vessels being readied to deliver goods from one city to another. There were a large number of personnel coming to and from the side tunnels leading to the anchor platform. The Zorans had a peculiar look about them—they were short, dark skinned, and quite stocky. Most of them wore a peculiar kind of costume that Dita recognized as Zoran fashion. The costume consisted of a loose fitting suit, that could be of any color, that was edged in a long feathery fringe of fabric in the same color. The shoes that the Zorans wore were made of some kind of animal leather and dyed a variety of colors. These shoes curled up at the toes and ended in points like a scorpion's tail. The Zorans also wore a small red cap on top of their heads, pinned in place by metal

combs. None of the Zorans paid much attention to them, which wasn't unexpected. Dita knew that Zora was one of the trading hubs in the web of known cities and many different people often came through this anchor on their travels.

After packing a few essentials into cloth packs, one of which Wray handed to her to carry, they left the ship and headed out to see what the city of Zora offered.

When they stepped out of the underground complex that housed Zora's anchor, Dita was almost overwhelmed by the bright noises and sights. It was day in Zora, the sun beating down in the way that summer time light did. The entrance to the underground complex was located at the end of an alleyway in the middle of a city that had built up around and over it. The alley itself was filled with merchant stands and people. They had walked straight until a street market.

Dita found herself almost immediately mesmerized by the wares on a nearby stand. The stand itself was no more than a tent of brown and blue fabric draped over a wooden frame. A small makeshift table was set up underneath the tent with a homespun white cloth draped over it. On the table were the wares, containers the size and shape of small unguent jars that women often used to store face creams and perfumes. But while Dita recalled that those particular jars were mostly made of ceramic painted in rather drab colors, these jars were as bright as polished jewels. Red, yellow, orange, green. There were even some jars that appeared to have been blown out of iridescent glass. She gawked at the wares, wondering what sort of materials the jars were made of since it was nothing that she had seen before. Perhaps the people in Zora had perfected a new ceramic firing technique. If so, it wouldn't be too long before such objects filtered into the other cities.

But she couldn't stand around too long to look at them. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Wray move forward through the crowd. She hurried to keep up, not because she was afraid that she would get lost, but that he would get into trouble. No one would pay much attention to someone as bedraggled as she was. But a rich man, even if he did not look quite the part, had a certain air about

him that would draw in pickpockets. And if the rich man was also from a different city, that would make him even more of a target.

“It looks like it's market day,” he remarked when she finally caught up with him. “If I were a merchant, I would be rubbing my hands in glee.”

“I don't know about that,” she murmured as they passed a stand selling small furry toys. “Most of this stuff here on Zora appear to be things that you could find elsewhere. Or at least be able to fake with some semblance on a much cheaper scale.”

He glanced at her, his dark eyes suddenly sharp. “You know quite a bit about Zora?”

“Probably as much as any other knot finder, which is not much,” she admitted. “I've only been here once.”

“Once?”

“It was a job,” she replied flatly.

He opened his mouth as if he wanted to question her about the job, but then he shut it, deciding to concentrate his attention on the activity around them. After a few minutes of weaving through the crowded alley, they eventually came to an intersection that turned off into a larger avenue. Some of the stands tapered off until the makeshift tents were replaced with more sturdy awnings that were extensions of the brick shops that lined the street. Next to the last stand which sold small mirrored trinkets, there was a cafe where the locals sat around on padded chairs, smoking something that was boiling inside a glass stand.

“What is that?” asked Wray.

She shrugged. “I have no idea. I never ventured this far when I came to this city. We didn't stop too long so all I was able to do was to buy a snack back in one of those stands back there.”

The merchant for the trinket stand, a short mustached man wearing a bright red vest, motioned towards Wray. When he turned his head to look at the sudden movement, the merchant

waved one of his mirrored trinkets in his face. It looked like a cube with its corners cut off. Every other face was a mirror with the rest made of some kind of dark glass that gleamed with the light.

“Pretty trinket for the pretty lady?” The merchant was speaking in the common, Ancient dialect, but his accent was atrocious. It had the thick long vowels that characterized the native language of Zora. Nonetheless, his broken grammar was still understandable to even strangers such as Dita.

“No thanks,” said Wray. He turned away to walk off.

At the dismissal, the merchant wasn't deterred. Since he couldn't convince Wray, he turned to Dita. “See how it shines? Very pretty. Pretty for a pretty lady.”

Aside Timeline

Chapter 1

“What have you got there?”

Mendel looked up to see his advisor, Bell, standing a few feet away with some kind of artifact in his claw. Bell was the supervisor who was in charge of the research group that was supposed to be examining the ruins of the city of Beersheba for any kind of technology and information that may be valuable in their studies of the Ancients. So far, they had uncovered a great library located near the

center of the city. Several of Bell's other students, like Haldane and Gamow, had already started to clear out the library by carting off all the volumes in small wheelbarrows to a nearby storage unit. The plan was to sort everything on site and then take the most valuable volumes back to the university library.

“It's a book of some sort,” Mendel said in a fast clip. “I think it's some kind of instructional tome. But I'm not quite sure. It doesn't look like any of the other books made by the Ancients.”

Bell tucked the artifact, which Mendel decided was probably the Ancient equivalent of a letter opener, into his waist pouch which held other artifacts that he was collecting on this most recent sojourn, and then moved closer to see the book that Mendel held out. He opened the cover and then caressed the first page with a claw, his antennae waving in thoughtfulness.

“It certainly is unusual,” said Bell. “I'm sure one of the material scientists back at the university will have a field day with this. It feels a little like plant pulp, like what some of the later Ancient books were made of when the synth trade fell apart after the Great Rending. But it's smoother than that. Almost elastic. But I think this is organic material like the plant pulp, not something synthetic. Besides, these words are printed in ink.

Together Mendel and Bell read the title page. What made Mendel think that it was some kind of technical guide was the first word that said 'encyclopedia.' But as he read further, he realized that this was not so. In the Ancient glyphs, the title page, in its entirety, said “Encyclopedia of Future Fairy Tales. Collected from Several Membranes.” The word 'membrane' was a very odd word. In the cockroach language, 'membrane' meant a type of tissue that covered an organ. But the Ancients had very different connotations of the word membrane. Sometimes, depending on the context of the work, it might mean something relating to the universe. Parallel universes.

Beersheba used to be connected to other parallel universes. In fact, it might still be connected to parallel universes. At the center of this Ancient city, there was an underground

complex which the Ancients called the anchor. There were knots or archways that led to tethers that connected Beersheba to other cities. Cities, that were in fact, exactly like Beersheba. Except they were in other universes. Other time lines. Perhaps there was another city elsewhere, Mendel mused, where he was traveling the tethers, having an adventure jumping the tethers instead of doing the tedious work of uncovering artifacts in the ruins of what used to be a great civilization.

“I wonder what they mean by future fairy tales,” Bell wondered aloud. “Do they really mean contemporary fairy tales that people made up, after the old fairy tales? Or fairy tales in which the setting is supposedly in the future? Or even more implausibly, fairy tales that people could see in the future?”

“Who knows,” Mendel replied. “The Ancients were a weird bunch. We're their creations, after all, and we still don't understand them. I mean, just look at their track record. They used a lowly insect and they made our species through a lot of genetic bioengineering. Maybe, with their skills in advanced technology, they developed some way to see into the future, too.”

“If they could see into the future, they must have seen their fall and decline,” said Bell. “The Great Rending. If they did, surely they would have tried to stop it.”

“Or perhaps the Great Rending was inevitable.” Mendel decided to flip the page. It appeared to be a table of contents listing all the stories in the book. The titles were unusual and somewhat inexplicable to Mendel. The Magic Donkey. The Girl Who Could Not Cry. The Haunted Walkman. The Evil Snowplows and the Flares of Doom. What the hell was a walkman anyway? Or a snowplow, for that matter? And what was a donkey? They were probably all Ancient concepts that lowly cockroaches like Mendel and his ilk would never understand.

“It's interesting,” Bell said finally. “But we really don't have time to look at this too closely right now. Tell you what. Just put it in your pouch and we'll look at it later. We have a tight schedule and I want to get the corner room in the north cataloged by the end of the day.”

Mendel wiggled his antennae in acquiescence. “Yes, sir. I’ll get right to it.” He promptly put the book in his own pouch and headed off to the room in question to start work.

Later that evening, after the fourth meal and everyone, including his advisor, had gone to bed, Mendel took out the small light ball that his engineer friend, Faraday, had given him on his birthday. After a few precise presses of some hidden buttons on the metal ball that was otherwise smooth, it began levitating and glowing. Mendel moved his claw, directing the glowing ball to hover just above his head.

He was sitting in his little nest that he made in the room that he had chosen to live in during the research team’s tenure at Beersheba. It was dark out and quiet. Perfect time for sleeping. But Mendel didn’t feel particularly tired. He felt wide awake. And he was curious. Out of his pouch, he pulled out the book of fairy tales that he had found earlier at the site of ruins that he and his advisor had been investigating during the day. He thought that his advisor had forgotten all about his find since after the initial discovery, Bell never mentioned it again.

Carefully, Mendel opened the cover and read the table of contents again, puzzling over the words. Finally, he decided to pick one of the stories at random and start reading in order to figure out exactly what the Ancients were talking about. The Girl with the Red Coat. He hoped by reading the story, he would figure out what a coat was.

Chapter 2

The snow was as soft as down as Elena made her way down the hill to the valley. It was also as sharp as a pin as the cold ice stung her cheeks. She tugged her scarf further up her face to protect

her skin. But the wind that had suddenly sprung up wasn't particularly calm. She found it difficult to navigate her way down to her destination, particularly since the wind was trying its hardest to blow through her cloak.

It was long minutes before she finally reached the bottom of the hill. She looked back at the faint outcropping of rocks and pebbles that littered their way down the hillside, forming a sort of path trickling down to the ground below. There were a few trees on the hill, most of them lining the top ridge like a line of spindly soldiers with thin arms outstretched to the heavy gray sky above. It was light out, but there was no sun.

Down in the ravine, there was a little less snow since the ridge above protected the ground below from much of the overbearing weather. Most of the ground was littered with more stones and pebbles, an indication that at one time, the place had been where a stream had run. Elena would not have been surprised if a small stream ran there during the spring time. But she had no time to really think about such things. She was on a search for something. And she needed to find it before anyone else did.

Elena considered herself a traveler. A traveler in exile. She came from a country that was a few days north, by carriage ride, and where people built small wood huts and cottages next to forests because they thought that the trees were actually protective nature spirits. Back in her home country, Elena considered herself to be a bit of an herbswoman and sometimes a hedge witch. She mostly made potions and ointments to heal the sick or to make charms for harmless things like good luck in harvesting or childbirth.

But then a rumor got around that she was actually an evil sorceress in disguise, giving people in town secret evil eyes. The rumors had gotten wild and people stopped coming to see her. She knew the signs and knew that things would only get worse. So she did her preparations and left, only to make her home just outside of her country, in the wilderness. She had lived in a small lonely

hut for about a month until a strange messenger, wearing the livery of a kingdom far away, a kingdom so far away that she could hardly conceive of the distance, had stayed at her hut in route to his destination that was to an important official living in her former home country. The messenger told her a story about something strange. An enchanted girl wearing a red coat who was supposed to grant wishes.

From then on, the story had nagged at her. For her discrete questioning of the messenger, she found out that this enchanted girl supposedly lived in a cave not far from her own hut. But the messenger warned her that the enchanted girl, although appearing to be quite harmless, could also be quite dangerous. He had heard of seasoned warriors and brave adventurers who had all met their doom with the enchanted girl. The messenger, however, was completely clueless as to how or why these warriors and adventurers met their doom.

But the promise of having her wish be granted was an irresistible lure. Elena was cautious, though, so she took her time gathering as much information about this story as possible. But then, when she housed a second messenger in her hut, she heard the tale that the prince in her home country was preparing to do a search for the enchanted girl so that he could possess her himself. After all, a prince in possession of a being who could grant his every wish and whim was going to be a power to be reckoned with.

So with that news, Elena decided to start her search. And that was how she made her way to the ravine. It was quiet and it didn't appear that anyone had been there recently. And if the enchanted girl with the red coat lived there, Elena reasoned that it would be difficult to obtain anything of use in the desolate countryside, except with magic.

The ravine wound its way along the hill like a long lazy snake, finally ending against a sheer cliff wall made of solid granite. At the sight of the wall, Elena gave a small sigh of frustration. She had everything right. She was sure that the ravine that she had found was the same ravine that the

first messenger had told her that the girl with the red coat was first sighted.

It was then that the snow began to fall in earnest. The sudden snow was so thick that she could hardly see in front of her own face. It would be foolhardy to try to travel now, she thought. She would be able to follow the path of the ravine back where she came from, but once she climbed the hill again, she would be lost without the sight of particular landmarks. It would be safer to stay where she was until the snow let up. Assuming, of course, that she could find or make some sort of shelter.

But it was nothing but the cliff face and other stone debris. Elena shivered and leaned against rock face, thinking that perhaps she should not have been so foolhardy to immediately set out on this journey. The sky had been dark gray for several days already. Snow, particularly heavy snow, was inevitable.

Suddenly the stone at her back gave way and with a yell, she fell back, falling onto the ground. Before, all she had seen was smooth rock. But a doorway had materialized without a sound, leading her into a dark and dry cave. For a moment, Elena stared up at the darkness overhead, catching her breath. She was surprised, and perhaps a little alarmed, but she soon realized that the strange occurrence was probably related to what she was looking for. After a moment of thinking this over, she got up and dusted herself off.

The interior of the cave was dark except for a bit of golden glow at the end of a long tunnel. Instinctively, Elena took a step towards the light. A second step later, she heard a grinding sound behind her. She whipped her head around and saw that the opening had suddenly closed back up. Now, there was no way back but forward.

As she continued to walk into the tunnel, she began to scent something unusual in the air. It was a flowery scent that reminded her of summers back in her childhood in her home country. Lavender, she finally decided. When she had been a child, her family lived near a lavender farm

where the flowers were harvested and eventually sent to a perfumer in the city where the essence of lavender would be processed and eventually be used in perfumes and soaps. During her childhood, she remembered that her mother would go out shopping at the market and buy some of the dried lavender flowers to help make scented pouches that would be placed with the linens. As a result, the bedclothes would be scented with lavender, and it made her think of home, warmth and comfort.

But her surroundings were completely incongruous with the scent. And her brain told her that it could well be a trick. The messenger had warned her that the enchanted girl with the red coat was dangerous. Perhaps this was how she lured in her victims. By making them think of home with whatever arsenal that she had, including tricking the sense of smell.

After walking a few hundred paces, Elena soon came across the source of the light. It was a small oil lamp cast in bronze. The oil in the lamp appeared to be scented with lavender. The lamp sat on the ground beside a small door that was perhaps came as high as her hip. It was a small wooden door, made of planks held together by rusted wrought iron. There was a wrought iron ring that served as a knob and there was no keyhole. Elena took hold of the lamp and with her free hand, tugged on the iron ring. The door easily swung away, leading into further, inky darkness.

Elena ended up crawling through the threshold into the next room. The door led into a wide cavern that was as large as a royal banquet hall, or at least what she imagined to be a banquet hall since she had only heard stories about the prince's castle in her homeland, and the roof above her head was rounded out into an egg shaped dome of gleaming brown rock. In the room itself, there was a small fire in the center where someone had set a spit with what looked like a rabbit roasting over it. Someone in a dark cloak was turning the spit slowly so that the rabbit could cook evenly. Bits of fat dropped into the fire, letting out occasional sizzling sounds. But there was something very strange about the fire. There was no smoke.

Around the edges of the room were benches, at knee height. But they didn't appear to be the

sort of benches that people would sit on. Instead, all of these benches were occupied with things. Books. Pots and pans. Various household accoutrements. And other bizarre objects that Elena could not even begin to put names to. The only entrance to this room was the small door from which she had entered.

Elena finally walked forward to see if the figure at the smokeless spit would have any information about what this particular place was. But as she came closer and saw the shade of the cloak in the fire, her heart beat faster. The cloak was red. This was the enchanted girl who wore the red coat.

“Hello?” Elena said tentatively.

The figure continued to turn the spit, but the figure's head moved slightly at the sound of her voice. She could not see the face in the shadow of the cloak's hood, but she thought she could detect the glint of an eye.

“Good evening.” The voice of the figure was that of a girl, perhaps about seven to ten. Her accent was strange as if she had learned the language from some place far from here. Since Elena had never had the chance to meet foreigners while she lived in her home country and had only met two messengers so far while she was in exile, it was hard for her to place the accent. Perhaps the girl was from the south, Elena decided. That was as good a place as any. It was known that many sorcerers and witches came from the south. But then again, the girl was enchanted. So all of this could simply be an illusion.

“A good evening to you,” Elena replied. “I am a traveler. And I stumbled here.”

“You were looking for me.”

“Yes.” Elena thought it would be a good idea to be truthful. If she lied, the girl would probably know immediately. And most people did not like liars. It would not be good to anger someone who could probably kill her in an instant. After all, Elena was only a hedge witch. Her

knowledge of spells was only limited to the simple.

“There are many people who are looking for me. Few find me. Perhaps because there are only a few people to whom I would let myself be found.”

Elena just nodded at that, unsure of what to say to that comment.

“Come sit by the fire,” the girl invited. “You are just in time for dinner.”

Elena moved closer and sat at the fire, opposite to the girl. Even from this new angle, Elena could not see her face. But then again, she mused, did she really want to? Perhaps the girl was cursed to look like a monster. She had heard of such spells before, even though she had only thought they were all confined to fairy tales told to children in order to frighten them into behaving.

The fire was light and it felt warm. But even up close, there was no smoke. It was as if it was just a collection of bright flames that were an illusion. The rabbit cooking in the flames, up close, appeared not to be a rabbit at all. The ears were short stubs that ended in points and the creature appeared to have three eyes. It smelled like cooking rabbit, though. Another monster. But it was dead, so Elena did not feel any alarm. Just slight distaste.

The girl, after a moment, raised a hand, a slim white thing, and something from one of the benches lining the edge of the room, flew into the air and came to her hand. It was a large knife. She raised her other hand and dishes flew to it. Then she began to cut slices of the deformed rabbit onto the dishes and then she offered one plate to Elena. Elena decided not to complain about not having utensils, so she merely picked up a piece of the meat with the tips of her fingers and took a bite, even though she was not particularly hungry. It did not taste of rabbit. Instead, it reminded her of the bear meat that hunters occasionally sold in the market during the fall, when it was easy to hunt for bear.

“Thank you for the food,” Elena said. “This is delicious.”

The girl nodded and ate some of her own food. When her plate was half empty, she said, “So

tell me why you're here.”

“I heard about you when a messenger visited my hut,” Elena began. “He said that you could grant wishes.”

“And you thought that I could grant you a wish?” The girl laughed, but it wasn't a particularly pleasant laughter. It made something cold dribble down her spine. “I don't do everything for free, you know.”

“It wouldn't make sense to do things for free, I agree.” As she said that Elena thought back to all the fairy tales that she had heard when she was a young girl. There was one about the mad woman who had murdered her employer and was about to be put to death by the magistrate. But then she was saved by a stranger who happened to be a dark sorcerer. The dark sorcerer said that for her life, she was to work for him. Elena had never really heard the ending to that story for one reason or another, but everyone knew that dark sorcerers were mostly evil. And if they wanted you to do something for them in return for a favor, the conditions were always complicated and not particularly easy.

“If you want me to grant you a wish, you must give me a boon.” The girl's voice had turned low, almost sing-song. The girl picked up another piece of the meat on her plate and ate it with a loud smacking sound of her lips, as if she was particularly savoring the thought that soon she would gain another boon from a hapless person. “The type of boon I would ask of you would depend on the wish that you make.”

“I see.” Elena put down her own dish. “I don't particularly see the problem there. A small wish, I presume, would require a small boon. A big one would correspondingly require a large boon.”

“That is correct,” said the girl. “And if you are unable to give me the boon after I grant your wish, your life will be forfeit.”

Elena nodded. Such things were de regieure in fairy tales. Someone's life was always on the

line. It might as well be hers, considering the way her luck had been going lately.

“So what is your wish?”

Instead of answering the girl directly, Elena said, “First, I want to know some things. Are you a sorceress? They say that you're an enchanted girl. But usually enchanted girls can't really do anything unless it is specific to their curse.”

“That is not a question that I can answer.”

“A question that you can't answer or won't answer?”

“Both. You do not need to know the answer to that question. The only person who would need to know would be the person destined to break the curse.”

“And I am not that person?”

“No.”

“All right. Then could you answer me at least one question before I tell you what I want?”

“It would depend on the question.”

Elena supposed that was the best acceptance that she could get. “Do you know that the prince of the country I used to live in is coming for you?”

She could see the movement of the girl's head as she turned to stare into the fire. After a moment, the girl said, “Yes, I know he is trying to find me. But he won't.”

“You have the power to hide yourself from the prince? I've heard that he has a counsel of sorcerers who all do his bidding. He could find you easily if he really tries.”

“Enough with your questions,” the girl suddenly said. “Tell me your wish or leave.”

Elena took in a deep breath and for a moment, glanced around her at the dark cave where the enchanted girl lived. In a way, the enchanted girl's life was very similar to her own. In hiding. In solitude. It was a tough and lonely life. Not a particularly happy way to live. At that moment, she resolved to do something about it, as soon as she got out of this enchanted cliff side.

Then she looked back at the cloaked girl and said her wish.

Chapter 3

Elena awoke at the top of the hill, lying in a drift of snow. Her entire body ached and for a moment, she couldn't recall why she was there. But as the aches in her body crystallized into one place, she realized that the enchanted girl must have transported her there by magic.

After she had told the girl her wish, she could sense the girl smiling even though her face had been hidden beneath the hood and most of the cave shadowed.

"I see. You have surprised me," the girl had said. "For one such as you, I would have guessed that you would have wished for something different."

"What did you think I would wish for?" Elena had found herself asking the girl.

"Most women like to wish for beauty or eternal youth. Some of them wish to find their soul mates, the love of their lives."

"Those of things can end badly," Elena had remarked. "Especially if you don't put any conditions on those particular wishes."

"Very true. You seem very wise for someone like yourself."

Elena had shrugged at that. She didn't particularly think of herself as wise. Just someone who knew the consequences of bad decisions. She certainly wasn't going to make the obvious mistakes. She had a pathological desire to see herself happy, functional, and alive. Some of those superficial wishes could be turned on themselves, causing the wisher a lot of pain.

"So in that case, you surprised me," the girl had said again. "And you are lucky in that you

find me in a good mood today. And I think that it was probably a good choice on my part to make sure you eventually found me today.”

“What sort of boon will I have to give you if you are to grant my wish?” Elena had asked.

“That is an interesting question.” At that moment, the girl had set aside her own dish and was contemplating the smokeless flames again. She had crossed her arms so that her hands were hidden in the sleeves of her cloak. “There are few things that I actually need. But one of the things that I do need would be a vial of dragon blood.”

“Dragon blood?” Elena had frowned at that. “I thought dragons only existed in fairy tales.” She had seen creatures that people had called dragons, but in reality, they were really just large lizards. Large dumb lizards. She had always assumed that they had been used as inspiration in the fairy tales. “Why would you need dragon blood?”

“You don't need to know what I use the dragon blood for,” she had replied. “All you need to know is that you need to get it for me.”

“If I obtain the dragon blood for you,” Elena had replied, “will I be able to find you again? The messenger said that sometimes your location changes. I only found you by chance, I think.”

“Nothing is by chance. Find the dragon blood for me. By the next full moon. Or your life will be mine.”

Elena had really wanted the wish to be granted. But not at the cost of her life. She had hoped that the boon was not too hard to grant. So how was she to be able to accomplish this if she didn't believe that dragons existed? So she asked the girl this.

The girl had laughed. This time, it was tinged with dark amusement as if she knew that Elena was going to ask that particular question. “Does it matter if you think dragons exist or not? As long as you collect the blood and give it to me, I will consider the boon repaid. But I will give you a hint. There is a village on the eastern coast. There, you will find those who know about dragons.”

On that note, the girl had stood up from her seat on the floor. She was probably as tall as a seven to ten year old child. She had raised her hands, declaring that her time was done and she had fallen into a deep sleep. And so that was how she ended up in the snow, outside of the cave and the mysterious cliff.

Elena did not remember if she had said that she would grant her her wish. But just to be safe, she thought with some irony, she would probably have to journey to the village on the east coast to get that so-called dragon's blood whether the wish was granted or not. She had the feeling that having the enchanted girl see her in the first place was already a favor that had been given to her. If she did not find the dragon's blood, who knew what would happen to her.

Besides, this was real life. Rules could be broken. If the enchanted girl was fickle, she might even decide to kill her even after she decided to do everything correctly.

Elena shut her eyes again and focused on the pain that she felt. It was a thick kind of pain that seem to easy through her blood like treacle. Carefully, she tried to trace it back to its origin. When she opened her eyes again, she lifted her right arm and pulled back the sleeve of her cloak. On her arm, etched into her skin, was a sign that had not been there before. The sign was dark and black as if someone had written on her skin with a black gall ink and it curled and twisted like smoke.

The sign from the enchanted girl, Elena thought. The creature had branded her with something that could probably tell everyone that she had made a deal with her. Sort of like someone who had made a deal with the devil. But the devil didn't exist, did he? And if he did, was he able to appear in different forms, like that of an enchanted girl?

The sound of hooves on the snow covered ground broke into her mental musings. Elena dropped her hand back to her side and stayed silent and still as the hooves drew closer. In the forest, there were few people. Some of them were travelers like herself. Others were messengers. Some were hunters and yet others were poachers. But there was always the possibility that it could be

someone that she did not want to see. Like a soldier or one of the prince's men. She had heard stories about such men and what they would do to women on their own.

The hoof beats came closer and then passed her without slowing down or stopping. Good. Apparently she had been covered in enough snow that any hint of her presence was obscured from anyone passing that way. As the hoof beats became fainter and fainter, she finally felt the courage to sit up and examine her surroundings in more detail.

She sat on top of the hill from where she had walked down to the ravine. The enchanted girl's magic had placed her near the hollow of a dead tree, behind an enormous drift of snow which blocked out most of the wind. Elena finally got up and slowly made her way back to the small hut where she called home. But just as she stepped out of the copse of trees that had been sheltering her unconscious body, she saw something unusual on the ground.

It was a book. The book was one of those large tomes bound in leather and made of vellum. The edges of the pages were gilded. But there was no title. It had fallen open revealing the pages within. They were written in an unusual language, a language that she could not decipher. With a quick glance around her to reassure herself that there was no one else about, she picked up the book and tucked it under her arm. And she made her way back home.

It was evening when she finally stepped through the threshold of her home with the book. The hut was cold, since she had put out the fire in the hearth in the morning and had left for most of the day. Relighting the fire was one of the first things she did after she put the book on her kitchen table. Once the fire was going again, she put on a pot of porridge to boil and then sat back down to examine the book.

The glyphs in the book still did not make any sense. But as she flipped through the pages, she came across an unusual panel that seemed to glisten in black. There were no glyphs on that particular page.

Before she could examine it any further, there was a heavy knock on her door. The sudden sound jerked her away from the book, her heart in her throat at the surprise. Another messenger? She thought. She got out of her chair and started to walk toward the door when the hard knock came again. A loud masculine voice accompanied the knock.

“Open up! This is the Royal Guard.”

She gasped and rushed back to her kitchen table, her mind in a myriad of directions. She wasn't even living in her home country any more, so technically, the Royal Guard had absolutely no jurisdiction at her new home. However, she was also living in a neutral, no-man's zone where many exiles and neer-do-wells hid out. And because there wasn't an official force of any kind that patrolled this area, protecting its residents, that also meant that if anyone else wanted to do anything, including the Royal Guard if they happened to be in the area, then no one would be able to do anything about it. But while this also ran through Elena's mind, the thought that was foremost was that she had to get away. She had escape. She didn't think about it, but the first thing she grabbed was the tome that she had found in the forest. Then she took her cloak and was about to take the only escape available, the window in the back room.

The knock came again and then there was a loud crack as the Royal Guard kicked the door in. Three men in the royal livery of white, red, and black, stormed into the hut. One of the men immediately took hold of Elena before she could run. She put up a token struggle, but it was clear that these men were intent on catching her. The second man searched the hut, pushing things over and spilling supplies onto the floor without regard for the organization. The third man immediately went to take the book from her. From the gleaming gold collar, Elena guessed that he was the one who was in charge of the group.

But as the Captain of the Guard tried to take the book, something sparked from the cover and the captain cursed as the burst of electricity hit him. He glared at Elena as if she was some kind of

evil witch. "By the order of the Prince," the captain sneered, "you are to tell us exactly where the enchanted girl with the red coat lives. We have evidence gathered by his counsel that you were the last person to meet with this creature."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Elena as she continued to clutch the book.

The guard who held her arm backhanded her with his free hand. Her head flew back with the force. The pain was almost blinding. She was sure that the entire half of her face would bruise by the morning. But she managed to make not a sound from the strike. After the hit, the captain gave her an ugly grin.

"You will tell us everything or you're going to face the punishment of the dungeons."

Elena had heard about the dungeons in the prince's castle. They were probably the most dreaded punishment in all of the land. Anyone who entered the dungeons would most assuredly never come back out again. Everyone assumed that the dungeon was a death sentence. Perhaps, she had thought. But there were plenty of things that were worse than death. She wouldn't put it past the prince and his lackeys to devise even more heinous punishments, none of which ever involved death. Did she want to risk that?

Then she recalled that the enchanted girl had said that she had the means to make sure to not be found if she did not wish to do so. While the prince employed a phalanx of sorcerers to do his bidding, Elena assumed that the enchanted girl had more powerful magic than all of them combined. Besides, the enchanted girl wanted her to find the dragon's blood. She couldn't very well do that if they decided to imprison her in the dungeons.

"I found the girl with the red coat at the end of a ravine several miles north of here," she finally said. "She told me that she would only be found if she wanted to be found."

The guards laughed at that. The captain told her, "Oh, she'll be found all right. The prince has many powerful sorcerers working for him. A small slip of a girl cannot escape from his grasp."

The guard who had been raiding her hut said, "Should we leave this place and try to find this girl now?"

"It's too late at the moment for that," said the captain. "Besides, this witch here could be useful later. And I am curious about this book that she has. I cannot pry it from her hands, but I'm sure one of the prince's pet sorcerers could do it. Get one of the messengers to tell the prince the news. We'll take her with us and send her to one of the sorcerers."

"Yes, sir."

With that, Elena found herself being shoved out of the hut and packed off on a horse like so much cargo. She tried to protest, but ended up getting tied and gagged for her troubles.

Chapter 4

The loud knock at the door startled Mendel so suddenly that he fell over with a squeak, the Ancient book of fairy tales falling out of his grasp with a thump.

"I know you're in there awake," his advisor Bell shouted. "You need to go to sleep since we're going to be getting up early tomorrow to continue cataloging that building."

"Yes sir," Mendel called out. "I just lost track of time." And he did. He had started reading about the story, supposedly about a girl wearing a red coat, but he got sucked into the plot that was in actuality about a peripheral character that was meeting this girl with a red coat. He got the book back from the floor and closed it before placing it underneath another pile of documents that he was studying. "I'll go right to sleep now, sir."

“Good. I better see you awake tomorrow morning,” his advisor replied.

Mendel gave a silent sigh and then extinguished his light ball before settling back into his nest bed. His advisor was a stickler to the schedule and the Great Beetle forbid that someone be late even one minute. But even in the darkness, his mind whirled as he thought back about the story that he had been reading. Even though there were things that he had no understanding of, he still did not understand what a red coat was, there was something about the main character's conflict that drew him.

In cockroach fairy tales, there was always a moral or lesson. And it was obvious. Most of these fairy tales told to young cockroaches were used as teaching tools to get them to behave. One example of a cockroach fairy tale would be the classic, Hiss and the Terrible Bloater. Of course, in this fairy tale, the Bloater was never really explained, but it was always understood that it stood for the boogey-cockroach, the monster that everyone feared because it represented ultimate death. In Hiss and the Terrible Bloater, the hero, Hiss, was a young cockroach who worked as an apprentice to a master engineer. However, their town fell into hard times because of natural disaster.

Then one day, when Hiss was trying to search for something to eat in the nearby forest, he discovered an unusual object hiding under the bush. To Hiss, it appears to be a very valuable tool with which was needed to build the arches that were prominent in cockroach architecture. In the city that Hiss lived, such tools had all been destroyed by the natural disaster. But as he is about to take this tool back with him, a pygmy cockroach jumps out of the bush warning Hiss that the tool is a magical one. And that using it too much would be asking for bad things to happen.

Hiss, of course, doesn't believe in any of that. He is an engineer's apprentice. He believes only in the rational. So he takes this tool back to his home town and he shows it to his mentor who is both astonished and grateful. With that, Hiss and his mentor starts using the tool to help rebuild his city and as a result, get rich. But then one day, when Hiss and his mentor are trying to repair one of

the main arches in the city square, the tool suddenly breaks apart and grows into an enormous vine that stretches up into the sky, past the clouds. As a result of this unexpected turn of events, Hiss halts work and offers to climb the vine to see where it goes.

Up in the sky, Hiss encounters a city that seems to parallel the city where all the cockroaches live. But in this city, everything is completely empty. The only thing different with this city is that instead of the paved square at the center, there is an enormous castle built in the Ancient style. And inside this castle was a monster called the Bloater which liked to eat little cockroaches like Hiss. In the fairy tale, Hiss manages to outwit the bloater and retrieve several tools from the castle to bring back to his home. However, in his adventure, Hiss does lose an antennae to the dreaded Bloater.

That particular story wasn't Mendel's favorite. He liked the more gory ones where the heroes and heroines met horrible ends. There were some fairy tales which had happy endings, but they were few and far between. And they in themselves weren't so interesting because the main characters for those tales were always pure and good. Pure and good, even as an idea, was boring.

Mendel resolved to finish reading the Ancient fairy tale the next time he found time.

The next time he did find time, it was during the third meal of the day when, unexpectedly, Mendel's advisor told all of his students to take a break because he had just received a message from one of his superiors at the university by telegraphic transmission. With Bell holed up in his makeshift office at the other end of their research base, Mendel headed back to his room to retrieve the Ancient book of fairy tales.

Unfortunately for him, he was waylaid by one of the other research students as he was trying to get back to his room. It was Gamow. The shorter cockroach seemed rather agitated as his antennae vibrated as he told Mendel that there was something in the kitchen that he wanted him to see.

In the kitchen, Gamow had several bowls with different ingredients set out. There were a

variety of grains and vegetables along with some protein that appeared to have been harvested from the local glow worms. Next to these ingredients, Gamow had set up a small stand where he had placed an open Ancient book. Gamow gestured towards the book.

“I'm trying out this new recipe, but I can't make heads or tails about it.” It was Gamow's turn for kitchen duty. Generally, kitchen duty involved cooking meals for the rest of the research team for that particular day. It didn't particularly matter what one cooked. For Mendel, whenever he was on kitchen duty, he always chose the easiest option. Others, however, were not so lazy. For instance, Gamow was one of those cockroaches who always tried to find the hardest way of doing things. Probably because he wanted to try hard to impress their advisor. As a result, Gamow almost always tried to find a recipe by the Ancients and adapt it for cockroach palates.

“What seems to be the matter?” Mendel inquired as he peered at the book on the stand. As expected, it was one of the Ancient cookbooks that someone on the team had unearthed earlier from the main Ancient library at the center of Beersheba.

“I can't make any sense about these series of glyphs,” Gamow said, with some frustration. “My grasp of the Ancient tongue isn't as good as yours. Probably because I'm more of an architecture expert.”

“Which glyphs?”

“The ones here, near the bottom of the page. I managed to decipher all of the ingredients that the Ancients used and how they were to be initially prepared, but all of this down here is gibberish to me.”

Mendel looked at the glyphs and was surprised as he found them extremely familiar. In fact, he had just read them the previous night in the Ancient book of fairy tales. “I think it's probably fairly straightforward,” he replied. “This says right here that you need to stuff all of the ingredients into a creature called a rabbit and then roast it onto a spit.”

“What is a rabbit?”

“I have no idea,” Mendel said. “But I do know that it is a creature that the Ancients were familiar with. It is probably a native in some other universe other than ours. But since you are trying to adjust the recipes to match what we have here on our world, I don't think you would have to worry too much about it. I'd say that what you could would be to find something like a blue bug or a water catcher and stuff those with these ingredients. Then you could roast it on the spit just as it says here. Unfortunately, as far as I know, roasting on a spit would take time.”

“Time will not be a problem,” Gamow announced. “Especially since Bell gave us the rest of the day off.”

After a few more comments, Mendel made his way back to his room where he found the book of fairy tales where he had left it. With no one else to bother him, until Gamow came back up to declare that the meal was finished cooking, he opened the book back to where he had stopped the previous night.

Chapter 5

At least it wasn't the dungeon, but the food was horrible. Every day, the guards would come by with a bowl of watery porridge and that would be her meal for the day.

After the Royal Guard had brought her back to her home country, they had taken her to the prince's castle, only to put her in one of the isolation towers. Her cell was bare except for a cot and a bucket in the corner for waste. There was little to do except to sleep and to wait. The sorcerer who

was in charge of trying to figure out how to part the strange book from her possession was still involved with the other sorcerers in finding the enchanted girl with the red coat. So at the moment, Elena had been relegated to a problem that was to be dealt with later.

But with the porridge that they kept bringing her, she suspected that they were trying to starve her to death. After all, after she died, what would stop any of them from prying the tome out of her cold fingers? At the moment, though, she was very much alive and she found herself with a lot of time on her hands as she waited. So she took the time to examine the book more thoroughly.

During her confinement, she discovered that the page with the dark panel was not what it seemed. It wasn't simply a large square of black ink. It appeared to be some sort of magical panel. If she touched the dark panel and dragged her finger against it, lights began appearing in the panel. And it wasn't a random flashing of light, either. Instead, the lights were arranged into specific patterns. Specific glyphs that were similar in style to the glyphs in the rest of the book. It was interesting looking at all of these glyphs. But until she knew what any of them meant, they were no more than strange squiggles on the page to her.

It was maybe on her third or fourth day of confinement when someone came to see her. It wasn't one of the prince's pet sorcerers. Instead, it was one of the nobles in the prince's court. The guard who unlocked her cell to admit the noble declared that he was a Baron of some sort who simply wished to talk with the strange witch. It was clear from the guard's tone that the Baron viewed her as a curiosity only.

The Baron who came to visit her was an older man with hair as gray as the clouds above that were heavy with snow. He wore rich red robes lined with ermine and gold jewelry around his neck and fingers. But despite these fashionable clothes, he gave Elena the impression that he was like a human version of a rat with his squinty eyes and scraggly beard. When he greeted her, his high, nasal voice reminded her of the squeaks of rodents.

“I hear that you were the last person to see the girl with the red coat,” the Baron began.

Carefully, Elena sat at the edge of the cot with the strange book in her lap. She was quite conscious of the fact that she was wearing the same clothes that she had on when the Royal Guard had taken her to the capital city. She probably smelled terribly since she had had no opportunity to bathe. So it was not surprising that the Baron remained at the corner of the cell, as far away from her as possible.

“I saw the girl with the red coat,” she said. She was careful not to say that she was the last person to see her. After all, the enchanted girl might have met someone after her and she would have never known.

The Baron gave a dry cough that sounded like the crumbling of leaves. “What was the monster like?” asked the Baron. “Did you do a deal with her for a wish?”

Elena shrugged at the question and answered with one of her own, “Doesn't the girl with the red coat always do deals for a wish?”

“How should I know? I've only heard about her.” The Baron nervously fingered one of his gold necklaces even as he stared at her in fascination. “Since you've met her, you must have asked her for a wish. Did she grant your wish? Did you have to give her a boon? I assume you did, otherwise you wouldn't be alive.”

“Who said that she granted me any wishes?” Elena replied. “Surely, if she had granted me a wish, I wouldn't be here in this isolation cell talking to you.”

“True, true.” The Baron squinted at her again and then said in a much softer voice, “I will be straight with you. There are many people curious about you due to your experiences. I am the least of these people. I am merely the messenger.”

Another messenger, Elena thought. Perhaps they were ill omens.

“There is an acquaintance of mine who would be very interested to hear about your

experience with the girl with the red coat. He is willing to get you out of this cell for the privilege of hearing your tale.”

The next day, Elena awoke to a clattering near the door. Someone was unlocking it. Mentally, she groaned and managed to sit up in her cot and attempted to smooth down her hair. She still held the book. By now, she almost thought of it as another part of her.

Perhaps it was another noble who thought to gawk on the prince's prisoner, she thought with some rancor. After all, she was supposedly the last person to see the girl with the red coat. They might as well lock her up in a cage like the animals in the prince's petting zoo and have people parade in here, gawking at her.

She was right, it was another noble. But she wasn't quite sure who he was because his long black cloak had a hood which covered his face. All she could tell was that he was tall and he had shiny boots. She thought she saw her reflection in them when he came closer to examine her. Apparently, unlike the Baron before him, he was able to stand the stench that was coming from her.

The noble didn't speak. Instead, he raised a hand to motion towards the guard who was on duty to come to him. The guard was a large beefy man dressed in the prince's livery. He had a large dark mustache and glowering eyebrows that made him look even more intimidating than the other guards. But in the presence of this mysterious noble, the guard seemed to shrink within himself as he was in the presence of someone even more intimidating than he. As for Elena, she didn't particularly care. She had met the girl with the red coat, and this mysterious noble had nothing on the menacing aura that the girl had emanated.

The guard glanced at the noble and then back at her. The guard seemed to have a pitying expression on his face as if he believed that her future fate was going to be worse than being locked up in the prince's isolation tower. “The Earl has made arrangements for your detention to be

transferred.”

“I see,” she said simply.

The noble made a gesture with his hand, indicating that she should follow him. So she got up from her cot and followed him out of the tower room and down a flight of stairs. Since she had been taken from her home in the forest without her coat, the winter wind felt particularly acute as she went outside. But she said nothing as she followed the noble, the Earl whoever he was, out of the tower and climbed into the stark black carriage that awaited them in front of the prince's fortress.

Once inside the carriage, the covered conveyance was enough to block out the bellowing and icy wind from outside. But it was still cold and reflexively, she hugged the book to her body in a vain attempt to keep herself warm. At that movement, the noble turned to the seat beside him and flung a fur blanket in her direction. Awkwardly, she caught it with one hand and covered herself with it.

“Thank you,” she said warily as the Earl settled himself on the opposite seat of the carriage and tapped the roof to indicate to the driver that they were ready to travel.

The noble inclined his head. But it wasn't until the carriage was well on its way down the road that led out of the prince's fortress that he decided to talk.

“I am the Earl of Nordalness,” he said. “I expect the Baron told you about me.”

“He did not mention you by name,” she said cautiously as she huddled beneath the blanket. And the Baron hadn't. He had only mentioned that he was working for someone who wanted to hear about her experiences with the girl with the red coat. She, of course, put two and two together and realized that this Earl was the one who wanted to know about her experiences. This put her on guard. But at the moment, it did not appear as if this Earl was in any way interested in the book that she held. “But he did say that he was working with another person who wanted to know what I knew about the girl with the red coat.”

“That is true.”

The Earl did not say anything for quite a long while. She had expected him to immediately start questioning her, but he was not doing anything expected. Unable to stand the silence, she finally asked, "How did you manage to convince the prince to transfer my detention to you?"

"I have my ways," the Earl replied. "You don't need to know the specifics. All you need to know that you will be working for me now."

"I heard that the prince has one of the sorcerers working on a way to get this book from me."

At that, the Earl gave a low chuckle. She shivered. But it wasn't from the cold. "Let's just say that I've also convinced the prince and his sycophant sorcerers that the book comes with you. They believe that I won't be able to take the book either, especially since I am supposedly no sorcerer."

The casual listener would never have caught his wording, but she immediately realized what he had implied. He had said that the others thought that he wasn't a sorcerer. But this was "supposedly." So it meant that he knew magic of some sort then. That, for some reason, didn't particularly surprise her. Sorcerers usually acted rather mysterious and scary anyway because of the powers they held over everyone else. She wondered when he would try for her book.

"Of course, even if I weren't a sorcerer, there are better ways to figure out what is in that book of yours other than by force," he said in a somewhat lackadaisical way.

"Like what?" she asked warily.

"Like asking to see it."

"Ah."

The Earl lounged at his seat as the carriage continued on through the countryside. When Elena had first been brought to the prince's palace, she had little opportunity to see where she had been taken. She had been thrown into a prisoner's cart by the Royal Guard. There were holes in the covered cart for air to get in, of course, but she had little inclination to look through those holes to see where they were going. Besides, the constant bumping of the road had made her nauseous and

she had spent most of the time lying at the bottom of the cart with her eyes closed.

But on the relative evenness of the carriage, she could peek out the window to see that they passed through a sleepy town surrounding the prince's palace. Since it was winter, most of the town was still covered in snow. No one had bothered yet to shovel the snow that had fallen the previous night so most of the roads were still a pristine white. The horses that drew the carriage had bells on their harnesses so that ever step they moved, there was a clang of noise indicating their presence. She wondered how long it would take for them to travel to the Earl's land. Hopefully not the entire day. Her feet were already beginning to get cold despite the blanket.

“Have you always had that book?” he asked.

She shook her head.

“Where did you find it?”

“In the forest.”

His head moved slightly and she had the impression that he was irritated with her vague answer. She wasn't sure since his face was still covered by the hood.

“Where in the forest?” he finally asked.

She shrugged. “I'm not sure. Somewhere in the forest, probably near my home on the outskirts of the country. I was not paying very much attention at the time.”

“What is the book about? Is it a spell book.”

“I wouldn't know if it was a spell book if indeed it is such a thing,” she replied. “It is written in a language that I don't understand.” And that was the truth. And in a certain way, it was probably safer that she didn't know what was in the book. If it indeed held important secrets, she was sure that she would be hunted down because she knew these secrets. Of course, most people didn't know that either so they probably thought she knew things that she didn't anyway. Which was a conundrum. She might as well be in the relative protection of being under detention by someone,

whether it was by the prince or the earl.

“How interesting. I will have to take a look at it once we get back to my home. I assume that they others could not see the book because they tried to take it by force from you?”

“Yes.”

“You will let me see the book.”

“Sure. If the book allows you to look at it.”

“You've put a spell on it?”

She shook her head again. “I'm just a hedge witch. I know little spells other than minor healing spells and good luck charms. I have no idea how to bind anything, let alone books, to me. It is as if the book chose me as its owner.”

“That's interesting. You don't suppose the book is sentient?”

“It has never talked to me.” But she was intrigued with that particular idea. “There are books that are sentient?”

“There have been tales about sentient books. In these tales, these books were bespelled in some way or another.”

She frowned at that and looked down at the book in her arms. It felt like any other book. The only interesting thing about it was the dark panel on one of the pages that lit up when she touched it and showed the strange glyphs. Of course, it could have been sentient and she just didn't know it. Perhaps it was trying to communicate with her through that dark panel, but only knew its own language.

The carriage passed through the sleepy town and down the main road that wound through the surrounding fields that lay fallow underneath the snow. Occasionally, they would pass a farmhouse out in the countryside, the only indication that anyone was living in them the puffs of smoke coming out of the chimneys. Elena noticed the sun slowly passing overhead. Closing in on

the noon time hour, the carriage slowed down as it approached a small hamlet that appeared out in the middle of nowhere and stopped at a building that appeared to be a combination tavern and inn.

Chapter 6

It was a simple meal of chicken and potatoes, but after the days of nothing but watery gruel, it seemed like a banquet. As a hedge witch and healer, Elena was quite aware that suddenly eating such food after a starvation diet was an invitation to get sick. So she ate slowly and took her time taking stock of her surroundings.

The Earl of Nordalness had left her in the dining room of the tavern in the small hamlet not far from the capital city where the prince's castle lay. Where he had gone, she had little idea. All that she could think of was that he had probably gone with the driver to make sure they got fresh horses for the rest of the drive to his lands.

The main tavern room was cozily lit with sconces and gas lanterns. There was a large hearth fire going on the far end of the room, occasionally tended by one of the tavern's kitchen boys. There were a few other patrons in the tavern, but most of them were locals and none of them paid any attention to her. Which was just as well. She had originally been exiled from the country after her own fellow villagers found her wanting. And even though her home village was far from here, she did not want to take any chances that anyone would have recognized her.

She knew of Nordalness although she paid little attention to the politics and geography of her own home country. Nordalness was a small fiefdom located in the northeastern part of the country, mostly consisting of hills and moors as it was just south of a great mountain range that stretched

further north into the hinterlands. Nordalness and a few of the surrounding fiefdoms were originally independent kingdoms that had formed a northern alliance in the distant past. But when one of the prince's ancestors began uniting the counties further south into one kingdom, the northern alliance decided to voluntarily join up with the larger kingdom, in return for relatively independent governance. And as far as she knew, that had worked well for the benefit of the northern fiefdoms and the southern part of the country.

Other than that, the northern fiefdoms were an enigmatic no man's land. Aside from some necessary trading, few people voluntarily traveled up north to make their home. And few people from the north preferred to move down south despite the more mild weather. Culturally, the southerners considered the northern fiefdoms barbarians. But the northern fiefdoms provided much wealth to the rest of the country via the mines, metalworking and stone working, so the grumbling was only few and far between.

"I heard that there was a powerful witch being held captive in the prince's castle," she overheard one of the locals tell another as they ate dinner in the tavern. "Apparently the prince is having his sorcerers deal with her."

"Oh? You must be pulling my leg, Jasper. I thought the sorcerers were busy trying to find a girl that the prince insisted was a distant cousin of his."

"It's all related," Jasper told his companion. "You see, Donny, the witch supposedly knows where the girl is hidden. And the sorcerers are trying to get her to tell them where she is."

Donny scoffed at that. "Where did you hear all of that blather? If there indeed was a witch up at the prince's castle, the entire country would have heard about it by now. Powerful witches are no laughing matter, especially if one gets angry. The prince had better watch out. Doesn't his royal highness know that one should approach such beings with caution? I'm sure the witch is brewing revenge for being held captive."

“I don't know about that. I heard this all from one of the old men down at the butcher's who heard it from his brother-in-law's cousin who is friends with a footman at the prince's castle. The witch was been rendered powerless by the prince's sorcerers and now they just want information from her. They say that she is very beautiful.”

“Oh?” Donny now sounded intrigued. “You don't suppose the prince is keeping her because of that? You know he hasn't chosen a bride yet.”

“And by all accounts, he doesn't seem to be in any hurry to do so any time soon,” Jasper replied. “Which, I suppose, is worrying his counselors and his relatives. But if anything happens to him before he breeds, well, I'll say that his first cousin isn't a bad sort from what I've heard about him.”

“No, not a bad sort at all.” Donny took a swig of his ale and then said, “So this witch. Has anyone seen her?”

“Everyone says she is beautiful. Hair as dark as night. Skin as pale as snow. And lips as red as a rose. They say that her gaze can stop a man's heart.”

“Huh. I'd like to see this witch to see if she's really as beautiful as everyone says she is. Perhaps she's just performing an illusion to make everyone think she's beautiful.”

“No, they say that she really is beautiful, especially after the sorcerers rendered her powerless.”

Elena listened intently, frowning. Did the prince also keep a powerful witch in his palace, hoping that she would also tell him about the girl in the red coat? She wouldn't put it past him. And in fact, that bit of rumor would explain quite a bit. Especially since the prince apparently easily gave her up to the Earl. Because why would he have any need of her or her strange book when he had another more powerful witch in his possession? She continued eavesdropping on the conversation, but Jasper and Donny never mentioned the witch's name. Perhaps they didn't know it. Instead, their

conversation moved on to a different topic.

“Old Kent told me that the Earl of Nordalness has stopped here at this tavern for the afternoon to change horses,” said Donny. “He's on his way back from the capital city to head back to his home up in the moors.”

“Gods. I don't see how anyone would want to live in Nordalness. I have never been there, but they say the landscape is completely desolate. It's hard enough farming there without their ghastly technology.”

“I agree with you there. I wouldn't want to go visiting unless someone paid me to. But the Earl of Nordalness is supposedly quite powerful. They say he has the prince's ear.”

“He's one of the prince's advisors?”

“No, he's more like an independent minister. They say that the prince is wary of him. The prince is wary of all the earls in the northern counties. Because they have quite a bit of power, especially with their control of the country's mines. I'm sure the prince wants to change the power balance, but he can't unless he wants to tear the country into two.”

“What's the Earl of Nordalness like?” asked Jasper. “Was he, you know, intimidating?”

Donny shrugged. “I just got the news from Old Kent. Apparently the old man thought he was like a lot of other nobles although he didn't particularly seem squeamish with taking care of the horses himself.”

“That speaks well of him, I think,” said Jasper. “The viscount who came through here a couple days ago could barely tolerate even stepping into this fine tavern. He thought it was too common.”

Just as Elena was finishing her meal, the earl came back into the tavern to retrieve her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Jasper and Donny gape at them and then eye them speculatively as they headed back outside. While her belly was now warm and full, she was resigned to the fact that

they were going to travel for several more hours in the cold. But to her surprise, not only was the fur blanket waiting for her in the carriage, but also hot bricks to warm her feet. It was as if the earl had read her mind.

But that wasn't possible. No one could read anyone's mind, even if they were sorcerers.

Once the carriage was started again, heading further north, presumable to Nordalness, she found the temerity to say, "I heard in the tavern that the prince has a powerful witch captive in his palace. Why didn't you attempt to get her instead? Especially since I heard that she might know something about the girl with the red coat."

Hidden in his own cloak, the earl, at first, didn't appear to hear her. But after a moment, he said, "The only witch at the palace was you."

"But I'm only a hedge witch."

"We'll just assume that someone has been exaggerating," he said. "I have it on very trustworthy sources that you were the only witch being held captive in the prince's castle. Why he even bothered to do that, of course, is another matter."

"Oh."

"Have you ever been to Nordalness?"

She shook her head.

"Then don't believe everything that you've heard about the place. People exaggerate about that, too."

Elena must have fallen asleep during the journey, because when she was jolted awake by the sudden turn of the carriage, she looked out the window to see that they had traveled into a foreign country. The rolling farmland that characterized the countryside around the capital city had now given way to hilly, stark country that appeared to be nothing but gray rock and scrub grass valiantly

trying to cling to life under a blanket of glittering snow.

The sun, that had been overhead during noon when they had stopped at the hamlet, was now brushing the horizon, turning the sky a faint orange. The clouds overhead were thick, promising a hard snow during the evening. Across from her, the earl appeared to be completely oblivious to everything. Perhaps he was asleep or pondering philosophical questions. Or he could be staring at her. It was hard to tell since his hood still covered his face.

The carriage made its slow way up one crag and around another hill until they came in sight of what looked like a small village surrounding a harsh, angular manor that was built partly into the rock of the nearby cliff side. By the time their conveyance reached the entrance of the earl's home, the sun had completely sunk down the horizon, giving way to the blackness of night. And it had begun to snow.

At the entrance, several servants greeted the arrival of the carriage with somber expressions. The head servant, a butler, held up a lantern illuminating the front of the manor in a small pool of light. From what Elena could see, the servants appeared to be all dressed in a uniform of brown suits and dresses with brass buttons and white aprons. They didn't even blink at her appearance when the earl dragged her sleepy self out of the carriage. He motioned for two of the maids to go attend to her.

“This young woman is a hedge witch named Elena. She is a visiting scholar who has had some misfortune during her journey. Make sure she is presentable within the hour,” he told his servants.

Misfortune was saying it lightly, she thought. And she was no scholar. But if that was how the earl wanted to explain away her presence in Nordalness, then so be it. She wasn't going to contradict anything and land herself in a worse situation. But before the maids could lead her away to wash up, the butler took a step forward to catch the earl's attention.

“My lord. There is something that you should know.”

“What is it, Waterstone?”

“The Lady Dowager Nordalness is here.”

“What? Why on earth is my mother here? She hates Nordalness during the winter time. She only tolerated it here because of my father. And now that he's gone, she spends her time in the warmer south.”

“I know not her ladyship's mind,” the butler replied, “but she arrived here at the manor earlier this afternoon and was disappointed that you were not here. I had the impression that she wishes to speak with you on a certain matter.”

The Earl of Nordalness gave an exasperated sigh and said, “Very well. I'll go speak with her then.” He then strode into the manor, probably intent on finding his mother.

The servants gave each other a look that Elena found difficult to interpret, especially since it was the evening and she was feeling tired. But after a moment, the maids chattered at her to hurry up and she was quickly led into the warm interior and down a hall to a luxurious guest room where a bath was summarily prepared.

After she washed and dressed in a borrowed maid's gown, one of the servants showed her to the dining room, leaving her standing at the foot of a long table that appeared to be set for three people. She heard voices in a neighboring room. Since no one was in the dining room forcing her to sit, she followed the sound of the voices around a corner. She stood on the threshold of an archway and peered into what looked like a parlor.

Two people stood next to the hearth in the parlor with their backs to her. From what she could see, one was an older woman dressed in a rich green brocade trimmed with gold silk thread that glimmered in the firelight. Her graying hair was pinned up with a gold and emerald comb, but despite her age, from the glimpses of her profile, Elena guessed that the woman must have been a great beauty when she was younger. Even now, she was quite a handsome woman. The other person

was a man. He wore a plain blue suit stitched from a high quality thick linen. She only saw the back of his head of thick dark hair. And from his voice, she guessed that this was the earl.

“The Council is disappointed that you have yet to make your decision,” said the woman. “And if you don't make the decision within the year, they are going to start agitating for change. You and I know that.”

“That's true. But according to the law, the Council cannot force me to do anything. I am not going to squander my choices just to appease some old men with outdated notions.”

“Not all of them are old men, Lysander. But all of them are committed to following the traditions. You know we northerners all stick together. We cannot be seen weak, especially by the southern prince. If he sees any weakness, he will soon take advantage. The current prince does not know his own boundaries, like his ancestors before him.”

“I know, mother. But we are in no danger at the moment. The prince has nothing to take advantage of.”

“And you know that can change in an instant. Especially if the sorcerers at Sophronia finally figure out what the Ancients had accomplished.”

“The sorcerers at Sophronia have no idea what they're dealing with.”

“Well, I certainly hope your assessment is correct. Otherwise, we will have an even bigger problem to contend with.” The older woman shifted her stance and in that moment, she turned her head and caught a glimpse of Elena standing in the doorway. “Well, I haven't seen you here before, girl. I thought I told Catrina that we were not to be disturbed.”

At his mother's comment, the earl turned to see what was the matter. Elena finally saw his face, which had a hint of his mother's features, but was more angular and harsh, making her think of mountain sides. His eyes were sharp and blue and she had no problem picturing him as a dangerous sorcerer. Especially since he seemed particularly dismissive of other sorcerers.

“That is my guest,” he said. “She is the hedge witch I told you about, mother. Elena, this is the Dowager Countess of Nordalness. Mother, this is Elena.”

“Honored to meet you, your ladyship,” said Elena as she awkwardly curtsied with the book that she kept with her always still in her hands.

“I see.” She peered down her nose at Elena. “Is that book literally attached to you?”

Elena looked at the book that she held under her arm. “No. I'm just rather cautious about leaving it lying around, that is all. One of the servants might accidentally touch it.”

“It is dangerous?”

“Not if you don't touch it.”

“Humph.” The older woman turned to her son. “I see you are taking in strays again. A couple months ago, it was that boy who tried to steal your pocket watch. And then before that, it was that old beggar man you found in Rathing.”

“I am not taking in strays,” the earl argued. “I had some job openings. They needed work, so I gave them the jobs. It's been mutually beneficial. I don't do charity just for the hell of it.”

“Then what do you call her? You might call her a hedge witch, but she looks like a girl who's been half starved.”

The earl sighed. “I did not bring her here with the goodness of my heart. She's here to do a job. And that job is going to ensure that we won't have to worry about the prince taking advantage of the northern lands in the future.”

“What?” Elena found herself squawking. “You never said I was to take on the prince!”

The earl glowered at her. “I didn't say anything about taking on the prince. That's traitorous. I'm talking about protecting ourselves. That's an entirely different thing.”

She shook her head. “I'm not sure I follow.”

“You're going to help me by providing me information,” he replied with exaggerated care.

“That information, I will use to the northern counties' benefit. That is all you need to know.”

“Well, enough talk about all of that,” the earl's mother suddenly declared. “We can hash out all of this later after dinner. I was told that the cook had outdone himself tonight. He has created a fantastic dish with pork, duck, and plums. I must admit, I am quite looking forward to trying it.”

With that, Elena was ushered back to the dining hall where the earl sat at the head of the table and his mother to his right. Elena found herself seated to his left and served by the attending waiter as if she was an honored guest. It made her feel rather strange and undeserving. She had been born in a small village near the southern border of the country to a farmer and his wife. Peasant folk. She had trained under another hedge witch before she herself had taken over the business. All she had known was the commoner way of life. Sitting here in an earl's manor eating dinner with him and his mother was as far removed from what she would have imagined that she would have been doing in the future. Besides, she knew no upper class manners. And although she tried to be cautious and copy what the earl and the dowager countess were doing at the table, she had the strong suspicion that it was probably very obvious that she had a commoner upbringing.

Then again, it was just the earl and his mother and not the prince's entire court, so things could have been worse. The earl himself seemed quite oblivious to the fact that she didn't know which spoon was what. And his mother seemed to turn a blind eye to it in favor of questioning her. She had the feeling that the earl's mother was a bit of an eccentric who seemed to be interested in many things that women in her station usually ignored.

“So, Elena, I've only met one hedge witch before and she was quite an old woman. You must have become one recently yourself. Or are you just an apprentice?” she asked.

“I'm a full hedge witch, my lady. But I haven't had a village to practice my craft in for about a year.”

“And why is that?”

“I was exiled. The inhabitants of my village thought I was giving everyone the evil eye so they thought to expel me.” She forked another bite of the cook's special pork and duck creation. The meat almost melted in her mouth. And the plum sauce gave it a slightly sweet and sour taste to it. She wanted to moan in delight at the taste, but she managed to refrain herself. While the earl and his mother didn't care what silverware she used, they would probably take exception to her making strange noises.

“How unfortunate. Did they have any proof that you were doing this?”

She shook her head. “No. It was all started by rumor. I think it was probably started by some of the women in the village in hopes of deflecting the blame from themselves. But the town magistrate, mayor, and the other elders believed it so I had to go.”

The earl's mother looked thoughtful and then said, “There are several reasons why someone might want to expel a young hedge witch like yourself.”

“What reasons?” demanded the earl.

“Never you mind, Lysander,” his mother told him. “It is neither here nor there since this has already happened. The only thing we can do is to continue forward, right my dear?”

“If you say so, your ladyship,” Elena said doubtfully.

“Exactly. Besides, you now find yourself in an earl's manor,” the older woman said, gesturing to the room about them. “And surely, few of those villagers could imagine you here now, wouldn't they? Look at this as a step up, an opportunity to something better.”

It would only be better, Elena thought, if she knew for sure the reason she was there. It could very well be that she was being pampered before being set up for a fall in one of the earl's political schemes.

Chapter 7

Elena wanted to go to sleep after the heavy dinner, but that was not to be. After the final dish was eaten, the earl and his mother retired back to the parlor with her in tow. Since no one said otherwise, Elena took a seat on a small settee cushioned with a bright red pillow with gold tassels. She imagined that it was now that the earl would question her in earnest. But instead of immediately staring her down and demanding answers, he made his way to the other end of the parlor where he opened a cabinet to withdraw a crystal bottle filled with a golden brown liquid. A moment later, one of the servants arrived at the parlor with a tray holding three glass goblets. He set the tray down on a side board. The earl dismissed him and poured out the liquid from the decanter himself.

He handed her one of the goblets and explained, "After dinner brandy."

"Are you sure that is a good idea?" his mother asked. "The poor girl looks like she's about to fall asleep at any minute."

"Not right this minute, I hope." He glowered at Elena who found herself suddenly sitting straighter in her chair under his sharp blue gaze. "I have a few questions that I hope to get some answers before the end of tonight. The rest, I must concede, can wait until tomorrow."

"I can't guarantee that I will be able to answer any of your questions," Elena replied.

"Let's just hope for your sake that you can," the earl said ominously.

The dowager countess took a sip of her own drink and admonished, "Now dear, no use frightening the girl. Then she might not be able to answer you at all."

He frowned at his mother, but then took a stance near the hearth in the parlor. He put his

own goblet on the mantle and crossed his arms as he stared at her. “The reason why I took you out of the prince's custody is because I heard news that you had seen the girl with the red coat.

Otherwise known as the Red Sorceress. Is this true or not?”

“I have seen her,” Elena said. She kept the goblet in her hands, using it as something to keep her focus on. “Or at least the girl with the red coat. I have never heard of the name that you refer her to, the Red Sorceress.”

“Semantics,” he dismissed. “What I'm interested in is if you have seen her powers at work.”

She laughed at that. “I will tell you this, my lord. I have felt her presence and her power, but I have never seen her powers at work.”

The earl's mouth turned downward. “You have never seen her powers at work? It is said that she grants anyone's wishes, for a price.”

“That part is true.”

“And you went to see her so that she could grant you a wish.”

“Yes.” But it was only part of the reason. She was also curious about the being that had been reported to live in the woods near her cottage.

“Did she grant you your wish?”

Elena gave him a humorless smile. “What do you think?”

“The stories say that she will grant you your wish if you are willing to pay the price. You were not willing to pay the price?”

“Oh, I was willing to pay the price. I was more than willing to pay the price. But, I think, the girl with the red coat takes her time granting the wish. Or perhaps she has decided not to grant one for me. Which, I suppose, might be a blessing in disguise, especially if it turned out that I couldn't pay the price.”

“Or,” the dowager countess added, “she could just be waiting until a time that you least

expect it and then grant you your wish to make sure that you couldn't pay the price. Because wasn't there a punishment or a penalty for you if you couldn't pay the price?"

"My life would certainly be forfeit," Elena agreed. "But I had that calculated into my plans. I don't really care if my life is forfeit. So I die. Not one would care very much if that happened. But at least my wish would be granted."

"That must be some wish, especially since you're willing to die for it," mused the earl. "What if, during the time between now and when the girl with the red coat decides to grant your wish that that particular situation changes?"

"I suppose that could happen," she conceded. "But I already know of this ahead of time. I should be prepared for every eventuality. Have you ever read any fairy tales while you were growing up?"

"Some," he said hesitatingly.

"Well, even from the few that you've read, you probably noticed a theme emerging. If someone reneged on a deal with a powerful being, worse things would come to befall them and the people around them. And I don't plan on reneging on any deal I make with the girl with the red coat. Everyone else would just have to understand that up front."

The earl asked a few more questions on how the girl in the red coat looked like and what her demeanor was like, but Elena, unfortunately, was not very helpful. She didn't think she spent enough time with the girl in the red coat to really tell for sure what she was like. And she had been hidden beneath a hood the entire time that she had talked with her. Visibly frustrated, the earl decided to dismiss her and began pacing back and forth in the parlor.

Elena made her way back to the guest room where someone had prepared a nice fire in the hearth of the room. A maid had probably also put out a night gown on top of the bed in the room. She quickly changed out of her borrowed dress and into the gown after performing some absolutions

at the water basin in the corner of the room, and hopped into bed. It didn't take her long to go to sleep.

Elena found herself standing outside of the earl's manor, knee deep in snow. She was wearing the borrowed night gown, but she wasn't feeling any cold. A dream, she thought, as she slowly looked around. At the door to the manor, a gigantic black cat with blue eyes sat on the lintel, watching her with an unblinking gaze. Definitely a dream. The trick was, of course, to see if this was a dream worth remembering or something that could easily be forgotten. In her training as a hedge witch, the old woman who had been her mentor had stressed the importance of dreams, especially dreams that her patients had. Sometimes dreams held the key to an illness or to a problem that was happening during the waking hours. Sometimes, on rare occasions, it could also tell the future.

As the large cat didn't appear to be moving any time soon, Elena took a step forward, away from the manor in order to explore the surrounding village.

A snow-filled road led from the front of the manor to the rest of the village. When she walked in the snow, it seemed to swirl around her feet like water, forming and reforming around her yet not giving any friction. The buildings in the village itself were constructed of stone and built in a peculiar quaint style that made Elena think of all of the northern made trinkets that occasionally made their way down to the south on the trading routes.

The stone masons of the northern counties were well renowned for their skills, so she was no surprised to see that the houses appeared to be well built and sturdy, like short, squat soldiers lined up on an avenue. Above, the sky was dark, yet cloudy. She could not see the stars or the moon. None of the houses in the village were lit, either, so theoretically, everything should have been pitch dark. But for some reason, she could see everything. It was as if the environment and the snow around her were emitting a soft gray light that illuminated everything around her.

She didn't hear anything, but something made her look to her side when she finally reached the edge of the village. The large black cat, as large as a man, she guessed, had moved from his post in front of the manor and had come to pad silently beside her. There were many hedge witches and sorcerers who had spirit animals who walked with them in dreams, but Elena was not one of those people. If she saw animals in her dreams, they were always part of the dream, not part of her. And certainly no guide. So she took the appearance of this cat as something she should perhaps ponder over when she finally woke up.

In real life, beyond the village surrounding the earl's manor was along rolling moor that seamlessly blended into the rocky surroundings. But in this dream, there were no moors. Instead, the village abutted a forest filled with trees that still had leaves. In the grayish light, the leaves appeared to be made of beaten silver. She followed her urge to go into the forest. For one moment, she stood next to a tree and plucked one of the leaves from the branches. Almost immediately, the leaf disintegrated in her hand, leaving nothing but a trail of silver dust on her palms.

Deeper in the forest, she saw a light glowing in the distance. She walked toward it, but the more distance she put behind her, the further the light seemed to be.

Once she realized that was happening, she stopped walking. When something like that happened in dreams, there was never going to be any end to it. She would just end up frustrating herself and then end up doing something foolish before she woke up. So instead, she stood by a tree and just waited. Either something would start happening without her having to exert too much effort, or the light would decide to come back.

Sensing that she had stopped for good, the cat sat on his haunches near here and began swishing his tail, also waiting.

Just as she suspected, the light began moving closer to her, now that she had decided to stop chasing it. Perhaps that very thing should mean something significant in her life, she supposed, but

at the moment, she was too in tune with the dream world about her to put too much thought into that.

The light came closer and when it was perhaps a few paces away from her, she realized that the light came from a small metal ball that floated in the air without any support. The glow from the ball was a soft yellow light, like that of candlelight, but it was obvious that this thing was something quite magical. Next to the light was a very strange and ugly creature. To her eyes, it looked like a gigantic cockroach. In real life, she would have started screaming and running away. But since this was the dream world, all she did was to tilt her head in curiosity and ask inquiringly, "Hello?"

The large cat, however, didn't take the appearance of the giant cockroach with such equanimity. Instead, the large feline bared its teeth and emitted a warning growl.

The giant cockroach raised one pair of legs as if in surrender and said in a strange accented voice that sounded like the husking of dry leaves, "Please, I mean you no harm. I am simply a traveler and a scholar. I noticed that you were here in this deserted forest. I thought you might have more ideas on why this is."

She shook her head. "I suppose I'm a traveler like you. And no, I don't know why this forest is empty. This is just a dream."

"A dream?" the giant cockroach said, startled. "I thought I had just turned down a wrong path from my explorations of the city. I'm trying to get back, you know."

"Get back?"

"Get back to the city. My colleagues and my advisor will be looking for me." The giant cockroach waved his antennae in sudden agitation. "Especially my advisor. He is going to be very disappointed in me if he discovers that I've wandered off again. I was supposed to be busy cataloging one of the outer buildings in the city that had some interesting artifacts."

"Oh." Elena was puzzled by the appearance of the lost giant cockroach in her dream. She

wondered what the creature represented in her subconscious. “Well, I hope you find your way back soon. I'm sorry I can't help you. I think I'm as lost as you are.”

“Well, it was nice meeting you, I suppose,” said the giant cockroach. “Yet you are a strange creature to my eyes. And you can speak the Ancient tongue. Are you one of the Ancients?”

She had heard tales of a people called the Ancients, but that was history, wasn't it? And certainly, who the giant cockroach called the Ancients were probably different from her notion of the Ancients. In any case, she certainly wasn't an Ancient. And she told the giant cockroach as much.

“Well, if you aren't an Ancient, is that an Ancient?” the giant cockroach said, pointing to the large cat.

She shook her head. “Most certainly not. It is just a creature. To be honest, I haven't really seen such a creature outside of the prince's menagerie when I had a glimpse of it, but it is just a creature, nonetheless.”

“That is too bad.” The giant cockroach waved one of his arms and then moved away. “I won't distract you from your walk then. I need to get back to the city.”

Chapter 8

Mendel woke with a jolt.

“Rise and shine! It's time for the first meal!”

He looked around to see who was speaking and found that Gamow had somehow gotten past the locks on his bedroom door.

“What are you doing here?” Mendel demanded. “How did you get past my locks?”

“What locks?” Gamow asked.

At that remark, Mendel scrambled out of his nest to test the doors. Meanwhile, Gamow strode over to the window and flung open the shutters, letting the sunlight in. The sudden light made Mendel lift an arm in an attempt to shield his eyes. He peered at the door and there didn't appear to be any locks on the door. It was as if someone had pried them apart and thrown them away. He gave an irritated click.

“Come on, sleepy head,” said Gamow. “You'd better get down there soon and eat. Apparently Bell has a long list of things for us to do today.”

“All right, all right,” Mendel grumbled. After cleaning himself, he followed Gamow back down to the lower floor to the kitchen where the others had already set the table for the first meal. Their advisor, fortunately, had not arrived yet to the table. Mendel hurriedly got his own bowl of the morning meal and began to eat, paying little attention to the chatter about him. He was mostly lost within his own world as he thought back to the strange dream that he had the previous night.

He had found himself at the outskirts of the Ancient city of Beersheba. That, at first, hadn't seemed too strange. In fact, he had thought that he was still awake at the time, going to one of the ruins to catalog some artifacts. He had his small floating light that he had gotten from Faraday as a gift and his pouch and recording devices. So he had gone into the building he thought he was supposed to be cataloging.

He had not been sure exactly how much time he had been in the ruin doing work, but it had not seemed that he was making any progress at all. Instead, his mind had wandered and he had wondered when he would be able to get back to base camp so he could get back to that strange Ancient book that he had been reading on his free time. It was then that he noticed that much of the natural light had gone from the windows of the ruins. Thinking that it was probably time to head

back, he had exited the ruins and had walked out, believing that he was going in the right direction.

But somehow, he had turned himself around and he found himself walking in a strange forest instead of the ruins of Beersheba. The sky had turned as dark as ink and it had felt a little cold as the wind began to blow. He had activated the light ball that Faraday had given him, but he didn't think that it made much of a difference. There seemed to be a strange light gray glow coming out from everything around him. The forest itself was also very strange. The trees were of no species that he had ever seen before. The leaves were flat and splayed out in points. And they were colored a metallic silver. And the further he went into the forest, the colder it got. And he began to notice snow on the ground.

While he was lost in the woods, he had sensed that there was someone with him in the forest. At first, he had wanted to run away from the unknown. He had momentarily panicked, wishing to go back home immediately. But then he had come to his senses and tried to reason logically about the situation. If there was someone else in the forest, perhaps this someone would be able to tell him which direction it was back to the city.

But when he found this person, it was a very strange creature that greeted his eyes. Instead of the six appendages that he was familiar with, this creature stood on two legs and had only two arms. The creature's eyes were very small and were set in a rather strange and unsettling face with a nose and a mouth opening with teeth inside instead of a pair of mandibles and a pair of antennae. The creature had flesh instead of a carapace, which he thought was very inefficient and not very protective. Especially since the creature had to wear clothes. And beside this creature was another creature which was similar, but walked on four paws and had a tail. It seemed even more alarming to Mendel because it had even sharper teeth and made threatening noises in his direction.

A thought had come to his head then. Were these creatures the Ancients?

But alas, that wasn't to be. These creatures were as lost in the forest as he was and could say

nothing about where Beersheba was. So he had decided to head back on his own. In his aimless wandering, he had managed to trip over a tree root. But before he hit the ground in his clumsiness, he had awoken.

What a strange dream, he thought as his advisor finally came into the kitchen to grab some food. Perhaps he had been reading too much about the Ancient fairy tales. In truth, he was still stuck on the story about the girl with the red coat. While he had taken top marks in the classes on the Ancient tongue that he had taken in university, the dialect of the Ancient language in the book of fairy tales wasn't exactly the same as the one he learned at school. It appeared to be a slightly different dialect, even a more archaic form. So it was taking him a little longer than usual to get through the story.

After the first meal, his advisor Bell began dealing out the work assignments for the day. He wasn't surprised that his advisor assigned him cataloging duty again. He was supposed to go to one of the ruins at the outskirts of the city where one of the other students had found some interesting artifacts that they believed the ancients created as pieces of art.

Soon after the he got instructions for his assignment for the day, Mendel headed out. He walked out of the building that they were using as base camp and made his way down one of the main avenues that crossed Beersheba's square. The square itself was quite interesting because the architecture of the cobblestone square was distinctly different from the rest of the buildings that surrounded it. At the center of the square was what he could only guess was the Ancients' version of a fountain. And below the fountain, there was a blocked off entrance to some sort of underground complex.

According to the Ancients, every tethered city had an anchor. Beersheba was one of those tethered cities, so far the only tethered city that anyone knew of in their current universe, so that meant that whatever was beneath the fountain was probably one of the Ancients' anchors. From

that anchor, there were probably knots or gateways that led to tethers that connected one universe to another. The Ancients used these constructed devices to populate a wide number of universes and cities, spreading out into an Empire. That, unfortunately, came tumbling down when a cataclysm called the Great Rending occurred.

No one knew exactly what the Great Rending was. There were some theories that it was a natural disaster, tearing apart the tethers that connected the cities. Others thought that the Great Rending had been caused by someone, possibly by even one of the Ancients. Whatever the case, the Great Rending had isolated Beersheba from all of the other cities in the parallel universes and caused the loss of a great amount of knowledge that they had on the Ancients. It was a wonder, really, that they still had the knowledge that they had. For instance, Mendel's kind knew that they did not come from gods or even evolve independently on the world that they currently resided on. No, they knew that their race had been engineered by the Ancients to help populate worlds that were otherwise harmful to their kind. Because Mendel and the other giant cockroaches had the unique ability to withstand certain environments without much damage.

At any rate, even if his research group had enough help and money to open up the underground complex and to get the anchor, knots, and tethers working again, it would be virtually impossible for any of his kind to get to any of the other cities by themselves. Because the Ancients had never engineered any knot jumpers or knot finders in their kind. Maybe the Ancients never thought to do it. Or more likely, the Ancients thought that they would have no need of it, especially since there were other races that they had already engineered to do so.

Unfortunately, none of those other races saw fit to try to get to Beersheba in the centuries following the Great Rending. Or more likely, they simply couldn't due to circumstances out of their control.

Mendel finally made his way to the edge of the city to the building that Bell had described.

But as he stood in front of the partially ruined building, he had to do a double take. He was positive that he had seen the building before. It had the same arrangement of windows and doors and even broken masonry as the building that he had worked in in his dream. What did this coincidence mean? he mused as he went inside the building and turned to the first room to start cataloging. He never took stock in dreams before. He had always believed that dream interpretation was all superstition.

But unlike the dream, when he finished at the building for the day and wrote down his report to take to his advisor when he got back, the evening air did not seem as cold. And he easily made his way back through the city to base camp. Some of the other cockroaches had made their own meals, apparently it was a free evening today, so Mendel went by his advisor's makeshift study to drop off his report and to grab some food in the kitchen. He went back to his own room and examined the door again and shook his head. He shook his head, hoping that Gamow wouldn't burst in on him again and then jumped into his nest.

He pulled out a protein bar to gnaw on as he got out the Ancient book again. If he wanted to avoid more strange dreams, he probably shouldn't be reading the book, but he couldn't help himself.

Chapter 9

The process of waking was a slow one. First, Elena became aware that she was no longer standing in the dark forest of trees with silver leaves but drifting off somewhere else in a cocoon of warm darkness. Then it registered on her mind that she was not standing at all by lying down somewhere, swaddled in blankets. Something else was lying on top of her. She cracked her eyes open and stared into very human-like blue eyes.

She gave a muffled shriek and nearly rolled off the bed. The enormous black cat which had somehow followed her from her dream world to the real world, had been curled up beside her, perhaps asleep, perhaps watching over her. It cocked its head in inquiry at her reaction and she had the urge to shout at it that of course she screamed. She screamed because its mouth was big enough to eat her head whole.

The large feline gave a purr and a butt of his head against her shoulder, indicating that he meant no particular harm. His tail swished on the coverlet, simply waiting for her to come out from underneath the covers. Finally, she slowly did and she raised one hand to touch the cat on his head. The feline purred in encouragement.

Now she sat up and looked about her room. It was an ordinary enough room, although lavish in her poor experience. She remembered that she was staying in one of the guest rooms in the manor of the Earl of Nordalness. It was obviously morning as a bit of sunlight filtered through the drapes that had been pulled shut against the window on the far side of the room. The fire in the hearth had died down through the night so that all that was left were a few embers in the fireplace. Beside the bed, which was an enormous piece of furniture that could have fit an additional five people along with herself and the cat, there was a small washstand and a vanity table. Across from that was a wardrobe which she had not had the time before to investigate. From all appearances, it didn't appear as if any of the maids that she had met the previous night had come into the room to prepare her for the morning. Someone had decided to let her sleep in.

She was also relieved to find that the giant talking cockroach that she had seen in her dream had not also come into real life like the cat. While the giant cockroach had seemed polite and safe enough, she had already had a shock this morning to find the cat in her bed. And she was already familiar with cats, if not cats as large as he was.

Seeing that she was now awake, the cat decided to jump off the bed. She half expected the

feline to just disappear, after all she had had experiences with dreams within dreams, but after a strong pinch on her arm, she was quite sure that she was really awake. The cat, however, did not decide to leave. First, the cat went over to the hearth to stare at the embers. In what seemed like an instant, the fire was going again, with fresh wood. Elena gaped at the magic, at first not comprehending. After that bit of strangeness, she expected the cat to leave. But instead, the cat decided to investigate the one piece of furniture that she had not looked inside, the wardrobe. The large cat lifted a paw and somehow managed to pull the knob, opening the wardrobe. The cat contemplated the contents for a while before turning his head and vocalizing a growl. She had the impression that the cat wanted her to get out of bed.

“Fine, fine,” she muttered as she pulled off the covers and climbed out of the warm bedclothes. While the room had warmed back up considerably after the cat had started the fire again, the floor was still very cold. And her feet were bare. She quickly found some slippers that had somehow slipped beneath the bed and put them on before walking to the wardrobe. The cat patted a paw on one of the gowns hanging in the wardrobe, evidently wanting her to put it on.

“Are you choosing my clothes now, are you?” she grumbled. “You're a rather bossy cat.”

The large feline sniffed at her remark and apparently content that she was going to do as she was told, padded back over to the fireplace and turned his back on her. At the cat's strange, almost human-like behavior, Elena pulled the gown out of the wardrobe to look it over. It was a warm woolen gown, one that would befit one of the lower gentry in style, but the cloth was very fine and probably very expensive, indicating that the lower gentry probably could not afford such luxury. The gown was for a noble who wanted to play at being the lower gentry, Elena decided. But it suited her purpose for the moment, to keep warm.

She stripped off the night gown and began putting on the dress. In the wardrobe, she found thick socks and matching slippers. She was quite sure what to do with her hair, so she simply

combed out the tangles and tied it back with a ribbon. She finally decided to venture out of her room.

The hallway outside of the guest room was empty. There were no servants around waiting for her or doing any household chores at this end of the house. The hallway itself was as lavish as the guest room. The stone floor was covered with warm dark blue carpet woven with strange symbols in yellow. From what she saw of the manor, there wasn't anything definite about it that she could pinpoint as the Nordalness coat of arms. But then again, she had only seen this part of the manor as well as the dining room. Usually in manors, or at least from what she had gleaned from her little knowledge about court life that she had heard from gossip while growing up, many of the coat of arms and insignia of the residing family was located in a great hall near the center of the building. She, however, had been ushered through a side entrance rather than the front hall, so she could not tell for sure if the gossip was right or not.

The giant cat decided to walk with her, silently, down the hall. She wasn't quite sure where to go, but she was famished and wishing for breakfast. And she decided that the most logical place to go was to the dining room again. And if there was no one there, perhaps she could try to find the kitchens which most likely be close to the dining room, if not next to it.

The corridor snaked past several other rooms with closed doors. She briefly wondered what lay behind those other doors. More guest rooms? Or something more functional? But she did not feel that she had the right to pry into the earl's home. Besides, there was always the chance that one of the servants might catch her snooping about and report her behavior back to the earl who would definitely not be happy about it. At the end of the corridor, there was an archway that led into a small hall filled with a variety of tapestries woven in blue and gold thread on one wall and a panel of laticed windows on the opposite side. Briefly, she stopped in front of the windows to look outside.

The windows looked over an inner courtyard in the manor that was paved in cobblestone,

from what the layer of snow had revealed, and decorated by statues of animals in a variety of poses. At the very center of the courtyard was a small fountain with the figure of a dancing horse. The fountain was empty of water, just as the courtyard was empty of people.

“It's a little strange, isn't it,” she mused, half to herself and half to the silent cat, “that we are all alone in this place. Am I still dreaming or is everyone on holiday?”

The cat uttered a grumbling purr and butted her hip with his head, urging her forward.

So she continued walking down the hall to turn to another corridor that would lead directly to the dining room. But halfway down the corridor, she heard voices from the dining room. One of the voices, a feminine voice, she immediately recognized as the dowager countess. The other voice was a younger woman's. A maid, she guessed, by her subservient answers to the dowager countess. When the cat caught the sound of conversation, however, he stopped and pricked up his ears, listening intently. Then, a moment later, the cat bounded off in the opposite direction as if the devil and all of his minions were at his heels.

Elena opened her mouth to call the cat back, but then decided against it. Controlling a feline that large would be a fool's errand. Especially for a fool who wanted his hand bitten off. So she turned back and walked towards the voices. Just inside the dining room, she found the dowager countess, dressed in a bright yellow morning dress and an old fashioned headdress speaking with one of the maids. When the dowager countess finished with her commands, she turned to spot Elena standing in the doorway.

“Good morning, my lady,” said Elena.

“There you are!” the older woman exclaimed. “I thought you were going to sleep the day away.”

“I guess I was more tired than I thought,” she said cautiously.

The dowager countess turned back to the maid and said, “Make everything double, then. We

will be in the sun room.”

“Yes, my lady.” The maid curtsied and then scurried off towards the kitchen.

The older woman motioned with her hand for Elena to follow her down another hallway that branched off from the dining hall. “I hope you had a good night's rest.”

“Yes, it was very good.” That was really all one could say about sleep, Elena mused. She hardly knew the dowager countess. It wouldn't do at all to tell her all about her strange dream. But the cat was another matter. “I noticed that the earl has a large cat in the manor. It's probably as big as a man. Is it the earl's pet? It seemed rather tame.”

She raised an eyebrow at Elena's description. “Oh? Yes, I suppose there are animals about in the manor. It wouldn't surprise me. If you haven't noticed already, my son is a little eccentric. I blame his father.”

“Ah.”

“The former earl was a scholar,” she said as they walked to the end of the hallway and began climbing up a flight of stairs. “He was always buried in his books and running all sorts of experiments that no one understood. He claimed that everything he did was for science. Lysander, unfortunately, has a very similar bent of mind. I'm afraid that may be one of the reasons that he is still not married yet. Quite annoying for me and the northern Council, I can assure you.”

Elena just made affirmative noises, unsure that she could follow all of the dowager countess's thought processes. But she did manage to ask a question, “Is the earl around? I thought he wanted to ask me more questions today.”

The dowager countess waved a hand in the air, pointing vaguely in the opposite direction. “He is around. I believe the boy is probably off in his study or in the library doing research. Last night, he had mumbled something about gates and tunnels and ancient beings and had decided to go off trying to find answers to other questions. I do hope he did get some sleep. I wouldn't be

surprised if he decided to sleep in his study again. But don't worry, he'll remember eventually that he brought you home with him. When he has questions, he won't rest until he gets the answers.”

That sounded rather ominous by far, but she decided not to tell the dowager countess of her misgivings. Instead, she concentrated on her surroundings.

The part of the manor that the older woman was taking her to was a section of the building that she had not been to before. The hall that they were passing by was covered by a large carpet dyed in rich brown and maroon. There were a few gilded tables lining the walls as well as portraits of people who Elena assumed were ancestors of the earl. At the far end of the hall, the dowager countess opened a tall door with a brass handle.

The room they entered had rugs in dark red strewn across a stone floor. The furniture and the tapestries hanging on the walls matched the color. The wall directly across from the door had several clear glass windows that overlooked the surrounding countryside.

“Please have a seat,” said the dowager countess as she took one of the chairs next to the hearth. “Agatha will be here in a moment with breakfast.”

As she had indicated, Elena took the chair across from the older woman and settled down into the deep red cushion. It was almost like sleeping in a bed, she thought. Back in her own meager cottage just outside of the country boundary, she had a bed with a mattress filled with hay. It was somewhat comfortable, especially after a long day of grinding herbs, but definitely not as soft as the mattress back in the guest room. She had guessed that it had been probably filled with feathers. The cushion on the chair had a similar comfort, and she felt a little anxiety that she might fall asleep before breakfast arrived.

The dowager countess seemed oblivious to her inner turmoil. Instead, the older woman seemed content to make small talk with her. “You are lucky that my son decided to take you out of the prince's hands,” she said. “Despite all of his bluster, Lysander treats his tenants and servants

very well. He got it from me, thank the gods. His father was too absent-minded and could care less if the manor burned down around his ears.”

Elena simply nodded.

“The prince is not known to be a very nice man,” she continued. “It's been said that he treats prisoners rather horribly, especially if he thinks it will get him what he wants. He's very spoiled. I think it's because of his parents who spoil him horribly. Unfortunately, the queen is gone and the king is just clinging onto the vestiges of life now. It's just a matter of time that he passes on. And the prince is pretty much king of the land in all but name.”

“Some say that speaking ill of the prince would be blasphemy,” Elena said quietly.

“There is no one here but us, girl,” the dowager countess peered at her, “but I see you don't have any love lost on the prince either. I suppose since Lysander took you from the palace at the capital city, you have already experienced his royal highness's brand of hospitality.”

“It was no harsher than what some would experience,” said Elena. “Otherwise, I couldn't really say. All I heard was that the prince would be sending one of the sorcerers to help part me from this book, but he never did.”

“Ah.”

At that moment, the maid Agatha arrived with a large tray containing a pot of tea along with two plates containing eggs, toast, and sausage. There were also two smaller bowls containing steaming porridge.

At the smell of the food, Elena's stomach growled embarrassingly loud. But it didn't appear to faze the dowager countess. Instead, when the maid poured the tea, the dowager countess inquired if she wanted sugar or milk in her drink. Elena just shook her head and took the hot drink straight up before taking the plate of food and starting to eat.

They ate in silence for a moment before the dowager countess announced, “I am sure my son

knows of this, but there is a council meeting tomorrow. I am sure they will want to hear his answer to their demands as soon as possible.”

“Demands?” Elena asked between bites.

“Oh, it is this and that,” she said offhandedly. “But if Lysander has any brains in his head, he will realize that bringing you with him to the meeting will dispel much of the grumbling in the council. You are, my dear, a concrete example that he is making progress.”

“Making progress on what?”

“Why, trying to figure out how to approach the sorcerers in Sophronia, of course.”

Elena had heard of Sophronia. It was one of those small city states located in the northern counties. It was, theoretically, governed by an old wizard who supposedly had the power to keep a major dike in the area from flooding. The very power needed to keep the dike from flooding was one of the requirements that Sophronia had for joining its ruling elite. It was also said that the sorcerers in Sophronia were also in charge of something far more profound, a gateway to other worlds. Elena herself wasn't quite sure what that meant, and most people believed that the very idea was just a fairy tale, so she didn't pay much attention to it. But she could see how some very powerful people would think that Sophronia would hold strategic significance, if those stories were indeed true. Whoever controlled the gateway to other worlds would also control access to such worlds. That would mean more land. More resources. And perhaps access to other civilizations, if such existed. She could see how the nobles of the northern counties would view Sophronia as an ace in their pocket in their dealings with the spoiled prince if they could somehow form an alliance with those sorcerers.

“I have heard stories about Sophronia,” said Elena as she sipped more tea and then finished her eggs. “But I don't see how any of that has anything to do with me. I'm just a hedge witch. I can hardly see why any of the sorcerers who live in Sophronia would want to deal with me.”

“Oh, but they will,” the dowager countess assured her. “They will be forced to, especially since you have had contact with the girl with the red coat.”

“But I just met her once and briefly at that. And I don't think she has granted my wish. Or taken any favors from me. How will that help?”

The older woman shrugged. “I am not well versed with the goings on of a sorcerer's mind. But I do know that the sorcerers have been rumored to be searching for the girl with the red coat and possibly other powerful creatures like her for a long time. They will welcome any clue you have that you might be able to tell them. That, by itself, will be our leverage.”

“I'm not sure I like the idea of being a political pawn.” She put her plate down and started in on the porridge, “But I suppose I don't have much say in that.”

Chapter 10

It was just when one of the servants arrived to clear away the dishes from the morning meal that the owner of the manor decided to make his appearance. That morning, he was wearing what looked like casual riding clothes made of thick brown cloth. He had a journal, a jar of ink, and a quill in one hand. He greeted Elena and the dowager countess curtly before pulling up a seat himself.

His mother looked at him critically. “Well, you don't look like you've been up the entire night. But have you had breakfast?”

“I've had breakfast,” he said. “Don't worry about me, mother. I'm a grown man.”

“Well, your father was a grown man and he forgot about meals all the time in favor of his books.”

“Trust me, I ate breakfast,” he growled. Then he turned his penetrating blue gaze onto Elena. “Now, hopefully you will be cooperative this morning.”

“I thought I was cooperative last night, my lord,” she replied.

“Humph.” He put the jar of ink on a small stand next to his elbow and balanced the journal on the arm of the chair. He dipped the quill into the ink and began to scribble something into the journal. “Now, about that book that appears to be permanently attached to your person.”

She looked down at the strange book written in a different language that she had currently put on her lap. It had become a habit in the past days to carry it with her the entire time, especially since she was afraid that someone unscrupulous would take it from her. Of course, since she didn't know what the book said, she supposed she shouldn't care who would take it from her, but she didn't want to take any chances. “What about this book?”

“Since you are apparently loathe to part with it, why don't you show it to me? You can open it and let me read it and you will be in possession of it the entire time.”

“You're hoping to copy some of it,” she realized as she looked from his journal back to her book.

“Yes. That way, I can study it at my leisure.”

She thought back to the strange black panel that she had found on one of the pages. “I have to warn you, it's not going to be as easy as that.”

“We'll see about that. You can balance it on your lap. When I'm finished, I'll tell you to turn the page.”

She sighed, slightly exasperated that he was automatically assuming that she would automatically show him the book even though she would not give it to him to look at it physically. But what could she do? The worst that could happen was that he would recognize what the glyphs said and figure out a way to take the book from her. On her part, she still had little idea how

important the book was. So she set the book in front of her and showed him that there was nothing written on the cover. Then she turned it to the tile page.

The earl slowly wrote the glyphs in his journal. "That's a very strange kind of writing. I've never seen it before. You say that you can't read it?"

She shook her head.

The dowager countess who was watching the proceedings with interest, set her tea aside and lifted up an eyeglass for a closer look. "Hm. How unusual."

The earl suddenly stopped scribbling in his journal. "What do you mean unusual?"

"I just mean that, unusual." She put down her eyeglass and gave her son a stare that was eerily reminiscent of his glare. "I don't know what they mean, of course, but I think I've seen something similar to those particular glyphs."

"You have?"

Elena suddenly sat up straighter at the earl's interested tone. She wanted to hear what the dowager countess was going to say. And she was not going to let the breakfast which was now sitting warm and pleasantly in her stomach from keeping her from staying awake to hear it.

"Of course," she replied. "I'm a little surprised that you didn't recognize them sooner. Don't you recognize the style? They're very familiar with the symbols that the sorcerers at Sophronia use on their spells."

"Really?"

At the dowager countess's remark, Elena found herself glancing over the cover of the book to see the glyphs on the page. They did not appear to have changed from the last time that she had seen them. But then it gave her a thought. If the sorcerers at Sophronia used the glyphs for spells, did that mean that the book she was holding was a spell book? And why on earth would it attach itself to her? She was only a hedge witch. And an ignorant hedge witch at that. She was literate but

only barely. And the glyphs were completely beyond her ken. But if the sorcerers knew about it, that meant that it would be inevitable that she would have to go see those sorcerers in Sophronia.

The earl, apparently, had come to the same conclusion that she had, because he was frowning. “Well, if these are the same glyphs that the sorcerers in Sophronia use, this must be one of their spell books. Which is even more of an incentive to go there as soon as possible to figure out what this is. The question now is, of course, how did you, a hedge witch, come across the volume?”

“It was by accident, really,” she said. “I saw it in the forest. I couldn't tell you exactly where in the forest, but it had been on my way home. It was just lying there on the ground. And there wasn't anyone else in the forest who it could have belonged to. Not anyone I could see, anyway.”

“Not that you could see?” repeated the earl. “What about anyone that you could sense around you?”

Elena only shook her head. “I thought I was alone. Although with the presence of the book, there's always the possibility that there was someone there, hidden from my eyes.”

“I don't want speculation,” said the earl. “Just what you know.”

“Fine.”

They stared at each other for a moment, but it was Elena who looked away first even though she did not particularly want to. It meant that he won that bout and that she had lost. She did not like losing unless it was inevitable. The earl's mother, however, did not notice the exchange.

“Did you notice anything else around you?” she asked her. “Perhaps something slightly out of place?”

She shook her head again. “What can you notice out of place in a forest? The branches and trees and the ground weren't unusual that I noticed. But at the time, I can't say that I was particularly observant.”

“Perhaps I should put her under hypnosis,” said the earl. “That's been a proven way of

getting people to describe details that they did not notice with their conscious mind.”

“That's ridiculous,” his mother replied. “I think hypnosis will not work at all. Whenever anyone is under hypnosis, they're always doing what the hypnotist suggests. They're under suggestion. They're not doing or saying anything that is really in their subconscious mind. Unless you go dream walking.”

“Dream walking has its own downsides,” said the earl. “For one thing, everything is in symbol form. You can't tell what is what unless you know the person very well. A tree in one person's dream may have a completely different meaning from a tree in someone else's dream.”

The earl abruptly closed his journal and took up his quill and ink pot. He stood up and motioned to his mother and Elena that he was going to leave.

“Are you going back to molder in your study?” his mother demanded. “You know you will have a meeting tomorrow with the council. They will expect answers.”

“And I expected to answer them without you standing over my shoulder.” But the comment was softened by the slight curve of his lips as if he had expected his mother to come to the manor anyway and involve herself in his business. “I don't need you to remind me of that. It's on my schedule.”

“If you say so,” she replied doubtfully. “What will you tell them?”

He looked thoughtful for a moment before looking straight back at Elena again. His blue eyes seemed to glow strangely in the sun room. “Why, I don't really have to tell them anything. I can just bring her, can't I? I've managed to wrest her from the prince's dungeons.”

“It was an isolation tower, actually,” said Elena.

“Same difference,” he replied dismissively. “I don't believe it would take much to convince them, although I suppose they would expect you to answer some questions.”

“What sort of questions?” Elena said warily. She did not look forward to being questioned in

front of an entire council, which would inevitably consist of a bunch of old dour men who probably would not approve of a hedge witch anyway.

“They would probably expect answers of the sort that involve the girl with the red coat,” he replied. “Maybe even some questions about what the prince wanted with you.”

“But I never saw the prince.”

“Even better. That will convince them that the prince is too preoccupied with other things while we shore up on our own position.” The earl then nodded to the two women. “I have several things to attend to for the rest of the morning. I'm sure the dowager countess will have time to show you around the manor to pass the time until the noon day meal.” And with that, the earl walked out of the sun room, leaving Elena alone with the dowager countess again.

“Well, I suppose that went better than expected.”

Elena found herself raising an eyebrow.

“He is usually quite curt,” she explained. “Lysander, like his father, hates explaining himself. You're luck that you got that many words out of him when you asked him what sort of questions the Council might ask of you. He must be in a good mood. Either that, or he doesn't find you annoying.”

“Does the earl find most people annoying?” If he didn't find her annoying, then she didn't want to see what he was like when he was annoyed. To her, he seemed a bit aloof and entitled, as all nobles seemed to be in her limited experience.

“Oh, quite.” The dowager countess seemed to warm to the subject. “When he was a boy, he was far less tactful. He found quite a few of the people that came through the manor who wanted to get on his father's good graces to be annoying. And when he grew older, it became most of the members of the Council and the rest of the nobility. He especially despises people he thinks are shallow. Which, unfortunately, are most of the eligible ladies that I have urged him to consider.”

“Maybe he doesn't want to marry?” Elena ventured.

“That's unthinkable,” the dowager countess declared. “He must marry in order to carry on the line and the title. He will marry whether he likes it or not. Of course, it is not quite so dire now since he is still young. But you know how it is. It is always more difficult to marry off a man if he is too old, even if he has a lot of money.”

“There are plenty of girls out there who would marry for the money and the title, regardless of what he looked like.”

“That's what I told him. But he would have none of it. Well, enough about that.” The dowager countess clapped her hands to summon a maid to clean up the things from breakfast. “My son did say that I could show you around the manor. And I do like giving tours to visitors. I especially want people to see one particular room.”

“Oh?”

The dowager countess seemed positively giddy at the thought. “Come. You'll see what I mean when you see it. It is not far from the sun room.”

Curious as to what would excite the older woman, Elena closed the text that she had and tucked it under her arm as they walked out of the sun room and walked a bit down the hallway to stop at one of the closed doors a bit further down. It was a plain wooden door, painted to match the wall, easily missed.

“It's rather wonderful if I say so myself,” she said. “I think you will like this, considering the fact that you're a hedge witch.”

“Really?” To Elena's mind, she couldn't really think of anything that she would specifically like compared to anyone else. Besides, the door was plain, indicating that there was something that normally the owner of the manor wanted to hide from prying eyes. She couldn't reconcile that assumption with the dowager countess's obvious desire to show the room to her.

The dowager countess nodded at her rhetorical remark and twisted the knob. It took little to

push the door open. The door itself made no noise, indicating that this particular door was maintained regularly. At first, Elena could not see anything, but as her eyes adjusted, she saw that there was a little sunlight filtering from where the drapes did not completely cover the windows at the far end of the room. The dowager countess walked into the room first, heading to the windows where she pulled the drapes aside.

The sunlight suddenly flooded the room, forcing Elena to shield her eyes with her free arm. When she blinked and focused, she found that the room was filled to the brim with things. Charms of all sorts. As a hedge witch, she conserved her own resources by only making as many charms that she and the villagers needed. Here, the room was bursting full of them, enough to equip several armies in her estimation. And the charms weren't all powerless, either. She could sense the magic, laying low, barely veiled, waiting to be used. She was almost afraid to move about in the room, in case one of the charms might accidentally activate.

There was a long work table close to the window where there were wooden blocks, herbs, ribbons, and other miscellanea that were used to make charms. Several charms there were works in progress. The rest of the room was lined with shelves where the rest of the charms were stashed. On one side was a hearth, the mantel which was filled with more charms, as were the chairs and small coffee table next to it. When she looked up, she saw that more charms hung from the beamed ceiling like so much drying flowers and bulb vegetables like onions. The charms themselves came in all sorts of shapes, sizes, and materials. Some of them were large statues which were stored in one corner. And others were as small as a locket. Most of them were like the latter.

“Don't you think this is magnificent?” said the dowager countess.

“It certainly is an impressive collection of charms,” she replied diplomatically. There didn't appear to be any order to where any of the charms were stored. They seemed to be placed wherever the owner found room. “I've never seen so many in one place. Isn't it a bit dangerous, storing all

this magic in one place?”

“Oh, I've been assured that it's not dangerous at all, especially since all of this magic isn't active at the moment. We're pretty proud of our collection. We generally supply the surrounding village and some of the other hamlets in the outer parts of the countryside on our lands. The charms have been made in the Nordalness family for generations. Lysander is the latest in the line to continue the tradition. But as you can see at the moment, he is neglecting his duties.”

If the Earl of Nordalness created charms, that meant that he had some kind of magical ability. Not surprising, since she had already assumed that he was a sorcerer in all but name.

“Are there no hedge witches on your lands?” Elena inquired.

The dowager countess shook her head. “The last hedge witch on our lands was an elderly woman when I first married the previous earl. She did not have any apprentices so there was no one to pass her knowledge down to. But it seems like the people don't particularly notice the absence of a hedge witch. Life goes on, as it were. And anyone in need of a charm is free to come to the manor to request one, although there have been very few requests of late.”

“Perhaps your people are reluctant to come up to the manor because they are intimidated by it. The Earl, if you pardon my saying so, my lady, is not particularly personable.”

The older woman chuckled. “You may be right, girl. Perhaps, too, we are too far removed from the populace to really be in touch with their needs. Most of the time, we rely on appointed servants who go into the villages to see what sorts of needs the people want. But they, too, could be intimidated by our representatives.” She glanced at Elena with a shrewd gleam in her eye. “You've worked with a village before, girl. Perhaps they will listen to you since you are a hedge witch yourself.”

“I don't know. I'm not originally from here. It's obvious because of my appearance, my accent. Most people are rather close minded about foreigners, even if they're from the other side of

the country.”

“Well, you could try.”

Elena doubted it. She had lived in a village all of her life. And she knew the nature of people in small villages and hamlets who rarely saw anyone outside of their own location for most of their life. Strangers were always viewed with suspicion. And because people were so insular, any little difference, even that of ability like being a hedge witch, was enough to brand one as different even though one was born there. It was as if people from small villages wanted to see differences. They wanted everyone exactly like themselves. And although the northern counties had a different culture than the south part of the country, she did not think that that particular mindset was any different here.

“We have a fair number of charms here,” the dowager countess continued. “Most of them are agriculturally related. For growing crops, harvesting, and preventing pests. And then there are other kinds of charms, mostly good luck charms. There are a few love charms in here somewhere, too, a relic of one of the Nordalness ancestresses, but I don't think anyone in recent memory has ever requested one of those.”

“Well, would you want to request a love charm from the earl?”

“I suppose that's a good point,” the dowager countess admitted. “I know exactly what my son would say. A love charm would soon wear off if the love isn't true. And the spell would be shallow at best. And most likely backfire no matter what sort of intentions you had.”

“I only made love charms on one occasion,” said Elena. “Only when a marriage was a love match. It's one of the first rules that an apprentice learns from a hedge witch. Love charms can be dangerous when in the wrong hands. So it would be best not to make them at all, if you could help it.”

“That's very wise.”

“I'm not particularly wise, but my teacher was.” Elena finally stepped further into the room to look at the charms a little more closely. On one shelf, she saw several small whistles that were shaped like miniature flutes. She had heard of such charms before. With such charms, the wielder would blow through the whistle and make a noise. For the best results, the wielder would have to blow a tune. This music would summon particular magic, or spirits as some would claim, to help the wielder do a variety of work. Depending on the tune, the magic summoned could do a variety of things, such as moving heavy objects, doing household work, or driving carts. And in rare cases, there were tunes that could make the magic take the form of a person who could do the wielder's every command. Elena only knew, theoretically, how to make such whistles and a couple of the simple tunes. But nothing so complicated as to make a magical doppelganger. She had never had the inclination or opportunity to make such a charm. But here they were, lying in this charm storeroom in the earl's manor, unused.

Right below the shelf that contained the whistles, there were a stash of strange charms that were strung on white ribbons. The charms themselves varied, from carvings of small birds and other animals to geometric shapes carved out of tumbled stones. Elena held a hand in front of them and felt no magic emanating from them. Which didn't mean anything at first. It was then that she picked one of the charms up, one of the charms that was a small carving of a dove, when she finally get a jolt of the magic. It was hard at first, but then gentled out as the magic itself realized that she was not exactly drawing from it. A good luck charm, she thought. She had made some that were very similar in function although she made hers as small braided yarn bracelets that could be easily worn and concealed. These particular charms were the kind of charms that a hedge witch would make to give to young girls on the cusp of womanhood. Good luck charms to help keep the evil spirits at bay. Especially since girls growing up were exposed to more temptation than they did when they were younger.

Elena quickly placed the charm back on the shelf and made her way across to the bench that was closest to the window. She was quite curious as to how the earl made the charms. As in her mind, she viewed him as a sorcerer, she had the impression that such people went about things a little differently than a hedge witch. Hedge witches and herbs women did things deliberately and in some ways, laboriously, although such a technique made charms very durable. Sorcerers, on the other hand, were known for their quick flash.

On the bench, she saw several carvings of more animals and objects. For more good luck and agricultural charms, she supposed. There were also ribbons placed in a box and several small pots of paints and brushes. But aside from all of these mundane materials, there were a couple of instruments that she intuitively knew what they were even though she had never seen any of them in person before. As a hedge witch, she often infused the magic into the charms through her will alone, without the use of chants or other props. However, many sorcerers liked to use instruments to help them channel magic directly into their spells. Thus the brilliant flashes that they were known for. One of the instruments on the bench top appeared to be a modified sextant that had several knobs and dials on it. Elena had seen such an instrument once in a book that had described it as a sorcerer's circle. It supposedly helped the sorcerer direct his magic into one place.

There was one other instrument readily in view and it sat at the center of the bench top like a small clock. But it wasn't really a clock because it had five hands, of varying lengths, rotating around dials that were marked with a variety of numbers and symbols that Elena recognized as signs that most magical workers used to indicate varying amounts and qualities of magic that one could draw from the environment.

“I won't pretend to know all of what goes on in here,” the dowager countess said beside her. “It is a Nordalness art. My late husband knew how to do it and he passed the knowledge down to my son.”

“It's interesting,” she said almost absentmindedly as she peered at one of the works in progress. It was one of the more intricate charms which involved quite a bit of work making the base and infusing it with magic. At the moment, the base was in the middle of its creation. It was an intricate wood carving that looked like one of those complicated knots that sailors used to tie their sails and anchors down. Only half of it was carved at the moment. The carving knife lay next to the creation, almost as an afterthought. “It is very similar to how I do things, but I do not use these instruments to help me infuse magic into the charms. These instruments, I think, are more in the provenance of sorcerers.”

“Just so,” said the dowager countess. “But these are only in the middle of being made. Here, you should see these. These were made by the former earl and the current earl, when my husband was still alive.”

The charms that the dowager countess indicated were small statuettes that were lined up on another shelf. They appeared to be strange creatures with bulging eyes and spindly arms and legs, as if they were normal people but had been stretched and molded into a completely different form. Elena had the eerie feeling that these sorts of beings actually existed somewhere although she couldn't really put her finger on where these beings existed. There was a strange sort of magic coming out of these statuettes that Elena mentally identified as harvest magic.

Seeing the puzzled look on her face, the dowager countess said, “They carved these strange creatures because they are very similar to scarecrows. I've been told that they are harvest charms to help scare away pests like crows and mice that might want to eat the harvest.”

“Ah, I see it now.” Elena nodded at that. But then her eye fell upon a collection of smaller charms that appeared to be stone carvings of cockroaches. One of the cockroaches, for some reason, reminded her of the giant cockroach she had seen in her dream, a cockroach with a black-greenish carapace. When she touched them, they only felt like cold stone. There was only a faint stirring of

magic that she could barely sense. “And what are these?”

“I am not sure,” said the dowager countess. “Sometimes there are some very strange and unusual charms in here. Most of the stone ones were carved by Lysander's great-great-grandfather who had learned to carve stone from a stone mason who worked on part of this manor. I don't think anyone really knows what they are, so they've pretty much been in the collection for years and years.”

The dowager countess moved on to a variety of other charms in the room, but Elena's mind stayed with the stone cockroaches, trying to rationalize their presence. She knew that some dreams predicted things and were oracular in nature. She never thought that she was one to have such dreams, but who knew. Perhaps the previous night's dream of the giant cockroach heralded her subsequent visit to this room of charms.

After the dowager countess exhausted her explanations of all of the different shelves and tables, they finally left the charm room in favor of touring the rest of the manor. She was not quite sure where the dowager countess was taking her. While most buildings had a straightforward floor plan, this particular manor in Nordalness seemed to be a mass of winding passageways that branched off the main corridor that led from the dining room to the guest wing. There were rooms branching from all of the winding passageways, some of them closed off with plain doors, some with elaborate doors. But the dowager countess passed all of them in favor of heading towards the far end of the manor where a large tower was built.

“The Nordalness Manor was built in bits and pieces, actually,” the older woman explained. “The main part of the manor was actually quite simple. The oldest part is in the dining room, kitchens, hall, and surrounding bedrooms. That was when the population of Nordalness was much smaller and our line title was just chieftain instead of earl. Then, throughout the generations, more and more rooms were added to the manor.”