

∞ BOOK ONE IN THE MAGICIANS' GOLD SERIES ∞



MAGIC TEACHER'S SON

DAVID HARTEN WATSON

Magic Teacher's Son

Book One of The Magicians' Gold Series



Magic Teacher's Son
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Dedicated to my number one fan.

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by
David Harten Watson

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1: CIRCLE OF SORCERY

What's the worst that could happen? Pran asked himself as he lay in bed waiting for his parents to fall asleep so he could sneak out of the house. Even if he got caught, his father wouldn't expel his own son from magic school just for going to a circle of sorcery. Would he? He had to assume his father knew spells to detect if someone had been using black magic, so if he didn't want to get caught, he'd have to just not cast any spells himself.

When at last he heard his father's snores from across the hall, he slid out from under the covers and tiptoed across the room, shoes in hand, the oak floor cool beneath his bare feet. He didn't dare cast a Mage-Light spell or light the lantern his brother had sent him for his sixteenth birthday (a genuine Eldorean Army field lantern, designed to burn the new fuel called kerosene instead of whale oil). With one foot in the hallway, Pran hesitated, deciding to use a Silence spell so he wouldn't be betrayed by creaking stairs or bumping into something in the dark. Besides the risk his parents would hear him, there was also a chance his shorthaired pointer, Nako, would pick tonight to redeem his sorry reputation as a watchdog.

Closing his eyes, Pran cast the spell by placing his right hand just above his left hip, palm down, and slowly rotating it in a half-circle while picturing himself walking through the house in total silence. He felt a tingle at his neck as several links in the silver chain he was wearing turned to iron, releasing the magic.

When he sensed the spell's power flowing through him, Pran opened his eyes, put on his shoes, and exited the bedroom more confidently, enveloped in a sphere of silence. He wondered if his father had ever imagined, when he'd taught that spell to their class, that Pran might use it to sneak out to attend a circle of sorcery!

Guided more by memory than by the moonlight seeping through the windows of the former farmhouse, Pran made his way carefully down the upstairs hall. As he passed by his brother's empty room, he felt a stab of guilt. Here he was, sneaking out to watch sorcery for fun, while his older brother was off defending the kingdom from enemy Sorcerers! Ashamed, he almost turned back, but he worried what his friends would think if he chickened out. His brother would never know if he went to the circle of sorcery, but his friends would sure notice if he didn't. Pran appeased his conscience with a silent prayer for his brother's safe return from the war, then continued down the hall.

Just as he reached the top of the stairs, his foot struck a bone Nako had left lying there. To Pran's horror, it tumbled down the stairway, out of his magical sphere of silence, sounding to his panicked ears like the paddling he'd get from his father if he were caught. He froze in place, expecting at any moment that Nako would start barking, and his parents would come rushing out of the bedroom.

He stayed still as a statue for several minutes, listening for any sign that he'd been detected. All he heard were snores from his parents' room, so he continued down the stairs and past the living room, where his dog lay asleep by the hearth. He opened the hall closet and grabbed his hickory hiking stick, as he wouldn't want to walk in the night woods without something to fend off branches, feel for holes, or help defend himself. When Pran finally stepped out the front door into the cool, night air, he gave a huge sigh of relief.

High above the world of Rados, the full moon beamed down on the Kingdom of Eldor, and the fertile farms of Pran's neighbors lay awash in its milky glow. Pran glanced up at the second floor windows of the white clapboard house, worried that if his parents chanced to look out,

they'd see him in the moonlight. He walked quickly to the front gate of the picket fence, opened and closed the latch silently, and stepped out onto Carpenter Road, turning right to head west on the dirt road.

With summer nearly at an end, the air was pleasantly cool, still, and fragrant with the scent of newly cut hay. Pran saw bats flutter by in the moonlit sky, silently seeking their meal of mosquitoes. Earlier that night, he'd heard farmer Efrom's dogs raising the alarm about something, but all was quiet at the moment except for the usual nighttime sounds: the music of crickets and frogs, snorting of horses left outside to spend the pleasant night in a pasture, and rustling of rabbits bounding into the roadside brush at his approach.

Pran stopped at the third farmhouse, the home of his best friend, Kimbar. He stood just outside the fence, canceled his Silence spell with a simple act of will, and gave a hoot-owl call to signal his arrival.

Kimbar stepped out of the shadow of an ancient maple tree, also carrying a hiking stick, and pushed open the gate to join Pran, his blond hair shining under the full moon. He and Pran were built alike: a bit shorter than most sixteen-year-olds, but as Kimbar liked to say, compact, athletic, and strong for their size. They were fellow Conjurers, having just begun their fourth and final year at the magic school taught by Pran's father.

"You're late," Kimbar whispered. "I was beginning to think you'd chickened out."

"I was waiting for my parents to fall asleep. I didn't think of casting a Silence spell 'til I was on my way out."

Kimbar snickered, his green eyes flashing. "You wasted a Silence spell *after* they were asleep?"

"Well, there's also Nako."

"Didn't you tell me he's the world's worst watchdog? And even if he heard you, all he'd do is follow you, Pran. You're way too cautious! Now we've gotta hurry, or we'll be late." When they reached the next house on their left, Kimbar whispered, "Garwin's already on his way. He got tired of waiting for you."

As they walked beside the extensive corrals and pastures of Garwin's family horse ranch, the full moon looming over Pran's shoulder made his

shadow tall, but in his heart he felt small, vulnerable, and uncertain of what he was getting himself into. Every year, his father warned their class against the dangers of using black magic, or of associating with those who did. Pran tried to calm himself with the thought that Kimbar and Garwin had gone to this circle of sorcery before, and they seemed none the worse for it.

They passed the far boundary of their classmate Garwin's horse ranch, crossed a short bridge over the Otter Creek, and turned right to head north on Mellenville Road. Soon, the pastures beside the road gave way to forest and rolling hills. A loud noise in the roadside bushes startled Pran, but it was only a trio of deer, which bounded across the road ahead of them and disappeared into the woods on the other side. After they'd walked nearly a mile, Kimbar paused to point out a huge oak tree on their left, its gnarled roots reaching out toward the road like skeleton fingers. Just after passing it, he led Pran off the road and into the woods.

Once they'd cleared the roadside brush, a path became visible leading off into the forest. Even in daylight, it would be difficult to see from the road, but on the far side of the bushes it was clear enough. With tonight's full moon, enough light filtered down through the trees overhead to follow the path without the need for a lantern or Mage-Light spell.

Inside the forest, the air was nearly still, but up above, treetops swayed in the night breeze, and the large, old trees creaked and groaned. An object crashed through the branches above them, and Pran instinctively held his hiking stick overhead with both arms to protect himself from a falling tree limb. When it landed next to him, the branch turned out to be little more than a twig, as forest sounds barely noticeable in the daytime seemed amplified tenfold at night. Pran felt silly for his reaction, until he heard Kimbar mutter, "I can't believe I just wasted silver on a Shield spell for that!"

The path soon passed through a small clearing. Before they could reenter the woods on the other side, a small figure slipped out of the shadows as silently as an elf, displaying empty palms forward, elf fashion, to indicate he was no threat. Pran's eyes widened, for these days it was rare for an elf to venture off the reservation. However, when he and Kimbar

drew closer, Pran saw that it was merely a young boy, perhaps twelve years old, his light, blond hair appearing silver in the moonlight.

Kimbar asked, "Hey, little feller, you lost? What are you doing out in the woods in the middle of the night?"

"I might ask you the same thing," the boy said cheekily.

"We asked first," Pran countered. "Where are you going?"

"The same place as you, I'd imagine."

"You mean the circle of—" began Pran, before a nudge in the ribs from Kimbar made him stop short.

"Yep," the small boy said, "the circle of sorcery. Why else would you be on this path tonight?" Pointing to the silver hexagram pendant Pran wore around his neck, he said, "I'm a magic student too, Master Alimar's school, but I kept my hexagram under my shirt tonight to attract less attention."

"You look too young to be in magic school," Pran observed. Seeing the boy's hurt look, he quickly added, "No offense."

The boy sighed. "Don't worry; I'm used to hearing that. I started a year early, plus I'm short for my age—always have been, probably always will be. But I make up for it in brains, and though I may be small, I'm no weakling. I can whip boys twice my size in a fair fight—*several* of them if I fight *unfairly*," he said with a sly grin. "My name's Jelal."

There was something peculiar about this boy, but Pran liked him. "I'm Pran, and this is my friend Kimbar. We're Conjurers in the school run by my father, Master Gilamond."

"Wow, fourth year students, *and* you're the teacher's son," Jelal observed, sounding impressed. "I'm just a Novice."

"Obviously," Kimbar snickered. "But being a magic teacher's son won't help where we're going, and neither will being a Conjurer. Pran, you should hide your hexagram too. It's best not to show it at a circle of sorcery 'cause some kids there think magic school students are snobs."

After slipping his silver pendant and chain under his shirt, Pran asked, "So, Jelal, what made you stop here? You lose your way?"

"No, I was supposed to be going to the circle of sorcery with a couple classmates, but they chickened out. I was scared to go on by myself, so I waited on the path until I saw you."

Kimbar observed, "You didn't *look* scared."

"Well, I'm not afraid of just the two of you. But if I went to the circle of sorcery alone, I'd be surrounded by older boys who don't mind breaking rules and might enjoy tormenting a small boy like me. If they see I'm with two big kids like you, they won't bother me. Can I go with you, please?" Jelal looked up at them with his big, blue eyes like a lost puppy and promised, "I'll be your best friend."

Pran looked questioningly at Kimbar, who shrugged indifferently. "The position of *best* friend's already taken," Pran said, "but I guess you can join us tonight."

Jelal's small face lit up. "Thanks; you won't regret it! I'll do you a favor in return."

Pran smiled down at him and said, "Come along then, little friend, or we'll be late." At that moment, an owl swooped down low into the clearing, pounced on a mouse, and then soared back into the moonlit sky, talons grasped tightly around its prey. Seeing Jelal shudder, Pran said, "Don't tell me you're scared of *owls*."

"No, I just fear it's a bad omen," Jelal said darkly, refusing to say more.

Pran was taken aback, and hoped Jelal was wrong about this.

They continued along the forest trail, which rose briefly and then dipped down. After a few minutes of very gradual descent, the orange glow of a fire filtered through the trees ahead. As they advanced, the glow loomed brighter, until between the trees directly ahead, Pran saw a clearing with a large bonfire in the middle. "Hold on a minute," he said to his friends, suddenly unsure whether to go any farther.

As the three boys paused in the darkness at the edge of the clearing, Pran looked closely at his companions' faces, lit faintly by the light of the full moon and the glow of the bonfire, to see if they shared his fears about being there. Kimbar's face showed only eagerness and excitement. Jelal's was harder to read, but Pran thought it showed a mixture of apprehension and anticipation. Pran hoped his own face didn't betray his trepidation. Far away, a wolf howled at the moon, and Pran shivered in spite of himself.

Kimbar asked, "What's wrong, Pran, getting cold feet?"

"Maybe," he confessed.

Kimbar looked surprised. "Are you afraid of a spell backfiring on you, your first try at black magic? Don't worry; nobody here has turned himself into a frog yet."

"Well, I don't want to be the first!" Pran joked nervously. "Actually, I'm more worried what will happen to me if I use black magic and my father finds out. I took enough risks just sneaking out here tonight. Maybe I'll watch to see what it's all about, but I'm not ready to try any spells."

"Now that you're here," Kimbar said, "you should worry less about your father and more about what these kids will think if you don't join in the spell casting. They'll say you're just here to spy on them for your father."

Jelal seemed strangely frightened by Kimbar's words. "Come on," he urged, "let's join the others before they see us standing here watching and get suspicious."

Kimbar led Pran and Jelal into the clearing to a circle of logs where over two dozen other boys, mostly teenagers, were already seated around the bonfire. On the far side of the fire, their classmate Garwin held space open for them on a log, as he'd promised them earlier. He was also a Conjuror, in his final year of magic school. Although he was taller than Pran, the two boys looked enough alike to be cousins, with the same dark brown hair and caramel eyes.

Even though he'd confided to Pran during the summer that he'd gone to the circle of sorcery, Pran still found it hard to believe that Garwin, the smartest and most talented student in the school, would be there. Garwin had cultivated a friendship with the teacher's apprentices, who'd taught him magic that Pran's father didn't seem to think his class, or even his son, was ready to learn. Now he'd apparently decided to broaden his knowledge even more by learning the forbidden black magic, or sorcery.

On a nearby log sat Samir, their red-haired classmate, Pran's former friend. His father taught in a one-room country schoolhouse about the same size as Pran's father's magic school in town, although Samir's father had more pupils to teach, as he taught grammar school. Samir smiled and waved at Kimbar, but when he saw Pran, his face hardened.

Pran and Samir had been close friends until fairly recently. After all, they'd grown up together, whiling away countless carefree summer days in the woods with Kimbar and Garwin as the four boys played their favorite game, "Elves and Goblins." However, last year, their longtime friendship had first strained and then broken. The problems had started when Samir began associating with the wrong crowd, particularly Sekar and his fat friend, Pathik. Those two were also classmates in their magic school, but marginal students, boys known to be experimenting with sorcery. Before long, Samir had apparently valued being in Sekar's gang so highly that he'd seemed to have no more use for Pran's friendship.

Not surprisingly, tonight Sekar and Pathik, the two classmates Pran blamed for breaking up the friendship, sat next to Samir on the same log. They looked at Pran suspiciously when he approached, not bothering to wave or say hello.

Jelal looked around the circle and whispered, "Just as I feared, I'm the only one here from my school." That told Pran that the rest attended grammar schools—some for lack of magic talent or ambition, others just because their families couldn't afford the tuition and lab fees for magic school.

Pathik said snidely, loud enough to get everyone's attention, "Well looky who's here: Pran, the magic teacher's son. Who invited *him*?"

"I did," Kimbar said boldly, "and I'll vouch for him personally."

Dhruti, a farmhand's son, hollered, "We don't need no stuck-up *Magician's* kids here," spitting the word "Magician's" like it was a curse. "He's probably just spying for his lily-white Magician papa."

Pran was tempted to turn around and leave, but Sekar stood up and yelled, "Enough!"

Instantly, the clearing fell silent except for the crackling of the flames. Tall and lean at seventeen, Sekar was the self-styled leader of this circle of sorcery. Although far from the best student in Pran's magic school, he obviously commanded respect, if not fear, from the boys gathered here tonight.

The son of a wealthy bank owner, Sekar had an arrogant bearing and shoulder length, sandalwood hair. He obviously knew he was handsome, for he sometimes used his looks to get what he wanted, the same way he used his father's money and influence. His ice blue eyes, set like jewels in a flawless pale face, remained cold and calculating even on the rare occasions that he smiled. Tonight, instead of the silver chain and hexagram of a magic student, Sekar wore the bone necklace of a Sorcerer, which Pran found vaguely unsettling.

"If Kimbar says Pran's okay, I believe him. I know he wouldn't jeopardize his *own* welcome by inviting someone here who can't be trusted," Sekar said pointedly.

Pran didn't need a Telepathy spell to know this was another one of Sekar's thinly veiled threats.

Kimbar led Pran and Jelal around the fire to where Garwin sat alone at the left end of a log. When he saw them approaching, Garwin welcomed Pran and Kimbar with a warm grin, beckoning them to come sit beside him, while ignoring Jelal just as the others had. Kimbar took a seat next to Garwin, and Pran sat on his right.

When Jelal sat down next to Pran, Garwin snapped, "Hey, these seats are saved for my friends. Go over there where the other little boys are sitting," he said, pointing to a log on which a group of scared looking, pre-teen boys huddled together whispering nervously.

"It's okay," Pran said, "he's with us. This is our new friend Jelal, a Novice in Master Alimar's school. Jelal, meet our friend Garwin, the top student in our school."

Jelal said wide-eyed, "Honored to meet you, Garwin."

An amused smile played at the corners of Garwin's lips. "Okay, you can stay. Any friend of Pran's and Kimbar's is a friend of mine."

The boys seated on the other logs had gone back to talking and laughing amongst themselves, but many of them still looked at Pran suspiciously. Kimbar said, "See what I meant, Pran? Now that you're here, you'll have to use sorcery too or they'll think you're here to snitch on them."

Pran shook his head, speaking just loudly enough for his friends on the same log to hear him. “I can’t use black magic tonight, or my father will know. Doing sorcery impairs your ability to do white magic the next day, and tomorrow’s a school day. *You* guys might get by unnoticed, but my father keeps a very close eye on *me* in Magic Lab—and the rest of the day too, for that matter,” he said with a sigh.

Before they could talk further, Sekar called the meeting to order, saying, “Good evening, friends, and thanks for coming. I see some new faces, including my magic school classmate, Pran. Tonight, you will be attending *my* magic school,” he joked, “where, I, Sekar, will give you an education you can’t get from Gilamond, Alimar, or the other white Magicians. You’ll learn something about the power and promise of black magic, and most of all, you’ll learn that sorcery can be fun.

“I think you’ll like the demonstration I’ve set up for tonight,” Sekar said as he reached into his satchel and took out a human skull. Holding it out toward the fire with his left hand, he began walking around the circle of stones that ringed the fire pit, chanting in a foreign language.

Jelal whispered to Pran, “He’s speaking Maraknese!”

Hearing the language of Eldor’s enemies spoken openly here sent a chill down Pran’s spine, and he shivered despite the heat of the bonfire. He thought of his older brother, Kavik, an Eldorean Army Lieutenant, currently in a front line unit fighting back the Maraknese invasion. Could Sekar have somehow learned black magic from an enemy Sorcerer?



2: BURNED

As Sekar continued to chant in Maraknese, the flames of the bonfire coalesced, merging into a single thin flame, nearly six feet high, rising up from the exact center of the wood pile. When Sekar completed walking one full circle around the fire pit, all while holding the skull toward the fire, the tall flame changed shape. He stopped walking and turned to face the flame, holding the skull in front of him now with both hands.

Pran watched in wonder as the flame formed into a clear image of a young woman, totally nude, of supernatural beauty. She was both tall and shapely, slim-waisted but amazingly well endowed. As his eyes devoured her spectacular body, Pran thought, *no human girl could have such a perfect figure*. Judging from her flaming red hair—*literally*, as her long, flowing locks were ablaze—he guessed that Sekar had summoned a fire nymph, a beautiful creature from the elemental Plane of Fire.

“Dance for us!” Sekar commanded.

The nymph smiled at him as if there were nothing she’d enjoy more. She stepped lightly down from her perch atop the center of the fire and began to dance in and around the fire pit, gyrating, shimmying, and undulating her nude body to the rhythm of the flames behind her. Every now and again, she paused to face each boy, one by one, and smile at him seductively.

Pran saw Kimbar sitting wide-eyed and open-mouthed, transfixed by the sight of the beautiful, sultry maiden. The nymph smiled at Kimbar and

extended her hand toward him, as if asking him to come and dance with her. Eagerly, he jumped to his feet and reached out to take her hand, but instead of touching flesh, his hand met only fire, and he screamed in pain. The nymph looked surprised and bewildered, but continued her dancing, while the boys seated on the other logs laughed and jeered at Kimbar for his foolishness.

No doubt the fire nymph hadn't intended to hurt Kimbar, Pran thought, as she was used to dancing with other creatures of fire in her world, but seeing other boys laugh at his best friend's pain angered him. He was about to help Kimbar, but saw him already casting a Pain-Relief spell on himself, holding his good hand a few inches over his burned right hand, palm down, his face a mixture of agony and concentration. A minute later, Kimbar's face relaxed as the spell took effect.

Pran stopped worrying about Kimbar and turned his attention back to the show. Before long, most of the skull Sekar was holding had disintegrated, and he was unable to hold the fire nymph in the physical plane any longer. She stepped back into the heart of the bonfire, blew a kiss toward him, and then vanished, just as the final bit of the skull in his hand crumbled to dust.

For a long time, the only sound to be heard was the crackling of the flames, as the boys sat wide-eyed, overcome by what they had seen. "Wow," one teen finally remarked, wiping sweat off his brow, "that's the best opening demonstration yet!"

"Awesome" agreed another. "This tops any white magic I've ever seen." Other boys expressed similar comments. Some of the older teens used colorful language to describe the nymph they'd just seen, words that would have made Pran's mother wash his mouth out with soap if he'd used them at home.

Sekar grinned, obviously pleased at the response. "I knew you'd like that. And that's just a sample of what you can do with black magic. Although it's more difficult, you can also summon a *wood* nymph to dance for you, a creature as beautiful as the fire nymph you saw here tonight, but one you can touch without getting burned," he said, winking at Kimbar, who was cradling his burnt hand.

“Of course, you can use sorcery on human girls, too,” Sekar added. “It’s a simple matter to remove a girl’s clothing with a ‘Strip spell,’ leaving her as naked as that nymph. Or you can use Mind Control spells to make human girls strip and dance for you like that fire nymph danced tonight. You can even use Mind Control to bring a girl into the hayloft with you to do everything you want, force her to fulfill all your wildest fantasies and desires. That concludes my opening demonstration,” he said with a bow. As he walked away from the fire, all the boys in the circle applauded.

Only the little Novice, Jelal, seemed unimpressed by the display they’d just witnessed. It was he who drew his new friends’ attention to the disturbing nature of Sekar’s last comments. “Sekar said you can use sorcery to force human girls to dance like that nymph. I think it’s wrong to make a girl do that against her will, don’t you?”

“Jelal’s right,” Pran admitted, suddenly ashamed of himself for not being the one to point that out, “that would be an awful thing to do. Wouldn’t it, Kimbar?”

Kimbar’s eyes looked distant and dreamy, so Pran wasn’t sure he’d heard, but he finally said, “Huh? Oh, of course, but I’ve got to admit, I liked that demonstration. It was worth burning my hand a little, just to see that nymph. She looked so good, I couldn’t help wanting to touch her, but she was made of fire, not flesh, so when I reached for her hand, I just burned my own.”

Once again, Pran thought, his best friend had let his impulsiveness and nascent sexual desire overcome his good sense. “You should think before you act,” he said. “What did you expect a fire nymph to be made of?”

Kimbar winced, looking down at his burnt hand, which he was still cradling gingerly. “Why didn’t Sekar summon a wood nymph instead?”

“Like he said, wood nymphs are hard to summon by black magic,” said Garwin, who liked to show off his knowledge. “They’re resistant to sorcery, despise evil, and hate fire because of what it can do to their forest. Fire nymphs look just as beautiful, but are in other ways opposite: they’re drawn to fire, perform willingly when summoned by sorcery,

and tend toward evil. If you could put a wood nymph and a fire nymph together, they'd probably fight each other."

"Wow, two nymphs fighting—that would be something *really* worth seeing!" exclaimed Kimbar, then winced again. "Could one of you Heal my hand, please? I used some silver for a Pain-Relief spell—apparently not enough, because it's hurting again—but I need it Healed, and that requires gold. I don't have any with me, do you?"

Pran hadn't realized the burns were serious before, but he could see blisters now, even in the firelight.

"Don't worry," Garwin said, "I'll Heal you; I always carry some gold for emergencies. But we'd better tell Sekar what we're up to, or he'll wonder why someone's using white magic at his circle of sorcery."

The four boys walked over to Sekar, and Garwin informed him that he'd need to use white magic to Heal Kimbar's hand. Sekar agreed, but told them to do it in the woods, so as not to disrupt the sorcery going on.

As soon as they were out of Sekar's earshot, Pran said bitterly, "You'd think he'd be nice enough to let us Heal Kimbar here!"

Garwin remarked, "We're better off going into the woods to do it, anyway. It'll be easier for me to concentrate on the Healing spell without the distraction of black magic nearby."

Pran saw Jelal glancing nervously around the circle, where the teenagers were breaking up into smaller groups to practice sorcery. "Don't worry, Jelal," he reassured the Novice, "we won't leave you alone here with the big kids. You can come with us."

Jelal flashed a grateful smile at him.

After picking up their hiking sticks from the log benches where they'd left them (except for Jelal, who hadn't brought one), the four boys headed out of the clearing. Pran, Garwin, and Jelal followed Kimbar onto a narrow deer trail that led from the clearing into the woods beyond. After the bright firelight, it took a few minutes for their eyes to adjust to the moonlight filtering down through the trees, so they walked slowly. Even though the full moon made the leafy branches visible, the bare branches were darker and difficult to spot. Pran grasped his hiking stick near the

middle and held it in front of him to fend off unseen branches from his face and eyes. Kimbar and Garwin did likewise, but Jelal walked elf fashion, empty-handed.

Garwin advised, "You guys should carry gold with you for emergencies, like I do."

"That's easy for you to say, since you're rich," Pran said, "but the rest of us don't have any gold to spare."

Garwin's family bred some of the best saddle horses in the entire Kingdom of Eldor. These were the steeds King Orban himself preferred to ride during peacetime, but nowadays, the King usually rode his charger. Garwin's father refused to breed war horses, even for the royal stables, because he couldn't bear to raise horses doomed to die in battle.

"Oh, come on, Pran," Garwin said. "Your father's a Magician. He must have gold lying around the house."

"He keeps it in his workshop, and he's always got protective spells on it. I tried to steal some when I was little—burned my hand worse than Kimbar did tonight."

Pran knew that if his family had as much money as Garwin's, he would attend the Royal Academy of Magic, in the kingdom's capital, Eldorado. He'd scored highly enough on the qualifying exam, but alas, his father didn't earn enough to send him to any boarding school, let alone the Royal Academy. Garwin had both the money and brains to attend the Royal Academy, but preferred to live with his family for now, even though it meant attending a one room magic school on the outskirts of White River Junction. Pran's father called it a "two-room" schoolhouse, because it had an office for the schoolmaster, but Pran didn't count that.

As they approached a large birch tree, its white bark glowing in the moonlight, Kimbar said, "Okay, let's stop here."

Jelal quickly moved to stand with his back against the trunk of the tree, looking back toward the clearing they'd just left. When Pran followed the direction of Jelal's gaze, he could only see a slight trace of firelight penetrating through the trees. They'd gone deep enough into the woods that they were away from the noise of the gathering, and it was quiet here.

Garwin said, "Now, Kimbar, hold out your hand."

Kimbar held out his burnt right hand. In the moonlight, the red burns looked dark gray, and blisters had already formed. Garwin took out a small gold coin, held it in his left hand, and clenched that hand into a fist. Then he held his right hand out palm down, a couple inches over Kimbar's burnt hand, and closed his eyes in concentration.

The air between Garwin's hand and Kimbar's started to glow yellow, and Garwin opened his eyes now that the spell was underway. Pran had never seen a Healing spell cast in the dark before, and looked on with amazement as the light emanating from Garwin's hands grew brighter and gave off sparks of Healing energy. Maybe, he thought, that was why Sekar hadn't wanted them to do it near the circle of sorcery. In daylight, Healing spells only cast a slight glow, but at night, the light might be distracting.

By now, the blisters had disappeared from Kimbar's hand, and soon the dark spots vanished too, leaving Kimbar's hand as bright and smooth as ever. Garwin opened his left hand, displaying the coin that was now gray, having been transformed from gold to lead as he'd channeled its energy into the spell.

"Thanks a lot for the Healing, Garwin," Kimbar said, flexing his hand. "I owe you one."

Garwin shrugged, pocketing the now nearly worthless coin, "When I need Healing, you can return the favor. But next time, *think* before touching a fire nymph!"

Kimbar said as they started back on the path toward the bonfire, "Well, she sure looked a lot better than those 'girls' you sent me to look at down at the swimming hole last month."

Pran grinned, recalling a few weeks ago when he and Garwin had told Kimbar that a group of teenage girls were skinny-dipping at the Otter Creek, when it was really a platoon of soldiers, returning from the Maraknese front, who had stopped there to bathe. Pran had watched from behind a tree as Kimbar crept close to the swimming hole, eager to watch teenage girls frolic in the water. By the time he'd realized he'd been tricked, a soldier on lookout had spotted him, and the expression on Kimbar's face as he ran away had been priceless!

As the three boys stepped back out into the clearing, they paused to watch a group of five boys standing in a circle around a smaller boy. One of the boys in the circle held something in the air, chanted in Maraknese, and gestured. The smaller boy's clothing vanished from his body while the others laughed and jeered. The boy in the center was obviously embarrassed, but tried to hide his feelings with a nervous smile, and his private parts with his hands.

Jelal's eyes widened, and he said, "Thanks for taking me into the woods with you, Pran. If you'd left me here alone, they might have tried that on *me*!"

Garwin said, "I guess they're practicing the 'Strip spell' Sekar mentioned earlier tonight."

Kimbar shook his head wistfully. "It's a shame girls can't do magic, or we'd have some of them here. Can you imagine boys and girls practicing the Strip spell on each other, or girls trying it on other girls? Now *that* would be fun to watch," he said with a grin.

Garwin mused, "I've heard that there are faraway lands, across the ocean, where girls *can* do magic."



Three miles away in White River Junction, on the street known as Immigrants Row, seventeen-year-old Vitina awoke screaming from her nightmare.

Her brother, Ravi, rushed into the room to defend her, knife drawn, jet black eyes searching the small, moonlit bedroom for any intruders. He was only a year older than her, but strong as a blacksmith and fearless as a tiger. Even though tonight, Vitina's enemies were only in her dreams, her brother's presence made her feel safe again.

"What happened?" he asked, speaking in their native tongue.

Sitting up, Vitina replied, "It is nothing. I just had a bad dream, Ravi."

"Do you want to tell me about it?" he whispered, sheathing his knife and sitting down on the edge of her bed. "It must have been an awful one, to make you scream like that."

“The worst,” Vitina admitted, her obsidian black eyes blinking back tears. “I was dreaming about the day mother was—I mean, the day you got your scar.” She reached up one delicate, brown hand and gently traced the cruel line the knife had left on her brother’s swarthy, otherwise handsome face. “I now have the power to Heal that scar for you, Ravi,” she said, confident in her new magic abilities. “Doc Parador taught me the spell.”

Her brother shook his head. “Do not waste our family’s gold on me. I have had that scar for five years, and I am used to it now.”

“You know our parents would not mind using gold for that. Let me Heal you, Ravi,” Vitina pleaded, “at least so your scar will no longer remind us of that terrible day.”

“No!” her brother said forcefully, standing up.

Vitina fell back on the bed, startled by his reaction.

Her brother said more gently, “I appreciate your offer, but Doc Parador made me the same proposal, and I turned him down, too. Why should I be Healed, when Mother’s trauma from that day cannot be? I want to keep this scar, as a reminder of what our captors did to our family. Soon, I will get my revenge on them—or on their countrymen, at least—and before they die, I want them to see what their people did to me.”

Vitina sighed. “Why must it always be about killing, with men? While I am learning the Healing magic, you want to learn to kill.”

“It will not always be that way, little sister. There will be a time for peace, later, but there is a war going on now, and I want to be a part of it.”



Resuming their walk back to the circle of sorcery, Kimbar scoffed, “Do you actually believe those stories about girls who can do magic, Garwin? I suppose you also believe in the legendary world of Earth, that fairy tale world of horseless carriages and flying machines!”



3: ANIMALS ENSORCELLED

The four boys stepped back into the clearing, and Kimbar went over to talk with Samir, with whom he had managed to stay friends longer than *Pran* had. Meanwhile, Garwin led Pran and Jelal closer to the fire, where a small group of boys were gathered around Sekar. The leader of tonight's circle of sorcery held a small cotton bag with something inside it that was moving. Sekar reached into it and pulled out a tiny kitten, holding it by the scruff of its neck. "Is anyone ready to practice Mind Control?" he asked.

"I am," Pathik said, stepping forward. Pathik was both tall and blubbery, a son of a butcher who had obviously made a habit of bringing the fattest cuts of meat home for his family. At seventeen, he should have already graduated magic school last year, been promoted to Enchanter, and started his apprenticeship. He would have, if he'd passed his final exams, but having failed miserably, he was repeating his Conjuror year instead. Pathik reached into his rucksack and pulled out what looked like a human shinbone.

Sekar nodded approvingly. "Let's see if you can make this kitten do something interesting," he said, placing it on the ground.

The kitten looked timidly at the boys gathered around and let out a small "meow."

While holding the shinbone in his meaty left hand, Pathik pointed a fat finger at the kitten with his right and chanted in Maraknese. Pran

thought he saw a dark ray of force emanate from the finger and streak into the head of the helpless kitten, while in Pathik's left hand, the bone gradually began to turn to dust, from the bottom up.

The kitten turned and walked, as if in a trance, toward the fire. It moved quickly at first, but its walk slowed as it realized the destination that was being forced on it, and it turned its head toward the boys, meowing plaintively.

The other boys whooped, cheering Pathik on. "Give him a hot foot!" said one.

"You mean four hot paws!" said another.

The kitten crept closer and closer to the flames, putting one paw slowly in front of the other now. It began mewling, its small body shaking in fear. Pran couldn't bear to let this torture continue. He whispered to Garwin, "Can't we do something to stop this?"

Garwin whispered back, "I don't know a counterspell, so what do you want to do, put out the fire? Do that, and these guys will pound you."

The kitten was only a couple feet from the red-hot coals, where the heat must have been nearly unbearable, when it finally stopped walking and stood still, trembling.

"What are you waiting for?" someone shouted. "We want to see flaming kitten!"

"I'm tryin'," Pathik said through clenched teeth. "It's resistin' me."

Pran hoped the kitten's willpower would hold out.

Without turning his gaze from the bonfire, Jelal said out of the corner of his mouth, "Pran, if you want to save the kitten, put another log on the fire."

"What?" Pran asked in disbelief. "I don't want to make it even hotter!"

"Trust me," Jelal murmured through his teeth while still looking straight ahead. Pran marveled at the little boy's skill in ventriloquism, as Jelal's mouth didn't even move when he explained, "Just pick up a big log from that pile behind us and throw it on the fire. You'll have to pass between Pathik and the kitten to reach the fire," he hinted, "but don't detour, no matter what anyone says."

Pran walked back to the woodpile and picked up a large log. None of the other boys paid him any notice, with all of their attention focused on the kitten. He heard Pathik's audience cheer when the kitten began inching forward again. The poor creature mewed in agony from the heat, and Pran rushed toward the fire with the log, understanding Jelal's plan.

As Pran approached the kitten's tormenter, Pathik yelled, "Hey, whaddya think you're doin'? Stay outta my way!"

Ignoring him, Pran stepped forward, as close to the heat as he dared, and swung the heavy log onto the fire. As he did so, the large log came between the kitten and Pathik, breaking his line of sight with the animal as well as the ray of force which Pran had seen extending from Pathik's finger to the kitten's head. The log landed in a shower of sparks, further distracting the fat boy from any attempt to reestablish the sorcerous spell.

Released from the Mind Control spell, the kitten immediately turned tail and ran into the woods.

Pathik yelled at Pran, "You ruined my spell!"

Garwin lied for Pran, "He was just trying to help by making the fire larger for you. He's new here; he didn't know."

Pathik said, "Some *help*! He spoiled all my fun, comin' between me and that kitty while I was castin' my spell. A magic teacher's son oughta know better."

Pran replied angrily, "You call that fun?" He was about to add, "Only a coward would torture a defenseless kitten like that," but Garwin grabbed him by the arm and quickly led him and Jelal away from the fire.

Once they were out of earshot of the others, Pran said, "Thanks for stopping me, Garwin, before I said something that I'd regret. And Jelal, thanks for the tip on how to save the kitten. Let's go find Kimbar and head home; I've seen enough."

"We can't leave yet," Garwin insisted. "It's too early. Do you want them to think you just came here to mess up their spells or spy on them? Let's look around. There's bound to be some better sorcery going on somewhere around here."

A short distance from the bonfire, they saw a smaller group gathered, including Kimbar and Samir. When they came closer, they saw Samir holding a large bullfrog in both hands.

"I thought nobody here ever accidentally turned himself into a frog," Pran said to Kimbar, laughing nervously.

Kimbar pointed at the frog and said, "Hey, Samir, why don't you introduce Pran to your sister?"

Pran was shocked that Samir would turn his own sister into a frog, until he heard laughter and realized his friend had just been kidding.

"Very funny," Samir said. Giving Pran a sly look, he said, "Here, hold this for me," thrusting the frog into Pran's hands before he could protest.

"Why?" Pran asked apprehensively, as he struggled to keep the large frog from jumping out of his hands while still holding it gently enough to avoid hurting it.

"You'll see. Don't worry; you won't have to hold it for long," Samir said, smiling mysteriously.

Pran saw Sekar walk over to observe. Against his better judgment, he continued holding the bullfrog in both hands, fearful about what might happen next, but afraid not to comply while Sekar and the others were all watching. However, he resolved not to let this frog meet the same fate the kitten had almost met.

Samir untied a bag lying beside him and pulled out a live, squawking chicken, its feathers the reddish-brown color of autumn leaves.

Kimbar asked, "How will you explain one of your mother's laying hens is missing?"

"It's not hers. I swiped it from Efrom's farm on the way here tonight." Grabbing the chicken by the neck, Samir carried it over to a broad, knee-high stump covered with dark stains. He held the chicken down on the stump with his left hand and pulled a hatchet from his belt with his right. Then he raised the hatchet and struck, severing the chicken's head with one stroke. He kept a tight grip on the chicken's bleeding neck, so it wouldn't run around with its head cut off, and turned to stare at the frog, pointing at it with his right hand and chanting in Maraknese.

The bullfrog had settled down and stopped struggling to hop away, so Pran held it with its head visible, not wanting Samir's spell to strike him by mistake instead of the frog. Feeling the frog in his hands suddenly growing bigger, heavier, and *hairier*, Pran jerked his hands away, terrified. The creature tumbled to the ground, and by the time it landed, it was no longer a frog, but a rapidly changing mass of fur and legs. It continued transforming for another minute, until it became a small rabbit, perfect in every detail, from its gray-brown fur to its pointy ears. The rabbit stood frozen in fear for a few seconds, twitching its nose, trapped between the boys and the fire. Then it croaked, a loud and distinct "Ribbit," and dashed between the legs of two of the boys.

The entire gathering erupted in laughter except for Samir (who looked surprised and confused), Pran (who was still gapping in disbelief), and Sekar.

When he could control his laughter, Kimbar said, "That's the strangest sounding rabbit I've ever heard, or the funniest looking frog. Where'd it go, Samir? Off to the swamp to hatch some tadpoles?"

"I wouldn't laugh so hard if I were you," Sekar told the group. "That Transmogrification spell I taught Samir works on people, too. He could turn any of you into rabbits, if he chose."

"Yeah, talking rabbits!" Kimbar said, and the group broke into laughter again.

Pran saw Sekar struggling to keep a straight face, as if trying to preserve his image as a tough Sorcerer. When a smile finally won out over the stern expression he was trying to maintain, he turned and walked away to keep the others from seeing it. Pran wondered why Sekar bothered trying to look serious at a moment like that. He pictured in his mind the croaking rabbit and burst out laughing himself.

The gathering broke up soon after that, and the boys headed for home. Jelal traveled the first part of the way with Pran, Kimbar, and Garwin, commenting, "I'm sure glad I ran into you guys tonight."

"Me too," said Pran, "otherwise we'd never have figured out how to save that kitten in time. That was quick thinking. So, will we be seeing you here again, Jelal? I heard there will be another circle of sorcery at the next full moon."

"No, I won't be coming to any more of these," said Jelal. "There's too much bad stuff going on here, evil stuff. Also, doesn't all that chanting in Maraknese make you wonder where Sekar learned those spells? In case anyone forgot, we're at war with them."

"Plus the more often you go, the higher the risk of being caught. Master Alimar warned my class that the penalty for getting caught doing sorcery is expulsion. From what I saw tonight, it's not worth the risk." Jelal suddenly stopped walking and turned to look them in the eyes. "Promise me, all three of you, that you won't go to any more circles of sorcery either. I don't want you to be expelled."

There was an awkward silence. Finally, Pran agreed, "Okay, I promise, although I can't speak for my friends. But then I suppose we won't see you much anymore, Jelal, what with you at Master Alimar's school and us at my father's school, on the other side of town." He couldn't hide his disappointment, because despite having just met Jelal, he really liked the little Novice.

"Oh, you might be seeing more of me than you expect," said Jelal with a smile. "I'm thinking of transferring to your school."

Pran's mood brightened. "That would be great."

"Transferring already?" asked Kimbar. "Why, did you get off to a bad start at Master Alimar's school?"

"No, I just like what I've heard about yours."

Kimbar grinned. "If what you've heard about Gilamond's boring lectures sounded better to you, then Alimar must be pretty awful!"

"He's joking," Garwin said. "Actually, Master Gilamond is a good teacher, and his apprentices are top-notch."

"That's what I've heard," said Jelal, as the four boys emerged from the forest path and stepped back onto Mellenville Road. "Tell me more about your school, to help me make up my mind."

Speaking softly while walking on the road, keeping their voices just loud enough to be heard over the crickets and frogs, Pran, Kimbar, and Garwin answered Jelal's questions as well as they could. The little Novice seemed more interested in the other students at their school, and in the teacher's apprentices, than he was in the schoolmaster himself.

When they reached the intersection of Mellenville Road and Carpenter Road, Jelal said, "I guess this is where we part."

Pran said warmly, "I hope you decide to transfer, Jelal. If you do, know that you have a friend in our school."

Jelal smiled at him. "Thanks, I'll remember that."

As Jelal continued on Mellenville Road, the other three boys turned Carpenter Road, stepping onto the small bridge over the Otter Creek. As soon as they were out of earshot, Garwin asked, "Pran, why on Rados do you want to be friends with him? He's only twelve."

"For one thing, he's intelligent. I think he's as smart as any of us."

"Maybe smarter than Kimbar," Garwin teased, "but still, he's just a Novice."

"No, Jelal isn't like the other Novices," Pran said. "There's something different about him, something special, although I can't quite put my finger on it. What do you think, Kimbar?"

"You want to know what I think?" Kimbar grinned mischievously. "I think you're falling in love with him."

Pran punched him in the shoulder.

"Ouch!"

Garwin hissed, "Quiet, you two! We've come this far without getting caught; do you want to spoil it now, when we're almost home?"

They walked the rest of the way in silence. Soon it was time to drop off Garwin at his house. Kimbar's house came next, after which Pran was alone once more.

Pran used some silver to cast another Silence spell, and then carefully sneaked back into his own house. He didn't dare use a Mage-Light, so he felt his way along the walls, and even with the Silence spell, he instinctively tiptoed. As he carefully made his way up the stairs and down the hallway, he heard his father still snoring obliviously. With any luck, his parents would never know he'd even been out of the house tonight. Since Pran hadn't cast any black magic spells, there would be no telltale damage to his ability to cast white magic spells in school.

After slipping into bed, Pran lay awake for a while, despite the lateness of the hour, pondering what he'd seen and heard tonight. He found himself

torn between horror and fascination at the spells he had witnessed. On the one hand, he could see the allure of black magic, understanding how it could be tempting to compel others to do your will, force girls to fulfill your every desire, or transform your enemies into harmless creatures.

However, he also knew how wrong it was—evil, even—and resolved to keep the promise he'd made to Jelal never to go to a circle of sorcery again. The way Pathik had used a Mind Control spell to torture a kitten had been horrible, and he was frightened by the Transmogrification spell Samir had used to change a frog into a rabbit. If someone were to cast that spell on Pran—and did it correctly—how would his father recognize him to change him back? To his family and friends he'd appear to be just one more rabbit in the garden. Before anyone could realize his predicament, he'd be killed by a predator, or even (he shuddered at the thought) by his own dog, Nako! As he drifted off to sleep, Pran determined to find a defense against that spell before anyone tried to use it on *him*.



4: A WARNING TO THE CLASS

Pran was so tired from his night sneaking around in the woods that when his mother woke him in the morning, he mumbled something and then fell right back to sleep. He awoke again to feel a dog's tongue licking his cheek. "Cut it out, Nako, you overgrown puppy!" he said, as he gently pushed his dog's nose away. Having done the job he'd been sent in to do, the pointer turned around and left, nails clicking on the hardwood floor. Pran hurriedly pulled on his shirt and trousers and ran downstairs, where he found Kimbar waiting for him in the kitchen.

"What took you so long?" Kimbar asked.

"I overslept. Sorry."

His mother said, "Your lunch is in your knapsack. Have some pancakes before you go. They might be cold by now, but you should eat something."

A bottle of maple syrup sat on the kitchen table beside a plate covered by a white linen cloth, which Pran lifted to reveal a stack of perfect pancakes. The sight and scent tempted him to sit down to eat, late as he was.

Kimbar asked, "Does he really have time to eat?"

"If I took the time to cook them, Pran can take the time to eat them," his mother said. "Besides, growing boys need their breakfast."

Kimbar shrugged. "Okay, but please hurry, Pran. If we're late for Magic Class again, your father will dock points from our grades."

During the first two school periods, Pran's father taught Theory and Principles of Magic, which students simply called "Magic Class," and the last two periods, he and his apprentices supervised Magic Lab. In between were "academic" (non-magic) subjects taught by visiting teachers from local grammar schools.

Pran wolfed down two pancakes, conscious of Kimbar standing by impatiently. He drank half a glass of milk, wiped his chin, and said, "Okay, Kimbar, let's go."

"You didn't finish your pancakes," his mother complained.

"Sorry, mother, they're tasty, but I don't have time for the whole stack. Maybe Nako can eat the rest," he said. Hearing his name associated with eating, the dog arose from under the table so quickly he nearly overturned a chair, wagging his tail furiously.

"Bye mother, bye Nako," Pran said, grabbing his knapsack and heading out the door before she could protest. Once out of the yard, he said, "We'd better run to make it on time."

Kimbar grinned. "Race you to the bridge!"

The two boys took off running along the dirt road, pacing themselves for the distance. After a mile and a half, they could see the squat guardhouse securing the western approach of the Flat Rock Bridge. It was typically manned by two or three men, enough to discourage ruffians or bandits from crossing into White River Junction, and if they needed reinforcements, the town garrison was just a bugle call away.

As he came within sight of the bridge, Pran pushed himself, briefly taking the lead. Kimbar, however, put on a last minute burst of speed, passing Pran again and beating him to the near abutment of the bridge by just a few feet, where a sign boasted, "Troll-free bridge," and in smaller print beneath, "This bridge troll-free since 1803 A.W.W., courtesy of King Orban II."

Kimbar panted as Pran arrived next to him, "Good race. You almost beat me this time." The two boys were evenly matched at running, swimming, wrestling and most other sports.

As they paused on the bridge to catch their breath, Pran looked down over the wooden railing at the White River rushing some thirty feet below.

It was a nice view, Pran thought, but he certainly wouldn't want to fall. The river was shallow there, but rapid, cutting its way swiftly through the vast, whitish-gray slabs of rock that gave the Flat Rock Bridge its name, for the bridge itself was not stone, but a wooden truss bridge supported by concrete piers sunk deep into the White River.

Pran and Kimbar crossed the bridge, and as they reached its far end, by unspoken agreement they broke back into an easy run. While covering the short distance remaining to the school, they passed several other students, actually managing to arrive before the bell. The two friends passed through the door and entered the building together, taking their seats in the back row where the Conjurers sat, with Kimbar's desk directly on Pran's right.

They'd barely sat down before Joran, the older of Pran's father's two white-robed apprentices, pulled the rope to toll the school bell. Pran turned to watch the Novices file into the classroom, all six of them in a pack as usual. It being only the second week of the school year, the Novices felt the need to stick together for support in their strange, new environment.

The Novices had arrived in magic school last week after spending the previous seven years in elementary school, studying academic subjects. The fact that they were in magic school now, rather than grammar school, proved they'd not only performed well academically, but also scored highly on a test of innate magic ability. Still, some of them could barely cast a spell yet, even if their lives depended on it.

Although it may have been new to the Novices, a small magic school, on the outskirts of White River Junction, was a far cry from the Royal Academy of Magic. It was only a one room schoolhouse—two rooms if you counted the large teacher's office in the back, where Pran's father tutored his apprentices during the hours between morning Magic Class and afternoon Magic Lab. The same office occasionally served him for hosting clients who needed a Magician's services, because as he often reminded Pran, teaching didn't pay much.

At first glance, the classroom looked very much like that of any country schoolhouse. Each student sat at a wooden desk with a drawer and a built-in, sealable inkwell. A large blackboard covered most of the front wall of the

room, and each student also had his own individual slate to write on. A potbellied stove sat in the center of the room to keep it warm in winter. All those items would be familiar to the Novices.

However, on closer examination, some details revealed this to indeed be a school of magic. Although the cast iron stove in the room resembled the wood or coal burning ones the Novices were used to, it had no chimney. Instead of making students chop firewood or shovel coal, each winter day Pran's father assigned a different boy to cast the spell that kept the stove glowing a cheery red inside.

The walls were lined not only with bookshelves, but also specimen jars, potted plants, cages (some currently occupied with small animals or birds), crystal balls, mirrors (three of them full-length), measuring scales, and other items not found in typical classrooms. Some Novices might not know in the beginning which of them were accouterments of magic and which were simply items to practice spells on. Along the side walls, beside the familiar maps of the world of Rados and the Kingdom of Eldor hung other study aids, including posters depicting the hand gestures and amount of gold or silver needed to cast the most common spells.

The Royal Academy it *wasn't*, but Pran conceded the school could still be a bit overwhelming to new students, especially those who hadn't had the benefit of growing up with a Magician father as he had. Remembering how he'd felt as a young Novice, three years ago, experiencing the scorn and contempt of the upperclassmen, Pran had long ago resolved to act nicer to the new students than older boys had toward him when he'd been a Novice.

Garwin walked into the classroom and took his customary seat to Pran's left, looking as tired as him. Pran relaxed his eyes and let them go slightly out of focus, a resting technique he'd learned while struggling to stay awake during boring academic classes. He snapped back to alertness when his father emerged from his office in the back of the schoolroom, trailed by Nahshon, the younger of his two apprentices, and sat down at the teacher's desk.

Like most Magicians, Pran's father was bearded, but kept his trimmed to three inches in deliberate contrast to palace Magicians, who he said, "strutted around self-importantly with their long, flowing beards." His indigo Magician's robe was fastened with a gray belt, the color worn by Loremasters, professors of magic, magic teachers, and their apprentices (although apprentices wore white robes). Over it, he wore a gold necklace bearing the hexagram pendant, as much a symbol of the magical profession as the indigo robe. Of course, he had additional gold chains under his robe, next to his skin for easy use. He wore gold rings on his right hand and silver on his left, with only his thumbs bare. Around his right wrist he wore a gold band, but his left wrist bore only the traditional bracelet of woven rope indicating he was married.

After taking roll, Pran's father said, "Let's start off today with a question for the Novices. Can any of you tell me why the symbol of Magicians is a hexagram, a six-sided star?" When none of them answered, he said, "Okay, then can one of you at least tell me what the points on the hexagram stand for?"

Prajno, a small, brown eyed, raven haired boy, raised his hand and offered, "Master Gilamond, I think four of the points on the star have to do with the four elements."

"Very good. Yes, the four side points on the hexagram represent the four major elements: Fire, Water, Air, and Metal. The top and bottom points on the star represent the two additional elements that are the concern of violet magic: Time and Space. The ancient Wizards adopted the hexagram as their emblem to signify that they were able to master all six elements, including travel through both time and space. Today's Magicians can travel spatially using Teleportation spells, but have not been able to master time travel.

"This morning I'll review the differences between white magic and black magic and warn you of the dangers of sorcery. Although you may think this lesson is just for the Novices, upperclassmen should pay close attention this year, because circumstances in Eldor have changed as a result of the war, and there are new laws that may affect you.

“The most obvious differences between white magic and sorcery are the material components. You all know that white Magicians use gold and silver to cast spells.”

A Novice in the front row raised his hand, causing snickers from the upperclassmen.

“You have a question *already*?” Even Pran’s father sounded surprised.

Yuli, whose blond hair, blue eyes, and cherubic complexion made him look even younger than his thirteen years, asked, “Why do we have to use silver for most of our spells, instead of gold like adult Magicians and apprentices?”

Pran’s father said, “Can another Novice answer his question?”

Mathur, a tawny haired, brown eyed boy who seemed calmer and more confident than the other Novices, replied, “We use silver because it’s less expensive than gold. Otherwise none of us could afford our training.”

“Yeah,” Kimbar whispered to Pran, his green eyes flashing, “some of these guys would waste more gold trying to learn one simple spell than they’ll earn in their lifetime!”

“That’s one reason,” Pran’s father agreed. “Why else? Anyone?”

“So that when we make mistakes, it doesn’t cause as much damage,” offered Oren, a second year student, or Initiate, who’d barely managed to pass his Novice finals last year, having nearly blown up the classroom during the practical portion of the exam.

Pran turned to Kimbar, grinning. “He ought to know,” he whispered. “He’s the biggest miscaster here.”

Kimbar laughed out loud.

Suddenly, Pran’s head felt as if it were being grasped by a giant hand. An irresistible force turned his head, slowly but firmly, until he found himself looking directly up at his father, who was holding both hands out in front of him as if grasping the lids of two invisible jars. Pran guessed that Kimbar was being held by the same force.

His father’s voice was like ice. “Pran and Kimbar. Do you have something you would like to share with the class?”

“No, Master Gilamond,” they replied in unison.

"I *thought* not," Pran's father said. He dropped his hands back to his sides, and the tight hold on Pran's head released as suddenly as it had begun. Then he turned his attention back to the rest of the class, saying, "'Damage' is one way to put it, Oren. Why wouldn't a mistake cause as much 'damage' when cast using silver instead of gold?"

Oren answered, "Because spells using silver don't last as long. They're usually less powerful, too."

"That's right," Pran's father said. "Spells possess some properties of the metals used to cast them. Just as silver tarnishes and corrodes, spells cast using silver are temporary. Gold keeps its shine forever, without tarnish, rust, or corrosion, and some spells cast using gold also last forever—if nothing acts to weaken the spell and no Magician cancels it.

"Spells using gold not only last longer, but are generally more powerful. The most powerful spells can *only* be cast using gold. Gold's potency for magic is the main reason it is so precious. The Kingdom of Eldor is blessed with the largest reserves of gold on Rados, which is why other nations call our capital, Eldorado, the 'city of gold.' Despite the fact that gold is nearly as abundant as silver in Eldor, even here, gold is far more valuable than silver, simply because it's more useful for magic."

"Master Gilamond, isn't gold also more valuable because it looks better as jewelry?" asked Fipin, another Initiate. A small, clever, brown-skinned boy whose family had immigrated from Ostor, Fipin had a tendency to ask questions about anything he found interesting, whether or not it related to the lesson.

"Sure, some people wear gold jewelry for its looks, and of course the Maraknese use gold only for jewelry, since they don't use white magic. But it's primarily the magic that comes from gold, Fipin, that makes it more valuable than silver.

"Now let's talk about black magic, or sorcery. Who can tell me the main material components of black magic?"

Nobody answered, perhaps out of fear it would be taken as an admission of guilt.

“Don’t be afraid to speak up. I know none of you have any *personal* experience with sorcery,” Pran’s father deadpanned. “However,” he suggested, “you may remember from my lecture last year, or from your readings.”

Pathik finally raised his hand, this being one of the few questions that was easy for the slow-witted Conjurer. “Bones, mostly.”

“That’s correct. What else, anyone?”

Garwin said, “Sorcerers can draw power from an animal as it dies, by touching it.”

“Yes, or from a person. Their need for black magic materials leads Sorcerers to engage in evil deeds such as grave-robbing, human and animal sacrifice, and murder. Not to mention smaller crimes like chicken thievery, right, Samir?” said Pran’s father, whirling to look the boy in the eye.

Samir blushed guiltily, his face turning almost as red as his hair.

Pran was stunned his father had found out about Samir’s chicken sacrifice already. Did he know *everything* that happened last night?

Having made his point to Samir, Pran’s father turned his gaze back to the rest of the class and continued, “Sorcerers cast their most powerful spells using specific parts of magical creatures, such as unicorn horns or dragon scales. Due to the high potency of these items for black magic, Sorcerers have hunted unicorns and dragons to the brink of extinction.

“I will not go into how they use those materials, because you are not here to learn sorcery! It is important, though, to learn how to recognize Sorcerers. Possession of human skulls is a sure sign that someone is a Sorcerer, because many use the human skull as their emblem, and most keep skulls for use in spells. Sorcerers wear bone necklaces rather than gold or silver, usually dress in black hooded robes, and often carry bone staffs.

“Now, who can tell me some of the limitations of black magic?”

Garwin raised his hand. “It can’t be used for Healing or to make crops grow faster. And black magic spells aren’t permanent, because when a Sorcerer dies, any spells he cast during his life expire as well.”

“Very good. Does anyone know some of the special powers of black magic?”

Sekar raised his hand. Even though today he was wearing the silver chain of a white magic student like the other boys, Pran couldn’t help

picturing him in the bone necklace he'd worn the night before. Sekar said boldly, "White magic can't create gold, but sorcery can. Black magic can Transmogrify a person into an animal, or one animal into another. It can make objects vanish forever, not just turn them invisible. And sorcery is better for attack spells than white magic."

Some students looked impressed by Sekar's words, and Pran's father frowned. "It's true that black magic can do those things, but you're wrong about it being a better weapon. Our Army Magicians are doing quite well fighting off the Maraknese invasion with powerful spells, many of them too secret to mention here.

"White magic may not have quite as many offensive spells, but it has much better *defensive* spells than sorcery, as well as Healing spells, making it actually more useful in war. And although Sorcerers can turn lead into gold with an Alchemy spell, if you're foolish enough to try it, you won't even be able to *use* the gold you created, because the Alchemy spell diminishes your white magic abilities so much!

"Most of the unique powers of black magic are ones that only *cowards* would want to use: spells for making people or animals sick, souring milk, spoiling meat, rotting crops in the field, and summoning hordes of rats, roaches, slugs, and other nasty creatures to infest the homes of good people. There's nothing glamorous or impressive about sneaking around making meat rot or milk sour."

Pran saw Samir began to raise his hand, most likely to protest that there were some impressive deeds that could be done using black magic. Kimbar kicked Samir under the desk, and the redhead put down his hand before Pran's father noticed it. A wise move, Pran thought.

Pran's father added, "Okay, to be fair, there are some other unique powers of black magic that don't sound quite so cowardly. Who can tell us about these?" Seeing several upraised hands, he grunted and said, "Let's hear from someone who hasn't spoken up yet. Balkar?"

The second son of a blacksmith, Balkar was much like his father: strong, decent, and as honest as the day was long. At sixteen, he was a year older than most other Charmers (as third year magic students were called), but

not for lack of talent. Balkar had started magic school at age fourteen, the year his older brother had become an apprentice in their father's smithy, finally freeing Balkar to pursue his own dream of becoming a Magician. He said, "I've heard Sorcerers can change themselves into animals when they want to, getting all the powers of that animal. Sometimes they turn themselves into birds, so they can fly."

"Good example," Pran's father said. "The reason those kinds of spells can't be cast with white magic is that they violate the natural order of things. Changing a person into an animal, or one species of animal into another, is a crime against nature. Religious people call it a sin."

"The same is true for the Rapid Aging spell Maraknese Army Sorcerers use to transform some of our brave young soldiers into frail old men. Fortunately, our Magicians can slow the aging before it kills them, but there's no way to reverse it. No way at all," Pran's father said, his voice breaking with emotion, and he turned toward the window for a moment. The class remained silent out of respect not only for their teacher, but also for Eldor's soldiers.

When Pran's father turned back to face the class, his eyes were moist. He cleared his throat and continued, "Now we come to the most important part of this morning's class, the part I hope you'll all remember: the dangers of using black magic. I'm sure you've heard that sorcery shortens your lifespan, and it's true: every black magic spell cast cuts *hours* from your life. But what you should be more immediately concerned about, since you all hope to be Magicians someday, is that using sorcery diminishes your abilities for white magic."

"After even your first attempt at sorcery, you'll find it more difficult to cast white magic spells the next day. Some of you may already be aware of this. You may not realize, however, that the more often you use black magic, the longer the effect lasts. If you start using sorcery regularly, before long you'll be incapable of casting any white magic spells."

Pran's father's eyes probed the classroom. Finding everyone paying rapt attention, he continued, "Most people who develop a liking for black magic find that it eventually becomes addictive. Once someone gets

addicted to black magic, it becomes all but impossible to train him as a white Magician, because he doesn't want to stop doing sorcery. And even if he is able to stop, the longer he's been practicing it, the longer it takes for his white magic abilities to return. So if you're using sorcery already, stop now, and if you haven't tried it, don't start."

He paused for a minute. "Every year, I warn the class about black magic, but I realize there are some things that boys, by nature, will not take on faith. Just like a little child who has to touch a hot stove to see if it really will burn his hand, many of you will, at some time or another, experiment with black magic." Pran saw his father look directly at Sekar, Samir, and Pathik, as if he knew what they'd been up to last night. "You'll then find out for yourself how much your use of sorcery impairs your ability at white magic."

"This year, there's another issue which makes experimenting with sorcery even more serious. As you know, Eldor is under attack by Marakna, whose Magicians are all Sorcerers. This time it's a full-scale war, not just a border skirmish, as the Maraknese intend to conquer our entire country. Thanks to the efforts of our brave soldiers, and our Army Magicians having ample supplies of gold, so far we've been repelling the invasion." He smiled thinly.

"However, our kingdom is spending a great deal of resources resisting the attacks of the Maraknese Army, especially its Sorcerers, who kill or cripple too many of our valiant soldiers. With this in mind, King Orban recently ordered the Royal Bureau of Investigation to arrest anyone in Eldor found practicing sorcery and interrogate them to find out if they are spies or enemy sympathizers."

Pran looked at Kimbar with alarm, wondering if he'd heard anything about this. Kimbar glanced back and shrugged, indicating this was the first he'd heard of it also.

"Luckily for *some* of you," Pran's father continued, "only adult Sorcerers are subject to arrest, not children. However, it has not gone unnoticed that in the last few years there has been an increase in the practice of underage sorcery in Eldor. The Magician General has decided to put a stop to

this by decreeing that any magic student caught using sorcery will be expelled from magic school.”

Pran’s father’s eyes bored into Sekar, Samir, and Pathik again as he said, “From now on, I won’t tolerate any users of black magic in this school, even occasional experimenters. Don’t assume you can keep it a secret from me, because I *will* find out. I’ll no longer abide students showing up in class unable to cast spells because they were out the night before practicing sorcery. You’ll get one warning, and the next time, you’ll be expelled. Does everyone understand?”

“Yes, Master Gilamond,” the class replied in unison.

“That is all. You can take a brief recess until your math teacher arrives,” Pran’s father said curtly, then turned his back on the class and stalked off to the teacher’s office, in the rear of the schoolhouse, to tutor his two apprentices.

Pran found it even harder than usual to pay attention during academic classes, preoccupied with his father’s warning from Magic Class. He’d never before heard his father give such an ominous picture of the consequences of using sorcery. But what scared him was that his father somehow seemed to know about their illicit activities in the woods last night, hinting to the class that Samir had stolen a chicken, and that he knew Sekar, Samir, and Pathik had cast black magic spells. Pran didn’t care what happened to *those* three boys, but was terrified about what would happen to himself, as well as his friends Kimbar and Garwin, if his father also knew *they* were at the circle of sorcery last night.



5: CONSEQUENCES

At the start of Magic Lab, students paired up with their assigned lab partners. Of the Conjurers, Pran's father had teamed Pran with Garwin, Kimbar with Samir, and Sekar with Pathik, so everyone was paired with a friend, even if it wasn't always their best friend. It was fortunate for Pathik that he got along with Sekar, as nobody else wanted to be Pathik's lab partner after he'd been held back last year for poor spell casting and low grades.

"Today," Pran's father told the class, "you're going to practice Healing spells on animals. The sick or injured animals you see in the cages today are what vets call 'charity cases': strays, wild animals, or pets whose owners couldn't afford to pay for their Healing, but they're all young enough to Heal. I want everyone to fully Diagnose his animal first before Healing it, even if it appears obvious what's wrong with it, as some animals might have more than one injury. Use silver for the Diagnosis, of course, saving gold for the actual Healing.

"Novices, I know you haven't used gold for spells yet, at least not in my classroom, and Healing spells are new for you, so I won't expect you to cast them yet. Just stand behind the Initiates today to watch and learn from their experience. Initiates, start by using as much gold as Prentice Joran recommends, and if the Healing is incomplete, you can try again using more. Remember to put your used metal into the lead bin, not the iron

bin that you were used to using as Novices. Don't worry about separating any leftover gold dust from the lead, as my apprentices will do that at the end of the day. You'll learn through experience to use the right quantity of gold, without wasting any. Hopefully you'll learn that quickly, because our school is on a limited budget, and I don't want to have to raise your lab fees just because some of you haven't learned how to use gold efficiently. It's also important for when you become Magicians, because you'll never know when you might need to ration your gold.

"For today's lab, Prentice Joran will supervise the Novices and Initiates, and Prentice Nahshon will guide the Charmers and Conjurers. Please divide into your two groups now, upperclassmen on the right, underclassmen on the left. I'll be available to offer my help as needed or answer any questions that my apprentices can't."

Pran liked Nahshon, the younger of Pran's father's two apprentices. Despite being a prodigy in magic (he'd graduated and become an Enchanter at only fifteen), Nahshon was modest, unassuming, and easy to get along with, more like a friend to the students than a teacher's assistant. Pran was glad he'd finally get a chance to work with him in lab, because last year, when Nahshon was sixteen, Pran's father had only let him supervise underclassmen, hesitant to put him in charge of teens his own age.

Nahshon led the upperclassmen over to some cages containing small animals. The first cage held a small, grayish-brown rabbit, just like the one Samir had transformed a frog into last night with the spell Pran found so terrifying. He wondered if it could even be the same rabbit, and moved in closer to see. Just behind him, Kimbar suddenly croaked, "Ribbit," causing Pran to jump back, startled. The other Conjurers burst out laughing.

"Hey, keep the noise down," Nahshon said. He leaned in toward Pran and Kimbar and whispered, "Do you want Master Gilamond to think I can't handle the upperclassmen?"

Pran worried that Kimbar's joke might have backfired on his favorite apprentice, but a glance over his shoulder showed his father was busy on the other side of the room giving tips to the Novices and Initiates.

Nahshon asked quietly, "So, do you mind letting me in on what is so funny?"

"It's a long story," Kimbar said.

"Well, save it for after class then." Nahshon stepped over to the rabbit cage, and said, "Okay, Pran, since you seem to find this rabbit so interesting, you can go first."

Healing spells were among Pran's favorites, as he always experienced a feeling of peace, joy, contentment, and elation while casting the spell on others, whether human or animal. He'd been Healed by his father often enough, after childhood accidents, to know that the rabbit would feel something similar. As the pain slowly disappeared from the animal's body, its mind would be filled with a sensation of comfort, peace, contentment, and gratitude toward its Healer.

Pran performed his spell easily, locating and mending a hidden break in the rabbit's left rear leg. When all the energy of the Healing spell had flowed out of him and into the rabbit, he opened his hand and found every single grain of the recommended half thimbleful of gold dust had turned into lead. He dumped the used powder into the correct recycling bin and stroked the rabbit's fur. It looked very content now, its nose twitching, eyes bright, and ears laid back smoothly, allowing him to pet the wild animal without even a shudder, as the aftereffects of the Healing spell left it calm, relaxed, and temporarily in love with its Healer.

Nahshon took a silver coin in one hand and ran his other hand along the rabbit to check Pran's work. "Very good," he said. "This rabbit is completely Healed."

Next was Garwin's turn. Nahshon led him to a cage holding a thin, gray and white striped house cat, its right front leg wrapped with blood soaked bandages. "It's pretty obvious what this cat's problem is," Garwin pointed out.

"Yes, it was caught in a fox trap. Go ahead and do a Diagnosis for practice, even though it looks obvious. You never know; you may find something else wrong with it, too."

Garwin's treatment of the cat was quick and flawless. When he finished the Healing, he opened his hand, revealing a few grains of gold dust left amid the lead powder. "Excellent, Garwin," Nahshon said, "a very efficient

Healing.” Motioning for the other Conjurers and Charmers to approach, he said, “Can everyone see that Garwin still has some gold left? He stopped the spell as soon as he knew the animal was Healed, to conserve gold.”

Sekar gave Garwin a dirty look, apparently jealous of the praise. He and his lab partner, Pathik, were lucky when their spells worked at all—their *white* magic spells, anyway, as Pran had witnessed their skill in sorcery.

The cat purred and rubbed its head against Garwin’s hand lovingly. Pran smiled and said, “Garwin, I think you’ve found a friend.”

Kimbar performed his Healing well too, but his partner, Samir, had difficulty, and so did Pathik, probably due to the aftereffects of the black magic spells they’d cast the night before. Both failed in their attempts to Diagnose the ailment of a small dog using silver. Following Nahshon’s advice, however, they didn’t waste gold trying to Heal an animal they’d been unable to Diagnose.

Finally all of the Conjurers had gone except for Sekar. Nahshon led him to a cage containing a bluebird. As Sekar reached in, the bluebird made an attempt to hop away, its left wing sticking out at an odd angle as it moved. He easily cornered it in the small cage, then held his hand next to it and did his Diagnosis spell with silver, announcing, “Its left wing is broken.”

Nahshon said, “That’s correct,” but he sounded worried.

“Sekar didn’t need a spell to know *that*,” Kimbar muttered.

Pran agreed. In fact, he wasn’t sure whether Sekar had cast the spell successfully or had merely faked it, but Sekar seemed determined to go through with the Healing. Pran saw him turn away from the apprentice’s view and pour a full thimbleful of gold dust into his left hand.

“Hey,” Kimbar complained, “that’s twice as much gold as we normally use.”

“Shut up,” Sekar whispered, “I know what I’m doing.” He reached into the cage with his right hand and held it over the bird’s left side.

Pran looked for any spark of Healing energy between Sekar’s hand and the bird, but could see none. Glancing behind him, he saw his father quietly moving toward them to observe.

Sekar let out a long breath, opened his left hand, then dumped its contents, now completely turned to lead, into the recycling bin. Prentice

Nahshon used a silver coin to check the bluebird's condition and quickly concluded, "The wing is still broken."

"Let me try again," Sekar said. He filled his measuring thimble with gold dust again, poured it into his hand, and then fetched a *second* thimbleful of gold dust.

"What are you doing?" Nahshon asked. "That's *four times* as much gold as you should use."

Before Sekar could respond, Pran's father's voice boomed out angrily from behind them, "Sekar, stop right there! You've wasted enough gold. Put it all back, right now. I waited to see what you were going to do when your spell didn't work, Sekar. You have no business even being here, in your condition." He turned to address the whole class. "In case you boys don't know what I'm talking about, Sekar was out doing sorcery last night, and this is the result: he isn't able to cast even a simple Healing spell. Now his parents are going to have to pay for the gold and silver he wasted today."

Pran knew that would be no hardship for Sekar, whose father, Toxomin, owned the largest bank in White River Junction.

Sekar smirked. "Okay," he said, "just give me my warning, and I'll reimburse the gold tomorrow. Anything else?"

"I'm just getting started," Pran's father snapped. "Where are your protégés?"

Pran saw Samir and Pathik try to hide behind the other Conjurers, a feat that proved difficult for the bulky Pathik.

Sekar asked with false innocence, "Who do you mean?"

"Your partners in crime, your companions in sorcery! You know who I mean—Pathik and that chicken thief, Samir. You two," he snapped, "get out where I can see you!"

Samir and Pathik appeared from behind Garwin and Prentice Nahshon, their faces even paler than usual. "Yes, Master Gilamond?"

"At least *these* two had the good sense to give up after one attempt at casting a spell, so they only wasted a little bit of silver. Sekar, you must be even dumber than they are. Go home, Sekar, and don't come back to my school until you're able to cast spells as well as the average Novice."

There were snickers from the class.

Sekar's face flushed with anger. "You can't talk to me like that!"

Pran's father raised an eyebrow. "Oh I can't, can I? And why not?"

"My father provided the money to *build* this school."

"Yes," Pran's father observed dryly, "I remember he loaned the Magicians' Council the money at full market rates. Very generous of him," he said sarcastically, "seeing as he made a tidy profit off the deal."

Sekar said haughtily, "And the loan on this building is not yet paid off, meaning this is my father's school, not yours. Perhaps he should find a better Magician to teach here."

"You dare speak to me like that, after showing up for lab too much under the influence of sorcery to Heal even one measly sparrow—"

"Bluebird," Sekar corrected.

"Silence!" Pran's father roared, his face livid with rage. "I've had enough of your disrespect. You think your father's bank owns this school, so that makes him my boss? I'll show you who's boss here, you arrogant little pup. As I said this morning, I won't tolerate any black magic users in my school. You're *expelled*, Sekar. Clean out your desk, get out of my school, and don't come back."

Sekar looked dumbstruck for a moment, then protested, "That's not fair. You've never expelled anyone before. Even this morning, you said you'd give a warning first."

"You've already had your share of warnings over the past four years, Sekar."

"But you have no proof I did sorcery! You can't expel me just for having trouble with one lab exercise. I'll have my father take it up with the Magicians' Council."

"Go right ahead, and I'll give the Council proof that you were not only doing sorcery last night, but also *teaching* it to others. Now get out of my magic school, right now, before I decide to expel your friends Pathik and Samir too!" As he pointed at Sekar, the gold rings glittering on his hand, Pran half expected him to cast a spell at the boy.

Sekar turned to give Pran a murderous look, then shoved his books into his satchel and stalked out of the schoolhouse, slamming the door behind him.

As his class sat in stunned silence, Pran's father stared at the schoolhouse door for a minute, gripping his desk tightly with both hands, then took a few deep breaths. When his color had returned to normal, he said sternly, "I don't want anyone else showing up in my schoolhouse unable to cast spells in lab. That goes for all of you, but especially Samir and Pathik, who are on probation as of today. One more time for either of you two, and you'll be kicked out as well."

Yuli raised his hand and asked nervously, "Master Gilamond, what about us Novices? Sometimes we just can't get a spell to work, no matter how hard we try."

"I'm not talking about those who lack the knowledge or experience," Pran's father said, his expression softening somewhat. "I'm speaking of those who put themselves into a condition where they can't cast white magic spells because they've been doing sorcery. If you have a valid excuse, like you're not feeling well, haven't had enough sleep, or just forgot how to do the spell, I won't punish you, but please tell me your problem before lab so you don't waste gold or silver. Understood?"

The students nodded their agreement.

"All right," Pran's father said, "class dismissed." He turned and strode into his office in the back room, closing the door sharply behind him.

It was unlike Pran's father to dismiss the class early, and everyone stayed in their seats. Some boys wondered aloud whether the apprentices would continue the lab exercise, as none of the Charmers had had a chance to cast Healing spells yet, nor had many of the Initiates.

Prentice Joran gestured toward the front door. "You heard Master Gilamond; class dismissed." He and Prentice Nahshon retreated to the teacher's office, and students began filing out of the schoolhouse in small groups, talking in whispers.

Just outside the building, Samir grabbed Pran's arm from behind and spun him around, yelling, "So, it wasn't enough for you to tell your father where we were last night! You had to tell him I'm a chicken thief too!"

"I didn't tell him anything," Pran protested.

Kimbar said, "Let him go," as he and Garwin appeared at Pran's side.

"Why, because he didn't snitch on *you* yet? Just wait—he'll betray you too! Pran, if there was anything left of our former friendship, it's over now." With that, Samir turned on his heel and stalked off.

As Pran and his two friends walked home together, Kimbar said, "Tell us what happened, Pran. I bet your father caught you sneaking in last night and used a Lie Detector spell on you, eh? I'm glad you didn't mention *my* name to him."

"No, it wasn't like that."

Garwin asked, "Then why on Rados did you turn those three in? You know they'll try to get even with you. We'll protect you if we can, but you could at least have warned us what you were going to do, first."

"I didn't snitch on anyone," Pran insisted.

Garwin said, "How else would your father know about last night? You don't need to lie to us, Pran; we're your friends.

Pran said, "I'm telling the truth! Kimbar, surely *you* believe me."

Kimbar's silence was answer enough.

"Kimbar," Pran protested, "you're my best friend! If you don't believe me, who will?"

"Well, what do you expect us to think," Kimbar asked, "when the first time you go to a circle of sorcery, your father catches everyone who was there from your class—except your two best friends? He even knew about Samir stealing the chicken and about Sekar *teaching* sorcery. If you didn't tell him, then who did?"

"He's a Magician," Pran pointed out. "He has ways to find things out through magic. He could have seen it in his crystal ball."

Garwin shook his head. "He'd have to have known exactly when and where to look."

"Not if he was using it to follow me," Pran said, and then the implications of this dawned on him. "Do you think he knows we were there too?"

"No," Kimbar said, "he only yelled at Sekar, Samir, and Pathik. Somehow he knew about them, but not us."

Pran said, "Promise me the same thing I promised Jelal, that you two won't go to any more circles of sorcery. I don't want to see my two best friends expelled."

Kimbar shrugged, "No problem. I only went to a couple of them, anyway." He grinned, "There are no girls there, just fire nymphs you can't even touch, so what's the point in going?"

Garwin agreed, "Me too. I didn't study this hard just to be expelled."

Pran asked, "Why do you think my father didn't catch Sekar and his friends before, anyway?"

"Well," Garwin answered, "Last year, Sekar always held these black magic sessions on Fridays so his followers could sleep late the next day. By the time school started on Monday, their spell casting ability was back to normal. But this summer, when Kimbar and I started going, Sekar found out sorcery works best when the moon's full. That's why he scheduled a session for last night, even though we had school the next day."

"So," Pran said dejectedly, "now they think they got caught because of me. Do you think if I talk to them about it tomorrow, I can convince them I didn't snitch?"

"Do you really think they'll believe you?" Kimbar asked. "I hardly believed it myself. No, stay away from them for now; I'll talk to them for you. Don't worry; Samir and I are good friends, so I'm sure I can convince *him*, at least, that you didn't tell."

"Don't worry,' you say? If you can't convince all three of them, one of them is going to turn me into a frog!"

Kimbar laughed, "Or maybe a croaking rabbit like last night? I know worrying is what you do best, Pran, but try to relax and leave things to me."

When they arrived at the white picket fence outside Pran's house, Garwin said, "Pran, want me to walk to school with you and Kimbar tomorrow, so case Sekar and his pals won't attack you on the way?"

"Sure, thanks. If those Sorcerer wannabes see me before you do, I might be the frog sitting by this gate, so be careful where you step."

Pran's friends laughed, thinking he was joking, but he wasn't.



6: THE TRUTHSEEKERS

Pran opened the side gate in the white picket fence and walked up the flagstone path to his home, a large, two story frame house with white clapboard siding and black storm shutters. It had once been his grandparents' farmhouse, but when they'd retired from farming, they'd offered it to Pran's parents for a price too good to pass up. Pran would have preferred to move to a big city like Eldorado when his grandparents had moved out, but of course he'd had no say in the matter, being very young at the time.

Although they'd kept the house in the family, Pran's grandparents had realized their Magician son would never be a farmer, so they'd sold their fertile fields to neighboring farmers for a larger price than they'd received for the house. This had financed their move to the southern seaport town of Turtle Bay, where they now lived with Pran's Uncle Javid and Aunt Abra. There they helped care for their grandchildren and kept their daughter-in-law company while their son was away at sea, for Uncle Javid was First Mate on a merchant ship, and sailors' wives led lonely lives.

As Pran opened the side door to his house and entered into the summer kitchen, Nako nearly bowled him over running to greet him, wagging his tail wildly. "Hey, Nako," Pran said, rubbing the dog's head, "Glad to see you too, but every time I get home from school, you act like I've been gone for a month." He called out to his mother the obligatory, "I'm home!"

When he walked into the main kitchen, his mother greeted him wearing her artist's smock rather than an apron, her brown hair tied behind her head. She had her easel set up in the kitchen, where (Pran noted with mild amusement) she was once again painting the bowl of fruit that lay on the table. His mother had painted at least a dozen versions of fruit bowls and fruit baskets, having heard that this was the way for beginning artists to learn.

"You're home early, Pran," she said, putting down her brush. "How was your day in school, dear?"

"Fine, mother." Checking the canvas on her easel, he asked, "If you're done painting that apple on the top, can I have it?"

When she nodded, he carefully picked the top apple from the bowl she'd been painting, so as not to disturb the fruit below, then fetched a glass from the cupboard to pour himself a drink of water.

"Oh, let me pour it for you, dear," his mother said, taking the glass from his hand and filling it from a brass pitcher on the counter.

Pran sighed and rolled his eyes. Why did his mother still treat him as if he were a helpless little boy? He was practically a Magician—well, practically an Enchanter, at any rate—and she still treated him like a child. He took off his knapsack and threw it in the corner.

"Please don't throw your books down like that, Pran. You know how valuable they are."

At least she left off the "dear" this time, Pran thought. Sometimes it seemed the only way to keep her from calling him that was to do something wrong!

His mother asked, "Why are you home early, anyway?"

"Oh, father was mad at a couple students, so he let us out of lab early. I guess he was too upset to do any more teaching."

"Which boys was he angry at? Friends of yours?"

"Not really," Pran said with a shrug, "just Sekar, Samir, and Pathik."

"Samir used to come over here with Kimbar every day to play. Aren't you two friends at all anymore?"

"Apparently not," Pran said. Samir's words still echoed in his head: *Pran, if there was anything left of our former friendship, it's over now.*

“And Pathik was a year ahead of you in school. Didn’t he graduate last year?”

“No, he was held back, so he’s a Conjurer again.”

“Oh right, I forgot. And Sekar, the banker’s son, I’m not surprised to hear your father’s angry at him again. I know Sekar likes to talk back, and his grades have been going down—do you think he’ll have to repeat his Conjurer year like Pathik?”

“Not after today. Father just expelled him.”

“Expelled?” His mother looked alarmed. “Why, what did he do?”

“I don’t feel like talking about it,” Pran said. Not only did he feel guilty for having been at the same circle of sorcery that had led to Sekar’s expulsion, but he was afraid that if he discussed it, his mother would know from his tone of voice that he was hiding something. Pran never had been a good liar. “I’m sure father will explain everything to you tonight.” He finished his glass of water, picked up his knapsack, and started toward his room.

“Oh, dear, now that you’ve finished drinking your water, would you fetch me another bucket?” Although a cistern under their house collected rainwater for washing, bathing, and dishwashing, they still depended on an outside well for drinking water.

“Sure, mother,” Pran said, grabbing the bucket. “Come on Nako, let’s go outside.” The moment he opened the door, Nako squeezed by him eagerly, running to the gate and waiting for him there. Pran whistled and swung the bucket around as he walked toward the side gate. He didn’t mind going for water on a beautiful, late-summer day like this. The weather was warm and sunny, probably one of the last nice days before autumn, which was just two days away.

The white picket fence around their house did not mark the end of their property. As Pran exited the side gate, on his right stretched Carpenter Road, leading east toward his school and the town of White River Junction, and west toward the homes of his classmates Kimbar, Samir, and Garwin. Across the road to the south lay the fields of Farmer Efrom. On Pran’s left, on his family property, thick woods to the north sloped down to the Otter Creek.

Straight ahead of Pran was the white, two-story building they called the carriage house. It used to be a red barn when his grandparents had worked the farm, but Pran's father had since repainted it white to match the house. They used the south side of it, the end nearest the road, as a carriage house and stable. Five horse stalls lined its walls: two empty now (used only for visitors), and the other three occupied by his father's horses: Shadow, Rocky, and Mapleshade. All three were trained for both saddle and carriage duty, but Shadow was Pran's father's favorite saddle horse. Of course, the reason they now called the building the carriage house was that it also housed their rockaway, a four passenger, two-horse utility carriage that was as popular in Eldor's countryside as the surrey was in its towns.

The north side of the barn had been completely cleaned out and remodeled as Pran's father's workshop. Despite having a home office, he'd insisted he needed a separate workshop to test new spells or perform magic too messy or dangerous to do in the house. That made sense to Pran, especially since the barn had plenty of room for both workshop and carriage house.

Beyond their carriage house was the well and a corral for the horses. Pran's parents had replaced the original rope-and-bucket well with a modern, reciprocating hand pump. The pump salesman had promised convenience and cleaner water, but what had sold Pran's mother on the pump was safety: the ability to seal the well mouth so her children wouldn't fall in and drown.

Normally, Carpenter Road was little used except by local folks and farmers traveling to market, so Pran was surprised to see a large caravan of travelers on the road, all headed west, away from town. It was a diverse party, including men, women, and children of all ages. Many walked, while others rode on horseback or in farm wagons, buggies, depot wagons, and carriages of all sizes and descriptions.

"Nako, stay," Pran said, afraid his dog might run under the wheels of someone's carriage. He put down his bucket and stared in curiosity, wondering what was going on. It was clear from the group's diversity that it was not a merchant caravan, but they didn't appear to be refugees fleeing

the Maraknese invasion, either. If they were, he would have expected them to be loaded down with all of their possessions, including farm animals and pets.

Inexplicably, given that it was a time of war, Pran didn't see a single sword, bow, spear, or any other weapon among the travelers! Not only were they unarmed, but Pran saw no sign of the fear, urgency, and desperation he would have expected to see in refugees fleeing a Maraknese attack. On the contrary, the people seemed to be in a jovial mood, laughing and talking as they walked. Some waved and smiled at Pran when they saw him, and he politely waved back, puzzled.

While he was considering who in the group he could ask what was going on, Pran saw a tall man approaching on horseback. Judging from the reverent looks the other travelers gave him as he passed, the man appeared to be their leader, although he was dressed plainly in a light blue homespun shirt, dark brown riding trousers of woven hemp, and a broad-brimmed oilcloth hat of matching brown. As the man drew closer, Pran recognized him as Mohinder, the Truthseeker missionary who'd visited their house a couple years ago. He wasn't just *any* missionary, Pran recalled, but the son of the Truthseeker prophet, Sehotra—although Mohinder had humbly confessed that the Truthseekers were such a new, small order that being the son of its prophet wasn't nearly as impressive as it sounded. He was in his thirties, clean shaven, and as evident from the bracelet of woven rope on his left wrist, married. Pran called out, "Ho, Mohinder, what's happening today, some sort of migration?"

The missionary reined in his horse in front of Pran, as did the tall brunette riding next to him, dressed slightly more fashionably in a white riding blouse, dark blue riding skirt, and white hat. The travelers behind the couple halted too, looking questioningly at Mohinder as if for instructions, but he waved the group on, adding, "Go ahead; my wife and I will catch up to you." Tipping his hat, he said, "Hello, Pran. Hi, Nako."

Pran was surprised the Truthseeker remembered his dog's name, too. The shorthaired pointer wagged his tail enthusiastically, but that didn't

necessarily mean he recognized Mohinder, as Nako was friendly with *everybody*—one reason he made such a poor watchdog!

Mohinder observed, “You’ve grown a bit since I saw you last, Pran. How long has it been, two years?”

“At least,” Pran said. “I’d hoped you’d visit sooner, but my father didn’t exactly hold out the welcome mat, eh?” Although Pran’s father had allowed the missionary into the house, he’d openly expressed his skepticism about the Truthseeker faith, and not very tactfully, either. He’d told Mohinder in no uncertain terms that the family would never be interested in his religion, and Pran feared his father had offended him.

Mohinder shrugged. “Don’t worry about it. I know Magicians aren’t always the most tactful people. Oh, Pran, I don’t think you’ve met my wife, Chitra,” he said, indicating the tall, pretty brunette who had reined in beside him. “Chitra, this is Pran, son of Gilamond the Magician. To answer your question, this isn’t a migration; it’s a pilgrimage. We’re traveling to Mystic Valley to gather at a place we call the Sacred Glen. Do you remember me telling you, last time I visited, what happens there every forty years?”

Pran’s eyes widened. According to the Truthseekers, the Angel of Truth appeared once every forty years in Mystic Valley, only a day’s walk from his house! “You mean it’s this month?”

“Yes indeed,” Chitra said, smiling. “The Angel of Truth will appear on the Autumnal Equinox, just two days from now.”

Mohinder added, “We’d be happy to have you join us at the Sacred Glen.”

Pran said, “But last time I saw you, you told me that only true believers were invited to go see the Angel. Have the rules changed?”

“Normally, only Truthseekers in good standing are invited,” Mohinder admitted, “but we make exceptions for good candidates who haven’t had a chance to join us yet. Last time we met, I told you I could see the Spirit of Truth in you, Pran. Your father thought I only said that to try to convert you, and was not pleased,” Mohinder recalled, shaking his head. “Perhaps I shouldn’t have said it in front of him, after finding out how skeptical he was about religion, but the Spirit was so evident in you that I couldn’t help saying it. Let me see if you still possess it.”

The Truthseeker leader dismounted, handing the reins to his wife, put his right hand on Pran's shoulder, and peered deeply into his eyes. After a minute, he exclaimed, "Pran, the Spirit of Truth shines out from your eyes today as clearly as ever! Not only do I *invite* you to come to the Sacred Glen with us, but I *urge* you to come. I have a strong feeling that you are meant to be there with us. I wish my father could see you to confirm this, but his carriage has gone on ahead."

His wife, Chitra, said, "Mohinder, someday your father's mantle of prophecy will rest on your shoulders, so you should trust your feelings; I know I do. Pran, can you come with us?"

"I can't just up and leave right now!"

Chitra said, "You don't have to join our caravan today, Pran. You can leave in the morning and meet us there tomorrow evening. Once you get to Mystic Valley, look for green ribbons on the trees after the road crosses the river. Follow them toward Red Pine Lake, and they'll lead you to the Sacred Glen. Just make sure you arrive before noon on Friday, as that's the Autumnal Equinox, and the Angel of Truth will appear that afternoon."

Pran shook his head sadly. "I'm afraid I can't miss a day of school, let alone two—my father's the teacher. And even if it weren't a school day, he'd never let me go. He doesn't believe in religion of any sort. It would be pointless for me to even ask him."

Mohinder said, "I do remember what he told me last time I came here." He imitated Pran's father's baritone voice, "'We Magicians are men of science. We have no need for religion or other such superstitions.'"

Pran laughed at the impression of his father.

Mohinder said, "Well, Pran, it sounds doubtful your father will let you join us, but there's always hope. Meanwhile, I have something for you. My father had these printed up for investigators," he said, reaching into his saddlebag, taking out an envelope, and handing it to Pran. "This is his account of the event that led him to start our order. Maybe it will help convince you to ask your parents for permission to go. I wish we could talk longer, but my wife and I have to go catch up with the others." The prophet's son shook Pran's hand warmly, patted Nako on the head, and

remounted his horse. Then with a tip of the hat from Mohinder, and a warm smile from Chitra, the two of them were gone, riding at a canter to rejoin their caravan.

Pran continued watching the Truthseekers as they rode off down the dusty road, the sound of hoof beats and creaking of wagon wheels retreating in the distance, until the road dipped out of sight. Even after he could no longer see them, he stood there for a minute longer, staring down the road where the caravan had passed, wondering if he dare ask his father for permission to join them two days hence.

He was startled out of his reverie by his mother calling from the kitchen window, "Pran! Have you forgotten about the water?"

Pran sighed and yelled, "Coming, mother." He quickly pumped the bucket full and brought it inside the house. Just as he was about to tell his mother about the invitation from the Truthseekers, he saw his father outside on his horse and decided to wait for him to come inside so he wouldn't have to repeat himself.

When his father arrived, however, instead of his usual greeting he ordered brusquely, "Take care of my horse, Pran. Have you fed, watered, and groomed the others yet?"

"No. I was waiting for you to get home with Shadow first."

"Well I'm home now," Pran's father snapped, "so what are you waiting for? And chop some more firewood for the stove while you're out there."

Pran hurried out to the carriage house, relieved he wouldn't have to stick around while his father explained the expulsion to his mother, because one of his parents might ask him what he knew about the circle of sorcery. He also was glad to be out of the house when his father sounded still angry over the events of this afternoon.

As he pumped water for the horses, brushed them down, and gave them fresh hay, Pran was thankful there were only three horses to take care of, as his grandfather's farm used to have many more animals. When he'd finished with the horses, he split wood for the fire.

Pran often found he did his best thinking while chopping wood. While he swung the axe in a rhythmic motion, the muscles of his shoulders,

arms, back, and legs bunched and moved in harmony while his brain thought about other things. He pondered last night's circle of sorcery, Sekar's expulsion, and whether to ask his parents for permission to go to Mystic Valley.

It didn't take long for him to realize that the timing was terrible, with his father still angry about Sekar, Samir, and Pathik. In the mood his father was in, surely he would forbid Pran from going, but that wasn't the worst that could happen. Right now, his father would be telling his mother what Sekar had done that had so infuriated him today. The more Pran talked with his parents that evening, the more likely one of them would ask what he knew of the circle of sorcery that had led to Sekar's expulsion. Pran couldn't fool his father's Lie Detector spells, so he thought it best to avoid any conversations with his parents that night, with the topic of the circle of sorcery still fresh in their minds. Maybe the next night his father would be in a better mood, and if so, he could ask permission then. If he rode to Mystic Valley by horseback, he could leave Friday morning and still reach the Sacred Glen by noon.



After preparing for bed, Pran opened the envelope that Mohinder had handed him that afternoon. He carefully unfolded the sheets of paper within, titled, "The Ballad of the Truthseekers" with the subheading, "An account by the prophet Sehotra of events that occurred in Mystic Valley, on the Autumnal Equinox, in the year 1783 After the War of the Wizards." That was indeed forty years ago to the week, since Friday would be the last day of summer, 1823 A.W.W.

Reading by the light of the whale oil lamp on his nightstand, Pran found himself caught up in the story. He felt as if he were no longer in his bedroom, but in Mystic Valley, in the "Sacred Glen," sitting beneath a willow tree beside a brook, experiencing events beyond his wildest dreams, as he read:

Beneath the forest of our glen
An elf from distant valley lay.
“What brings you here?” I asked the elf.
“I seek the Truth,” the elf did say.

“You shall not find it here, my friend,
Nor anywhere that man doth tread.
Many a man has sought the Truth,
But none has found it, it is said.”

He sighed, “They know not where to look.
They search in churches, schools, and books.
Man does not build Truth,” he said,
“It flows from nature, like this brook.

“My grandfather encountered Truth
Along this very forest track.
‘Twas forty years this very day.
Today, he said, it will be back.”

“If in fact thou art so wise,
Show me this ‘Truth’ you speak about.”
“Gladly, sir,” the elf replies,
“Be patient, and you’ll have your wish.”

I sat down there, beside the elf,
Beneath a shady willow tree.
“Do you know how it looks?” I asked.
“The Truth takes many forms,” said he.

“How did it look to him?” I asked,
Beginning to believe him now.
“That he would not say, except
That recognize we will, somehow.”

We sat there for another hour,
And my mind began to search.
Why is it that the Truth would be
Out here, and not inside a church?

Or why not in a school, instead,
Where teachers tell and students quote
The words of wise men, ages dead,
From dusty books that scholars wrote?

Then on the path there came a child,
A boy of maybe nine or ten.
“Begone!” I said, “And bother not
The solitude of elves and men.”

The boy just stood, without a sound,
And for a moment, caught my eye,
Then settled down upon the ground,
To watch the clouds drift past the sky.

Oh great, I thought unto myself,
A pest to foul up our quest.
“Why won’t he leave?” I asked the elf,
“He’ll likely chase the Truth away.”

And then the boy produced a flute,
A silver flute, with valves of brass,
And started playing, softly first,
While sitting there upon the grass.

The music grew, and filled the air,
And all the woods that lay around.

The insects stopped, the birds stood still,
To hear the flutist's magic sound.

It spoke of Hope, it spoke of Fear,
It spoke of Thunder, Wind, and Rain;
Love and Sorrow, Sickness, Health;
Death and Laughter, Pleasure, Pain.

The birds came close, the foxes too,
And wonder shone upon my face.
The hare lay down beside the fox.
The hawks above us ceased their chase.

The boy played on, upon his flute,
As all the wonders of the world
Were wrapped up in the magic sound
To be in music there unfurled.

Emotions that I seldom dreamed
Welled up inside me while the flute
Piped melodies that even seemed
To halt the stream within its chute.

At last the music faded down
As all good things are bound to do.
I found myself upon the ground
With sobs of sorrow, joy, and hurt.

"Don't stop," I cried, "but give us more.
Your music is an ecstasy!
Music that would stop a war.
Please," I begged, "don't leave us now!"

The boy just smiled, in reply,
And stood up with his flute in hand.
He said, “‘Til two-score years have passed,”
And vanished from this troubled land.

“We saw the Truth!” the elf exclaimed,
“That Boy was Truth Himself, no less.
This day I never will forget,
And we have been forever blessed!”

I knew that he was right, and yet,
Was saddened that the Truth was gone.
But memory of it would, I bet,
Be with me now my whole life long.

“Cheer up, my friend,” the elf then said,
“The Truth is never gone away.
It flows from nature, like I said,
And you can find it any day.

“Just find a man who’s honest, eh,
Or child who’s not yet learned to lie.
Now that you’ve met Truth in the flesh
You’ll know it when it comes to eye.”

And so I have, and ever since
No one deceives me, now that I
Can hear the truth, without a doubt,
And never fail to sense a lie.

I’ve marked the spot, and told my friends
To come here, after forty years,
So they may witness for themselves
That Truth is ecstasy to hear.

In addition to the poem, there was a page that informed the reader (as if it weren't obvious by now) that the "boy" in the ballad was the Angel of Truth himself.

Pran blew out the lamp and lay awake pondering what the Truthseeker prophet had written. He was fascinated by the poem, and somehow seemed to *know* that it was true. Perhaps this Friday he'd be able to travel to the Sacred Glen himself, to see and hear Truth, as Sehotra had. He decided that the next day he'd screw up his courage and ask his parents' permission to ride there on Friday instead of going to school, although he doubted they'd agree.



7: PUNISHMENT

Pran had thought to ask his father's permission in the morning to go to Mystic Valley, but even though he arrived downstairs early, his father was already pushing his chair back from the kitchen table. Still, his father was often in a good mood after breakfast, and Pran thought the Truthseekers' pilgrimage important enough that he asked, "Father, Mother, can I talk to you about something?"

"Can it wait until tonight?" his father asked, reaching for his hat. "I have a meeting in town this morning before school."

"Sure," said Pran, his disappointment tempered with relief that he wouldn't have to get into a stressful discussion of religion with his father so early in the day. "Are you meeting with Colonel Kaldor to go over your role in the town's defense?" He'd heard that since the Maraknese invasion, the town's Chief Magician had called several sessions of the Magicians' Council for this purpose.

"I can't tell you, and you should know better than to ask. I expect to be in school on time, Pran, but if I'm late, my apprentices have instructions to start without me, so don't *you* be late," Pran's father said, heading out the door.

His mother advised gently, "It's best not to ask questions about the comings and goings of Magicians during wartime. The enemy has many ears."

“Not in our house,” Pran pointed out.

His mother smiled. “True, but what you don’t know, you can’t talk about. There is a reason secrets are on a ‘need-to-know’ basis, and magic students have no need to know.”

Pran protested, “I would never give away secrets that would endanger my country!”

“Not knowingly, I’m sure, or willingly. But the more you know, the more you put yourself in danger.”

Pran realized she was right. He had no idea how he’d hold up under torture, and no desire to find out.

His mother continued, “It’s hard enough knowing that your brother, Kavik, is on the front lines. At least he and your father are powerful enough to protect themselves, but you’re not a Magician yet.”

“Okay, I get the point,” Pran said, sighing.

After breakfast, Pran met up with Kimbar and Garwin by the front gate of the house. On the way to school, he asked them, “Ever heard of a religious group called the Truthseekers?”

Kimbar said, “That’s an elven religion, isn’t it?”

“No,” Pran said, “or at least, their leaders are human. It was founded by a man named Sehotra, who they call a prophet. He and his missionary son, Mohinder, passed by my house yesterday in that big caravan—you two must have seen it.”

His friends nodded.

Pran explained, “I’d already met Mohinder a couple years ago when he stopped by our house. But back then, my father chased him away before he could say much about their religion, and yesterday, he was too busy leading the Truthseekers to Mystic Valley to talk long.”

Garwin looked curiously at Pran. “Are you thinking of joining them?”

“No,” Pran said. “I mean, I don’t think so.”

Kimbar shrugged. “Join whatever you want, Pran, but I try to stay away from religions, myself. Most of them seem to forbid everything that’s fun. When the opportunity comes for a roll in the hay, I don’t want any religion coming between me and my girl,” he said with a roguish grin.

Pran rolled his eyes. “You’re incorrigible, Kimbar!” But he had more important things to worry about than religion, so he asked, “Do you think Pathik and Samir will show up at school today, or will they be afraid to be expelled for being under the influence of sorcery?”

“From my experience,” Kimbar said, “the effects should have worn off by now, so I think they’ll be there. But don’t worry; I’ll tell them you didn’t snitch on them, despite the way it looks. Stay away from them until I have a chance to talk to them at lunchtime.”

Pran readily agreed.



At lunch, Garwin ate out on the porch steps with Pran while Kimbar went over to talk to Pathik and Samir, who were sitting under a tree near the playground. Kimbar had expressed confidence that he could clear things up with them, so Pran couldn’t wait to find out how their conversation went. Finally, Kimbar came back over to the porch.

“Did you talk to Samir?” Pran asked eagerly.

“Yes,” Kimbar said, “and to Pathik, too.”

He waited for Kimbar to say more, but his friend seemed hesitant, so Pran feared things hadn’t gone quite the way they’d planned. He prompted, “And?”

“Sekar told them that now *I’m* not allowed to go to any more black magic circles, either,” Kimbar said bitterly. “Not that I was planning on going anymore, but still, it’s insulting.”

Pran asked, “Why did Sekar ban you? Does he think you’d snitch on them?”

“He banned me for inviting *you*,” Kimbar said, glaring at Pran as if it were his fault. “He also thinks I’d tell you when the session is, and then you’d snitch on him again!”

“But I didn’t. You told them that. Why didn’t they believe you?”

“They asked how your father could have known about the chicken Samir stole, or that Sekar was the one teaching sorcery. I couldn’t answer them.”

“Why don’t they just ask him?”

"*You* ask him; he's *your* father. They're both afraid of him, especially after yesterday."

The afternoon academic classes were uneventful, and in Pran's opinion, as boring as usual. But during Magic Lab, to his delight, his father announced that while the Novices and Initiates practiced levitating objects, the Charmers and Conjurers would be allowed to do self-levitation. They would have to do it indoors, though, because the one year they'd tried it outdoors, the school had almost lost a student—literally. The boy had floated halfway to the clouds before Pran's father had managed to stop his ascent!

With Sekar expelled, Pran's father made some changes to the usual lab partners. He assigned Samir to work with Pathik, leaving Pran, Garwin, and Kimbar to form a team of three. Pran was happy with that arrangement, as he was together with his two best friends, but Samir looked less than pleased at having been forced to be with Pathik rather than his friend Kimbar.

Pran had always found self-levitation fun, and he did better than last year, not even bumping his head on the ceiling once. Pathik, on the other hand, was lucky the apprentices had passed out helmets. Pran stifled his laughter, because with Pathik already angry at him, he didn't want to make the situation any worse.

When Pran's father dismissed the class at the end of Magic Lab, he told Pathik and Samir to stay and meet him in his office.

Kimbar said to Pran and Garwin, "Now they're going to learn their punishment. We'd better leave now, so they won't catch up with us."

On the way home, Garwin remarked, "Levitation is all right, but I can't wait until we get to the interesting spells that we get to learn in our Conjurer year, like Flying and Invisibility."

Kimbar's eyes were bright with anticipation. "That's right. We get to learn Invisibility spells this year! I know where those will come in handy."

"Where?" Pran asked.

"Spying on girls, of course! Girls swimming, girls bathing, girls getting undressed..." Kimbar's eyes turned distant and dreamy as his voice trailed off.

"You'd better be careful how you use the spell, Kimbar," Pran warned. "You don't want to get expelled like Sekar."

Kimbar scoffed, "How would I get caught? Girls can't do magic, and even if I sneezed while invisible, they wouldn't know it's me. Besides, we Conjurers deserve a little fun after suffering through four years of Gilamond's boring, long-winded lectures. No offense, Pran."

Grinning conspiratorially, Pran said, "If you think he's boring in the classroom, that's nothing compared to the lectures he gives me at home sometimes."

Garwin and Kimbar laughed and clapped him on the shoulder. Pran felt a pang of guilt for speaking ill of his father, but quickly shrugged off the thought, and the three friends continued laughing and joking together on the way home.



Sekar paused at the entrance to the alleyway. He looked around carefully to make sure he wasn't being followed, and then ducked into the passage. Two thirds of the way down the alley, he turned to face a wooden door with peeling gray paint. After a glance back toward the street to make sure nobody had seen him, he rapped on the door with three quick knocks, two slow, and then two quick.

There was the sound of a bolt being drawn back, and the door opened into a dark entryway. A tall, thin man in a black, hooded cloak rasped, "Welcome, Sekar. Come on in." The old man's face was hidden by the hood, but there was no mistaking Merlow's accent.

Sekar shot a third glance back toward the way he had come, but still saw nobody in the alley. Instead of feeling his usual relief that nobody had followed him, Sekar felt uneasy, apprehensive. He hesitated on the threshold, as if just crossing it would commit himself to his course of action. Finally, he took a deep breath and entered the dark building.

Merlow guided him past the unlit entryway into his windowless study, dimly lit by candles set in sconces along the walls. Seating himself in a

black leather chair behind his large, oaken desk, the man pulled back his hood to reveal a bald head and a pale, gaunt face. He motioned Sekar into the only other piece of furniture in the room, another black chair, and then said, "Sekar, my star pupil. What brings you back here so soon? We did not schedule a tutoring session for today."

Without further hesitation, Sekar said, "I've made my decision. I'll do it."

"Excellent. What finally made up your mind?"

"Gilamond expelled me from magic school," Sekar said angrily. "But what really infuriates me is that it was my own classmate Pran who betrayed me and my friends. He probably *told* his father to expel me! Well, if Pran wants to play at betrayal, I'll show him that two can play at that game. My country might call it treason, but I call it *payback*."

"That fool Gilamond does not appreciate true talent like yours," Merlow sympathized, shaking his bald head. "But let his loss be my gain, and yours as well. From now on you will no longer be just my tutee, but my protégé, my apprentice—Prentice Sekar."

Pleased at the sudden promotion, Sekar bowed his head. "Thank you, master."

"Furthermore," Merlow said, "your expulsion solves your problem of how to abstain from magic without arousing suspicions. If you had missed school by playing sick, we would have risked Gilamond or one of his nosy apprentices coming to your house trying to Heal you! Now our timetable can start today, and we should be ready by next Wednesday. Be sure you abstain from *all* magic, black as well as white, until then."

"Yes, master," Sekar said, nodding.

"Glad to have you on board," said the Sorcerer. He grinned cadaverously, showing teeth as white as the human skulls arranged on the four corners of the desk in front of him.



During supper that evening, Pran thought how best to broach the topic of the pilgrimage to Mystic Valley and ask his parents' permission to go there tomorrow morning. He decided to wait until they'd finished

eating, as it was too important to discuss in between bites, and besides, his parents would be in a better mood on a full stomach.

As soon as the meal was over, however, his father said, “Pran, come into my study for a minute. I’d like to talk to you.”

Pran knew that tone of voice: it meant he was in trouble. His father couldn’t have found out he’d been to the circle of sorcery—could he? He was scared, and his heart beat faster as he joined his father in the study. Nako moved to follow them, but his father shooed the dog away—a bad sign. Then he closed the door, seated himself behind the desk, and told Pran, “Pull up a chair.”

Pran settled nervously into one of the wooden armchairs the apprentices usually sat in when his father tutored them here, suddenly feeling very small.

“Every year, I warn my class about the dangers of using black magic.” He sighed. “Apparently, I haven’t been doing a very good job at that. In fact, I seem to have failed miserably.” Pran’s father paused, as if waiting for him to comment.

Pran almost said, “I’m sure you do your best,” but realizing that would sound insulting, he kept quiet.

His father explained, “It’s difficult, you see. Because magic students are by nature both curious and daring, fascinated by the unknown and delighted by risk, I have to handle the subject of black magic very carefully. On the one hand, I have to warn of its dangers, and the penalties for using it. On the other hand, if I preach too strongly against it, it will become a ‘forbidden fruit’ that might appear more attractive to the students.”

Maybe I’m not in trouble after all, and Father just wants to share with me the difficulties of teaching magic. He began to relax, imagining himself tomorrow joking with Garwin and Kimbar about having to endure another long-winded lecture at home!

His father was saying, “The real problem is not the boy who tries sorcery once or twice, but the boy who continues trying it, like Sekar. As I told the class, once someone takes a liking to the black magic, it becomes all but impossible to train him as a white Magician. Expelling Sekar from

magic school was just a formality, because he would never have passed the final exams next spring—he's too addicted to black magic. If he continues using sorcery as an adult, under the new laws he'll probably end up in prison.

"Pran, I've long suspected that other boys in my school besides Sekar have tried sorcery. Yesterday, I found out that Sekar has been leading a 'circle of sorcery' in the woods, and that Samir and Pathik participated in it the night before. Today I heard even worse news. Do you want to know who else I discovered was at Sekar's circle of sorcery?"

Pran felt his stomach sink.

"I found out this afternoon, when I called Samir and Pathik into my office to tell them their punishment. They assumed you were the one who'd turned them in, and were angry that you hadn't told me about Kimbar and Garwin being there too, because I didn't punish your friends. I was shocked enough to find out about Kimbar and Garwin," Pran's father said, his eyes boring into Pran's, "but I never in my life expected to hear that my own *son* was at a circle of sorcery! I can't *believe* you're experimenting with black magic, Pran."

"I didn't actually cast any spells—"

"Well, I can't believe you're associating with people who do!" shouted his father. "Consorting with Sorcerers—do you have any idea what black magic can *do* to people?" Without waiting for an answer, he pulled an envelope out of a drawer and tossed it onto the desk. "I got this letter today from Kavik," he said. "In case you've *forgotten*, your brother is fighting Sorcerers on the front lines. Kavik writes that record numbers of our soldiers have been dying or losing limbs recently due to what looks like gangrene. Apparently, it's a new black magic spell that rots people's bodies. An arm or a leg putrefies, turns black, and often has to be amputated to save the soldier's life."

"So far, none of our herbal healers or Magical Doctors has been able to reverse the spell. The best they can do is stop its progression. If they treat a soldier quickly enough, they might save the affected limb, but it's not pretty." He looked Pran directly in the eyes. "Herbal healers apply a poultice of maggots to eat away the dead skin."

Pran almost gagged. In a strained voice, he asked, “Can’t our Army Magicians shield soldiers against the spell?”

“Given time, but even if our armies had twice as many Magicians, it would be impossible to shield *every* Eldorean soldier against *all* types of sorcery. As soon as we discover how to shield against one new spell like this, the Maraknese develop another that we haven’t seen before. And our enemies never run out of bones from for their sorcery, because each battle gives them a fresh supply of bodies.”

Pran shook his head. “I didn’t know the situation at the front was that grim.”

“You don’t *think*, that’s why you didn’t know!” his father shouted, face flushed with anger. Then he sat back, took a few deep breaths, and when he spoke again, his voice was much quieter. “Can I trust that you won’t be attending any more of these circles of sorcery? No more consorting with Sorcerers, or Sorcerer wannabes like Sekar?”

“Yes, of course,” Pran said. “I swear!”

“Good. Then we won’t have to have any more of these discussions, and I won’t have to punish you this time.”

Pran blinked in confusion. He’d never expected to be let off that easy! Then he remembered something his father had mentioned earlier. “You said Samir and Pathik assumed I was the one who told you about them being at Sekar’s circle of sorcery. At least now they know that’s not true—right?”

His father hesitated, and Pran began to get a sinking feeling in his stomach again. Finally, his father sighed and said, “Yesterday, I should have just punished them for not being able to complete the lab, but Sekar got me so angry that I spoke without thinking and revealed my knowledge of the circle of sorcery. Luckily, they thought the reason I knew so many details was because you’d told me.”

“What do you mean, ‘luckily’?”

“Maybe it’s not lucky for *you*, but it is for Eldor’s national security. If they discovered my real source of information about their activities, they might share the information with Sorcerers they may be in contact with. I hope you’ll understand the sacrifice you may have to make, in order to keep this secret.”

Pran didn't like the direction this was going. "You didn't tell Samir and Pathik that I was spying on them for you... *did* you?" he asked in disbelief.

His father shrugged. "I didn't have to; they were already convinced you were. I merely encouraged them to continue thinking that."

Pran's jaw dropped. So *this* was to be his punishment, to have his classmates think he was a snitch and a spy! "When they told you I was with them that night, what did you say?"

"Fortunately, I was able to think quickly and hide my surprise. Being a teacher has given me some practice in that. When Samir asked, 'Aren't you going to punish your son for being there with us?' I told him, '*Pran* didn't cast any black magic spells. That's not what he was there for. My son's being there is none of your concern.' From the looks on their faces, this confirmed their suspicions."

Horried, Pran said, "You might as well have come right out and said that I spied on them for you. They're going to kill me!"

"No, Pran," his father said, "they aren't going to *kill* you. Even if they beat you up, that's not nearly as bad as what would happen to you if you were a little older and got caught practicing sorcery by the sheriff, the RBI, or the Army! Remember, you brought this on yourself through your own foolishness."

Pran sat tongue-tied, shocked that his own father would set him up to be beaten by his classmates. Finally, he asked, "How are you punishing Samir and Pathik?"

"First, I'm notifying their parents, who will have to pay me back all the silver they wasted yesterday. Second, they'll have to stay after school and redo the lab exercises from that day until they get it perfect, using their own silver and gold. Finally, and most important, if I ever find they've been using black magic again, they'll be expelled like Sekar."

"Now that I know Kimbar and Garwin were there too, they'll get a stern warning. Apparently they didn't use any sorcery that night, or they'd be one step away from expulsion themselves. Frankly, I'd hate to have to expel them, because Garwin's my star pupil, and Kimbar's your best friend, but if I have to, I will."

"I can't punish *you*, Pran, because if I did, your classmates would realize you weren't spying for me, and that I had my own way of finding out that they were practicing sorcery. However, I think that letting Sekar and his gang believe you spied on them is a fitting punishment for attending that circle of sorcery. Now they'll never let you go there again, and I, for one, will sleep better at night knowing that.

"I'm going to let you learn from your mistakes the hard way, meaning if Sekar, Pathik, or Samir beat you up, so be it. As they say, you can *tell* a child not to touch a stove, and he won't listen, but the burned hand teaches a lesson he'll never forget. Sometimes literally—like when you tried to steal gold from my workshop, and the Anti-Theft spells burned your hand. I know you never tried that again."

Pran remembered Kimbar's burned hand, and wondered if it had taught *him* anything.

"Don't attempt to find out my true source of information, or I *will* punish you," his father said, then stood up, signaling the conversation was over.

Pran wanted to protest, "But I didn't *do* anything, I didn't cast any black magic spells," but he knew any further argument would be useless, so he left his father's office without saying another word. As he headed up to his room, Nako followed at his heels, but much as he loved his pet, Pran felt the need to be alone. He shut the bedroom door behind him, leaving the dog sitting in the hall outside his door, whining in confusion at being shunned by his master, until Pran's mother came to comfort Nako and let him outside.

There would be no comfort tonight for Pran, though. On top of everything else, he realized he'd ruined any chance he'd had of getting permission to go to Mystic Valley tomorrow, for what would have been a once in a lifetime opportunity to see an angel. He tried to fight back the tears, because he was sixteen now, too old to cry, but finally lost that battle.



8: SHIELD SPELLS

On the way to school Friday morning with Kimbar and Garwin, Pran told his friends about his father's talk with him the night before. Kimbar said, "Wow, I can't believe your own father set you up like that. Letting the kids he punished think his son's the snitch, that's cold."

"What do you think I should do about it?"

"Stick with us," Kimbar advised. "Don't go anywhere alone."

Garwin added, "Lucky for you, today's lessons are about Shield spells. Pay attention, because you might need to use those spells soon."

They arrived at school just in time to take their seats before Pran's father started his morning lecture. "Shield spells can be cast using either gold or silver," he said for the benefit of the Novices. "Shield spells cast using silver are, of course, temporary in duration. Those cast with gold are generally long-lasting, but not permanent."

The Novice Prajno asked, "Why not, Master Gilamond?"

"I was going to get into that later, but since you raised the issue, we'll discuss it now. Who can answer Prajno's question?"

Fipin, whose father was an Army Magician, raised his hand. "Shield spells get worn down every time they're attacked by an enemy. Each attack makes the shield weaker."

"That's correct. All Shield spells are worn down by use, but from more than just enemy attacks. Depending on the type of Shield spell, they can

be weakened by such things as animal attacks, bumping into objects, or even bad weather.”

“By weather?” Oren asked incredulously.

“Yes, certainly,” said Pran’s father. “Rain, snow, hail, cold, and strong winds can wear down many Shield spells, especially spells designed to protect against such weather. Defensive spells are often very specific, protecting the caster against only one or two hazards.”

Yuli asked, “Master Gilamond, why don’t Magicians just cast a spell protecting them against everything?”

Pran groaned inwardly to hear a question only a Novice would ask!

His father said patiently, “That’s impractical, if not impossible. Remember from your textbook: the more general the Shield spell, the more gold or silver it takes to cast, and the less effective it is against each hazard. The more specific the Shield spell, the less metal it takes to cast, and the more effective it is against the particular hazard it is designed for.”

“Oh,” Yuli said, sounding disappointed. Then the Novice’s face brightened. “Well, then why don’t Magicians just Shield themselves against whatever it is they’re going to be attacked with next?”

Half the class erupted in laughter.

“Silence!” Pran’s father roared. Turning to the boy who had laughed loudest, he asked, “Samir, would *you* like to answer that?”

Samir obliged, but the redhead’s tone was mocking, sounding much like his mentor, Sekar. “It’s a stupid question, Master Gilamond. How would a Magician know what he’s going to be attacked with next? An enemy doesn’t announce his intentions in advance, or attack a Magician with exactly what he’s expecting!”

Pran’s father never liked to hear anyone call a question “stupid,” and his face hardened. “Your answer is only half right. It’s true that in battle, you don’t know what the Maraknese or their Sorcerers are going to attack you with next. However, Yuli’s question was not a ‘stupid’ one, Samir. There are times when a Magician knows exactly what he’s facing but doesn’t have the option of avoiding it, so specific Shield spells come in handy. For example, before going into a burning building to rescue

someone, you cast a spell protecting yourself from heat, smoke, and falling objects. We call that a 'Fireman spell,' and cast it on firemen regularly. So you see," he said, addressing the group of boys who'd been laughing, "Yuli's question was a valid one, and your laughter just shows you're not smart enough to come up with good questions yourselves."

Even though Pran's father had addressed his last remark to everyone who'd been laughing, Samir seemed to take the remark personally, and his face flushed with both embarrassment and anger. Pran couldn't help worrying that he would soon find himself the object of that anger, on top of the rage Samir and his friends already felt against him for supposedly spying on their circle of sorcery.

Pran's father continued, "Shield spells using gold not only last longer than those cast using silver; they're also stronger and can take more hits before weakening. Now, in addition to using Shield spells to protect yourself or other people, you can also cast them on objects. Can someone give me an example of this?"

Pran raised his hand and offered, "The gold in this classroom is protected by Shield spells when we're not using it."

"And the gold in our house, too, as you've found out the hard way, eh Pran?"

There were titters from the class, which Pran's father tolerated this time with a smile. Pran saw some boys looking at him with a new respect, as if he were someone brave and daring. Strange, he mused, that having tried to steal gold from his father made them respect him more!

"Can someone give me an example of an object right here in White River Junction with very strong Shield spells on it?"

"Our Wizard Tower," replied the Novice Mathur.

"Exactly," Pran's father said. "The Wizard Towers were shaped many centuries ago by the ancient Wizards, who possessed magic far more powerful than any present day Magicians or Sorcerers."

Most towns in Eldor were built around a Wizard Tower. Some cities had more than one, and the capital, Eldorado, had five. Wizard Towers were tall, cylindrical structures made from magically smooth stone.

Eldoreans saw no need for walled cities, because from atop a Wizard Tower, Magicians could defend their town from attack more effectively than walls, without the construction costs, and without impeding the flow of commerce. White River Junction's Wizard Tower was four hundred and fifty feet tall, rising needlelike from its broad base for over four hundred feet before broadening out again into a bulbous section at the top with three levels: the battle room, Army officer's quarters (which also had room for some civilian Magicians), and a belfry. The top of the Tower was flat, as it was designed to be a dragon landing pad, but that feature had gone unused since the Age of Wizards.

In time of war, such as the present, the Tower was manned by at least one platoon of archers, all equipped with Eagle-Eye spells, including their Platoon Magic Officer. If White River Junction came under attack, one of the lookouts would ring the bell to summon all the civilian Magicians in town to the battle room, where they could assist Army Magicians in mounting a defense against every point of the compass simultaneously.

Fipin, the little brown Initiate with the curious mind, asked, "Master Gilamond, if they were so powerful, why did all the Wizards disappear from Rados?"

"Didn't your history teacher cover this?"

Fipin said, "No, he said it wasn't his area of expertise. He said to ask either you or Loremaster Lokor."

Pran's father looked surprised. "Really? Okay, I'll try to answer your question, Fipin, even though it is rather off the topic."

"As usual," Kimbar whispered to Pran, grinning.

Pran's father leaned back in his chair, folded his hands together, and pressed them against his chin for a moment, bowing his head to compose his thoughts. Then he raised his head again and said, "The mysterious demise or disappearance of the ancient Wizards, many centuries ago, has long fascinated Loremasters and historians. How could such powerful magic users have disappeared utterly from the face of Rados? Few written records survive from the time of the Wizards, but historians,

archaeologists, and Loremasters believe they have pieced together enough evidence to shed some light on the puzzle.

“The power of ancient Wizard spells was far greater than that of today’s strongest spellcasters, orders of magnitude greater. And in contrast to today’s Magicians and Sorcerers, Wizards were able to perform both white and black magic spells with equal ease and skill. According to the tales, Wizards could lay waste to whole armies with a single fireball; sink entire fleets of warships by raising tidal waves; and destroy even the largest cities by summoning hurricanes, quakes, volcanoes, or meteors from the sky.

“Most people think those stories were exaggerated, as it’s hard to conceive of any weapons that powerful. However, all agree that Wizards were able to control dragons, which were plentiful back then. They subjugated dragons, forcing them to do their bidding, and used dragon fire to burn the cities of their enemies to the ground.

“The most fearsome weapon of the Wizards, however, was their ability to change the weather and manipulate the local or regional climate. A spell to bring drought to the lands of their enemies was the most deadly spell of this type, for the resulting famines starved millions, if the tales be true.

“Historians and Loremasters now believe the Age of Wizards ended when their attack spells grew so powerful that even Wizards were unable to control them. Or possibly Wizards could control their *spells*, but not their *anger*, so when their fury outstripped their wisdom, they unleashed their most devastating spells on each other in mutual destruction.

“In either case, there’s evidence that the Wizards used the spells I mentioned and others just as potent in their final, cataclysmic war known as the War of the Wizards. That great and terrible war not only killed off the Wizards, but also wiped out most human, elf, dwarf, and dragon life on Rados. Ever since, we’ve numbered years as ‘A.W.W.’ for ‘After the War of the Wizards.’

“It took centuries for the human population to recover, reestablish civilization around the world, and rebuild new cities around each of the Wizard Towers, the only structures strong enough to have survived the War of the Wizards. However, the population of dragons never fully

recovered, because they breed less frequently due to their longer life spans. Dragons were also hunted by humans over the years and preyed on by Sorcerers for their scales, so they survive today in dragon sanctuaries in a fraction of their former numbers.

“As powerful as the Wizards once were, they left little behind as their legacy except for tales told by Loremasters, and occasional artifacts discovered in caves or archaeological digs. And, of course, the Wizard Towers, which brings us, Fipin, back to today’s topic,” Pran’s father said with a smile.

“The Wizard Towers, built magically strong to begin with, are kept virtually impregnable today by dozens of powerful spells protecting against every conceivable attack or disaster. Members of the Magicians’ Council share in the responsibility of maintaining the spells.

“The beauty of *specific* spells is that they remain at full strength until they face the particular force or object they are protecting against. Let me give you some examples from the spells we maintain on White River Junction’s Wizard Tower:

“One spell protects against quakes. That spell was last reinforced over a century ago, but since we haven’t had any quakes since then, we haven’t had to maintain it recently.

“Another defends against fire. We haven’t had to reinforce that spell in my generation, although we’ve had to several times in generations past.

“Three others shield the battle room against rain, snow, and hail or sleet, because there is no glass in the windows of towers used for war. Those spells have to be maintained often, but they are easy spells.

“The spell protecting against large hurled objects, such as those from a catapult or trebuchet, may be important for us to maintain if White River Junction is invaded by the Maraknese. However, it hasn’t needed maintenance since the last time our town was attacked over fifty years ago, and besides, Wizard Towers are nearly impossible to crack even without this spell.

“I think you get the general idea: the rarer the danger, the less often the spell protecting against it has to be maintained. Over the years, we’ve

gradually added more and more spells to the Wizard Towers, until they've become the impregnable structures they are today."

Fipin raised his hand again and asked, "Master Gilamond, how is it possible that all the Wizards were killed, but their Towers were left standing? Wouldn't their Towers have protected them?"

"Good question. The most likely possibility is that Wizards were attacked with spells that penetrated the Towers' defenses, killing everyone inside without damaging the structures themselves. Unfortunately, we'll never know for certain, because as I said, there are no historical records of what happened to the Wizards. We don't even know for sure that all the Wizards were killed; maybe some traveled to other worlds, as legend has it that they were wont to do, and escaped the fate of their peers."

After a few more questions from the Novices and Initiates, the class was over.

Pran suffered through that day's academic classes—math, history, astronomy, and music—waiting for Magic Lab so he would have a chance to practice Shield spells. Several times he glanced over at Pathik or Samir, only to see them glare back at him, eyes burning in hatred. Both boys were unusually quiet during the day's lessons, but in breaks between classes they whispered together, making Pran even more nervous than he'd been already.

Finally, it was time for lab. Lately, it seemed that the most common way magic students were getting hurt was through falls, such as falling out of a tree or from a horse, so today Pran's father taught the class a very practical spell to protect them against such injuries. After demonstrating the Gravity Shield spell, he turned the class over to his apprentices to supervise the spell casting practice. The Conjurers paired up in the new teams assigned yesterday: Samir with Pathik; and Pran, Garwin, and Kimbar in their three-boy team.

Kimbar whispered to Pran, "I think you'd better cast something other than the Gravity Shield spell. From the way Samir and Pathik have been looking at you today, I'd say you may have to rely on a defensive spell real soon."

Pran whispered back, “What spell should I choose? Protection from punches and kicks, or perhaps a shield against rocks?”

Garwin shook his head. “No, if Pathik, Samir, or Sekar attack, I think they’re going to hit you with magic. Probably sorcery, as they’re always claiming that it’s better for attack spells, and they aren’t very good at white magic. Is there any particular black magic spell you’re most afraid—I mean *worried* about?”

Pran thought for a minute. “Being turned into an animal, like a frog or a rabbit,” he finally said. “Nobody would be able to find me to change me back before I got eaten.”

Garwin grunted. “Even I don’t know how to protect against being Transmogrified. Let’s ask one of the apprentices.” Joran was busy with the Novices and Initiates on the other side of the room, so Pran waited until Nahshon was finished helping a pair of Charmers, and then asked him quietly, so Pathik and Samir wouldn’t overhear.

Nahshon replied, “You know you’re supposed to be doing Gravity Shield spells today.”

“But it’s wartime,” Garwin protested. “Shouldn’t we be learning to defend ourselves against enemy Sorcerers?”

Nahshon nodded. “Good point. I’ve argued the same thing with your father. Okay,” he agreed, “I’ll show you how to protect against Transmogrification spells, but it will take more than today’s allotment of gold to give any kind of real protection.”

Kimbar said, “If I added my gold to Pran’s, would it give him enough?”

Garwin added, “He can use my gold, too, if that would help.”

“That’s very generous of you two,” Nahshon said. “You must be really worried about your friend.” He thought for a moment. “If you combine all of your gold, the spell should be strong enough to withstand an attack from an amateur,” he said, with a knowing glance at Pathik and Samir. “If you were attacked by a skilled Sorcerer, your shield might not totally block the spell, but it should weaken it so if he tried to change you into a rabbit, you might end up with a rabbit’s foot,” he chuckled. “Then the spell could be reversed later.”

“Good, enough,” Pran said.

Because the requirements of today’s Magic Lab were that *every* student cast a Shield spell, Nahshon didn’t let Pran use the combined gold allotment all by himself. Instead, he taught all three boys how to do the spell, instructing Pran to cast it on himself first, then Garwin to cast it on Pran, and finally Kimbar to do the same. “Don’t worry,” said Nahshon, “since it’s the same type of spell, all three weaker spells will combine into one more powerful shield, if you do it right.”

When lab was over, Pran’s father told the class, “Don’t let your Gravity Shield spells make you overconfident. The best protection is to avoid danger, not count on your spells to protect you. *Please* don’t go jumping off of bridges or out of trees to test the spell.”

There was laughter from the class.

“You think I’m joking, but I’ve seen boys try it! Save the spell for when you really need it. You haven’t yet learned how to tell when a Shield spell has been used up, and breaking a leg is a bad way to find out. Class dismissed.”

Nahshon took Pran aside as he was leaving and told him, “Your father’s advice about overconfidence goes for you, too. The best protection is to avoid an attack, not count on your spell to protect you from sorcery.”

Pran understood this, but he still felt a huge surge in self-confidence as a result of the spell he now had protecting him. As the three boys walked home together, with Pran in the middle, he said, “Kimbar and Garwin, I owe you one,” putting an arm around the shoulder of each of his friends.

“Forget it,” Kimbar said. “You’d have done the same for either of us.”

It was true, Pran knew, but he still felt grateful. With the Shield spell protecting him, and two skilled Conjurers by his side, he felt he could handle any classmates of his, and for the first time in over three days, he didn’t worry. When the trip home went without incident, Pran found himself almost disappointed that Samir and Pathik hadn’t tried to attack him on the way.

Almost.



9: PROPHECY

Friday evenings, Pran's father invited his apprentices, Nahshon and Joran, to his house for dinner with the family followed by a training session in his study. He'd review the previous week's classes with them, go over lesson plans and spells for the coming week, and tutor them in any additional magic they needed to know.

That night, when his father brought the apprentices into his study after supper, Pran went upstairs to read up on self-defense spells, expecting he might need to use them soon. He'd barely opened his textbook when he heard a horse approaching at a gallop. The hoof beats stopped just outside their house, and he looked out his window to see the Truthseeker prophet's son, Mohinder, tying his horse to the hitching post in front of their house. Pran closed his book and headed for the stairs just as three loud knocks sounded on the front door. Nako, who'd been lying half asleep in the living room, jumped to his feet and let out a noise that was part bark, part howl: "Roo-roo-roo-roo-roo!"

Pran laughed, "Trying to playing watchdog now, Nako? You'll have to be more alert than *that*. Dogs are supposed to have good ears, but I heard him before you."

Mistaking Pran's lighthearted criticism for praise, Nako wagged his tail furiously and followed him eagerly to the door, where he licked

Mohinder's hand. The Truthseeker laughed and rubbed the dog's head, saying, "It looks like *someone's* happy to see me again."

Pran said, "I am too, but I didn't expect to see you so soon."

"You didn't? I expected to see you earlier today at the Sacred Glen," the Truthseeker said, disappointment evident in his voice. "Did your parents forbid you from going to Mystic Valley to see the Angel of Truth?"

Pran's face fell. "I didn't ask them. I was going to, but—" He cut himself off, not wanting to confess that he'd been caught going to a circle of sorcery.

Mohinder shook his head in disapproval. "You should have gone; it turned out you were *supposed* to be there. There was a prophecy for you today from the Angel of Truth himself."

Pran's eyes went wide. "You're joking."

"I do not joke about such matters," Mohinder said sternly. Then his tone softened. "But don't worry; my father and I both heard the prophecy, and I can relay it to you. May I come in?"

"I'll have to ask my parents." Pran glanced behind him and saw his mother already approaching the door.

Mohinder tipped his hat to her and said, "Good evening, ma'am, may I come in?"

Pran's mother said, "Aren't you Mohinder, that preacher who came here two years ago?"

"I'm a missionary, not a preacher, but you got my name right, ma'am. Would you refresh my memory on yours?"

Pran thought it funny, although not unusual for a dog lover, that Mohinder had forgotten his mother's name while remembering Nako's.

"It's Ilandra. But I can tell you right now, we're *still* not interested in converting, so you needn't waste your time."

"I'm not here on missionary business. I have urgent matters to discuss with your family."

"Gilamond is busy teaching his apprentices, but you're welcome to come in and wait for him to finish. Is something wrong?"

Mohinder entered and removed his hat. “Not yet, but there *will* be, and if I don’t get certain information to your family, the situation will worsen.”

“Are you here because of one of your father’s prophecies?” Pran’s mother guessed.

“Yes, a major one that affects all Magicians, especially your son Pran. My father said it vital that I come talk with your family immediately.”

“What prophecy?” Pran asked.

“I’d prefer to tell all of you at the same time. Can you call Master Gilamond out here, please?”

Pran’s mother said, “I don’t like to disturb him when he’s tutoring his apprentices. Can your prophecy wait a few more minutes?”

“I suppose so,” Mohinder said, clearly frustrated at the delay.

“Come into the kitchen and have something to eat while you’re waiting. I baked some cookies this morning, and there’s fresh milk in the icebox.” As Mohinder and Pran followed his mother into the kitchen, she pointed out with pride, “Our icebox may look ordinary from the outside, but my husband put a Cold spell on it, so there’s no need for a block of ice. That leaves more room for food, it doesn’t require any drainage, and food keeps longer.”

She set a plate of cookies on the table and poured a glass of milk for each of them while Nako settled down on the floor in his usual spot, beneath the kitchen table for quick access to any crumbs or handouts. As they ate, Pran took the opportunity to ask Mohinder something that had been on his mind since Kimbar mentioned it the previous day. “Is Truthseeking an elven religion?”

“No,” said Mohinder, “although some outsiders have that impression, quite understandably. Many of our tenets are similar to those of the elves, including our beliefs in the sanctity of nature, the virtue of honesty, and the futility of war. Some say elves were the first Truthseekers, because the Angel of Truth first appeared in Mystic Valley to an elf, the grandfather of the one in the Ballad of Truth, forty years before he appeared to my father. However, we are not an elven religion, as elves have their own faith

and their own religious leaders. We don't interfere with their religion, and they don't interfere with ours.

"Unlike some other denominations, we don't claim that there's only one person who can speak for God. We believe it would be the height of presumption for any prophet to say he has an exclusive line of communication with the Lord, as God can speak to whomever He wishes! However, we Truthseekers choose to follow my father, rather than other religious leaders, because we believe he receives messages from God and His Angel of Truth that are specifically intended for us. In other words, Sehotra is the prophet for *our* order, but if others appear among other sects, we will not speak ill of them. Elves also have their own prophets, so my father doesn't prophesize for them."

"Do Truthseekers have much contact with elves? I've never seen one myself, but I'd like to. I thought since your father shared his religious experience with an elf forty years ago, he might still be in contact with them," Pran said hopefully.

"I'm not surprised you've never seen an elf," Mohinder said. "Many people now live their whole lives without ever seeing one, as in 'civilized' areas, humans have confined elves to reservations, and in the 'uncivilized' wilderness, elves are notoriously—and justifiably—wary of humans. They don't have much trust in the human race, finding us greedy, warlike, wasteful, and destructive of nature. However, because Truthseekers and elves share some of the same beliefs, we've managed to make friends with some of the bolder and more adventurous ones, who have taught us much. Elves sometimes exchange visits with Truthseekers who have befriended them, but they never stay," he added with a trace of sadness.

They heard the door to the study open. Pran quickly helped his mother clear the table while his father walked the apprentices to the front door and sent them on their way.

When Pran's father came into the kitchen and saw the Truthseeker there, he said, "Hello, Mohinder, what brings you here this fine evening?" Although his voice was polite, his eyes betrayed mild annoyance. "Did you come to tell us more about your religion?"

“No, I’m not here on missionary business, but I’m afraid this isn’t just a social call, either. I was sent here by my father to warn your family of an impending disaster.”

Far from being disturbed by news of a coming catastrophe, Pran’s father looked relieved to find out they weren’t going to be discussing religion. “Come into the living room, then, and we’ll discuss it. Would you like a drink?”

“We already had some milk, and I don’t drink anything stronger, myself,” Mohinder said.

“I seldom do either—wine tends to dull the magic abilities, as well as the senses,” Pran’s father observed. “But if you’ll have a seat, I’ll fetch myself a glass of water and be right with you.”

In the living room, Pran and his mother seated themselves on the couch, Mohinder took an armchair, and Nako padded over to the Truthseeker to get his head rubbed. Pran’s father returned to join them, setting his glass on a coaster on an end table before sitting next to his wife. “So,” he said when he was seated, “what is this disaster, and how does it affect us?”

Mohinder hesitated a moment, then swallowed and said grimly, “Today in Mystic Valley, my father and I heard this prophecy from the Angel of Truth himself: *Before this month ends, all gold will be gone from the world, leaving white Magicians nearly powerless.*”



10: THE QUEST

After a moment of stunned silence, Pran's father said, "Impossible. How could all gold disappear from Rados in one week?"

"I'm afraid the prophecy didn't say how it would happen."

"That figures," Pran's father snorted. "Religious prophecies are always vague. That's why I prefer my crystal ball."

Pran said, "If the gold's going to disappear, I bet it's a Maraknese plot. I don't know how they'd do it, but if they could take away all our gold, they would."

His father looked worried. "Yes, they know our Army Magicians would be defenseless without gold. I need to check on the accuracy of this prophecy right now. I know *you* believe it, Mohinder, as I have a Lie Detector spell, but that doesn't necessarily mean it's correct. Pran, fetch me the crystal ball from my study."

Pran found the wooden box containing the crystal on his father's desk. The crystal ball was heavy, made out of solid quartz, and the box also contained gold, making it even heavier. Not trusting the leather handle on top to be strong enough, Pran put one hand on each side of the box and carried it carefully with both hands.

"Thanks," his father said, as Pran passed him the box. "We'll soon know whether there's any truth to this prophecy." He opened the lid and put his hands on the crystal, which rested on a pile of gold dust set into a

circular depression in the box. Because crystal balls drew their own energy from the gold dust they rested on, there was no need for him to touch the gold with his hands or even cancel the Anti-Theft spell on the gold. After a minute, he said, "I'm looking ten days ahead, and I see nothing."

Pran's mother asked, "You mean you don't see gold disappearing in the next ten days?"

"No, I mean I see absolutely *nothing* ten days from now," Pran's father said, looking perplexed. "I've never had this problem before, although I've heard it can happen if Magicians don't take good care of their crystal balls. I wonder what's wrong with mine," he mused, holding it near a lamp to check for cracks.

Pran said, "Father, I remember you told us in class that a crystal ball shows the future by sending information back in time. You showed us that the gold dust the crystal ball rests on doesn't change into lead at the time you gaze into the ball, but *later*, at the time when the future event takes place. So, if there were no gold at some point in the future—"

Pran's father finished, "Then my crystal ball would no longer be sitting on gold dust, and I would be unable to foresee anything from that time! Yes, Pran, that could explain it. I'll experiment with this some more, later, but for now, Mohinder, let's assume your dismal prophecy is true. Why did Sehotra send you to *us*? Did he say we could prevent the gold from disappearing?"

The Truthseeker shook his head. "Unlike the visions that Magicians see in their crystal balls, this prophecy came directly from the Angel of Truth. It's impossible to prevent something prophesied by the Angel, as that would make his words false, and Prophecies from God or His Angel of Truth are never false. No, the Angel didn't send me here to prevent the gold from disappearing; he sent me to help lessen the damage. Only a few people in the entire world can save Eldor from an enemy conquest, and as it turns out, Pran's one of them."

Pran's eyes widened, and he suddenly felt tremendously important. The Angel of Truth had chosen him personally to save the kingdom! His pride was short lived, as a moment later, his mother exclaimed, "Our son? He's only sixteen—what can he do?"

“Pran must restore some of the gold to Eldor so our kingdom won’t lose the war.”

“Did the prophecy say how I’m going to do that? Am I supposed to create more gold?”

“No, you won’t create gold using sorcery,” the Truthseeker said.

Pran’s father said, “That’s a relief.”

Mohinder continued, “You will replace some of Eldor’s gold with gold from another world. You must travel to the world known as Earth.”

Pran’s father laughed. “Earth? That’s a mythological place, from fairy tales grandparents read to little children!”

Mohinder said, “The fairy tales and nursery rhymes are based on truth. Earth is real, and that is where Pran must go.”

Pran looked at his parents eagerly, hoping they would agree to let him go.

“Out of the question,” his mother said, dashing his hopes. “It’s too dangerous, and he’s just a child.”

“I’d prefer to send an adult,” said Mohinder, “but the Angel of Truth said only a child or teenager can successfully complete this quest. Earth is such a strange, unnatural place to people of our world that for most adults, anything more than brief exposure would lead to insanity. Pran is young enough that there is little danger of that.”

Far from being convinced by this reasoning, Pran’s parents looked even more concerned.

“Before you forbid him from going,” the Truthseeker said, “think of what will happen if the gold is not restored. Eldor will lose the war, and even your home will not be safe.”

Pran’s father bit his lip. “I’m afraid he’s right, dear. If the Maraknese conquer Eldor, they’ll hunt down both Magicians and magic students. I’d have no way of keeping Pran safe here without any gold, so if the prophecy is fulfilled, we may as well let him go.”

“If it will be so dangerous for Magicians, then we should warn Kavik,” Pran’s mother said. To Mohinder, she explained, “Kavik is our older son, an Army Magician.”

"I'll contact him," Pran's father said, "but I must warn others as well, and somebody needs to inform the King."

Mohinder nodded. "That's already being taken care of. Although he seemed skeptical at first that the Angel of Truth would appear, the royal chaplain accepted my father's invitation and came to the Sacred Glen today. When he witnessed the Angel's return and heard his prophecy, the chaplain was sufficiently alarmed that he's taking my father for an audience with the King. However, that meeting won't take place for several days, as they're traveling to Eldorado by carriage. In the meantime, it's probably best if you notify some leaders among Magicians, since they'll be the ones most affected."

"You're right," Pran's father said, his brow furrowed in thought. "I must tell Colonel Kaldor so he can inform the Magician General. Perhaps our Army Magicians should carry more silver—for whatever good that will do. Without gold, they won't be able to mount much of a defense against Maraknese sorcery, so I fear our armies will have to retreat or be slaughtered. The kingdom could be overrun in a matter of days or weeks, and Eldor's Magicians will need to go into hiding so we don't suffer the same fate as the ancient Wizards."

Pran finally spoke up. "Am I supposed to restore Eldor's gold all by myself?"

"Certainly not," the Truthseeker reassured him. "You will have help from three other people who will journey with you to Earth."

"That's a relief," Pran's mother said. "What are their names?"

"Oh, the Angel's prophecies rarely give names," the Truthseeker said with a laugh. "This one doesn't even mention Pran by name, only referring to him as 'the magic teacher's son,' but I figured out who it meant."

Pran's father sighed. "Yes, religious prophecies are always enigmatic, as I said earlier. So, how do we know who should go with my son?"

"Pran will have to figure that out himself. He must identify the correct three people to bring with him before he sets off on the quest."

"So," Pran asked, "should I tell my friends about the quest and ask if they'll go with me?"

"Absolutely not, Pran," the Truthseeker warned. "Your quest is secret, so you mustn't reveal it to anyone until after you know that they're destined to go to Earth with you. You won't have to look for companions, as *they* will come to *you*."

"How will I recognize them?"

"The prophecy says that all three people destined to join you on the quest have a mysterious past. The first two are very special people, unlike any you've ever met before, and are more than they *appear* to be. Your third companion will be the teenage relative you never knew you had."

Pran furrowed his brow. "Mother, Father, do I have any relatives I don't know about?"

"Not that I'm aware of," his mother said.

"If you do," his father said, "then I don't know about them either."

"So," Pran asked the Truthseeker, "do I just sit back and wait for these three mysterious companions to come to me?"

"I'd better read you this part word for word, so you know what to expect." Mohinder reached into his vest pocket, pulled out a small handwritten journal, and said, "According to the prophecy, 'The magic teacher's son will *only* be able to gather the necessary companions for the quest if he proves himself worthy through three challenges, each more difficult than the last.

"He will recognize his first companion through intelligence, deductive reasoning, and humility. The second companion will find him if he demonstrates courage, discretion, patriotism, and loyalty. His third and final companion will seek him out only if he exercises mercy, forgiveness, and trust. Once the magic teacher's son recognizes them for who and what they really are, he will know of a surety that these three are the ones destined to accompany him on the quest.

"After they arrive on Earth, the four members of the quest must seek assistance there from a native family. The magic teacher's son will know which Earth family is destined to help him on his quest when he hears them mention a familiar name.' That is all the prophecy said concerning Pran." The living room clock chimed eight times, and Mohinder said,

“Well, I’d best be going home now.”

Pran’s father offered, “Why don’t you stay the night, Mohinder? It’s dark already, and besides, we might think of more questions for you later.”

“Thanks. At the risk of sounding presumptuous, I do have a change of clothes in my saddlebags. I told my wife that if you were kind enough to offer, I might spend the night here.”

“Good. I need to communicate with some people by Telepathy spells. Meanwhile, Pran, I’d like you to check something out for me. Fetch my spare crystal ball from the workshop, please.”

Pran got up to go, but then said, “Wait a minute. You have Anti-Theft spells on everything in your workshop.”

With a wry smile, his father said, “I *wonder* how you knew that.”

Pran blushed.

“Don’t worry, I’ll cancel the spell from here,” his father said, then waved an arm in the direction of his workshop. “Okay, Pran, the Anti-Theft spell is cancelled—on the crystal ball *only*, so don’t get any ideas about poking into my other things!”

Pran grinned and ran out to his father’s workshop to fetch the other ball. Carrying its wooden case from the bottom with both hands, he walked gingerly back up the flagstone path to the side door of the house, where his mother held the door open for him. As Pran handed the ball to him in the living room, his father said, “I’m going to be busy in my study doing Telepathy spells and penning a letter or two. These spells take concentration, so I don’t want anyone to bother me until I’m done, but meanwhile I have a task for you, Pran. Try to look into the future with my spare crystal ball. First look ten days ahead, as I did with the other one. If that works, you *can* interrupt me, because it means either something was wrong with my other ball, or the prophecy is false. If it doesn’t work, try looking nine days into the future, then eight, and so on, until you find the last day the crystal ball shows you the future. That should be the day when the gold disappears.”

“I’m not as accurate as you are in seeing the future,” Pran confessed.

“It doesn’t matter if what you see will actually take place; what matters

is whether you see anything or not.” Pran’s father set the box on the dining room table and opened it. “Aha; there’s a little lead dust in there; one of my prophecies must have come to pass. But there’s still enough gold in the box for a dozen viewings, so you’re all set,” he told Pran, before going into his study and closing the door.

Pran sat down at the dining room table in front of the crystal ball, curious to see what his future had in store for him, but not sure what to look for. His thoughts were interrupted by Mohinder, who asked, “Pran, before you begin, are you aware that it’s unwise to look into your own future?”

“Why not? My father never mentioned that in class.”

Mohinder raised an eyebrow. “I’m surprised he neglected to warn you of the danger. I know he doesn’t specialize as a Fortuneteller, but most Magicians know that looking into one’s own future risks changing your destiny.”

“How would looking into my future change my ‘destiny’?”

“Pran, there are always hardships in anyone’s future: accidents, sickness, loss, pain, and death. However, often bad things have to happen in order for *good* things to happen later on. When someone looks into his own future, he’s likely to see something tragic and try to avoid it. However, in avoiding pain or loss, he might also avoid something truly wonderful that was destined to happen to him because of that pain or loss.

“For example, a man might see that if he rides his horse on a certain path, it will break its leg, so he decides to follow a different path. But in taking a different path, he may end up never meeting his next employer, long-lost cousin, or future wife. Even if he tries to look farther into the future to see what he’d miss by changing his actions, there’s no way he can view the entire chain of events that he’d set into motion by avoiding a misfortune. Making a decision based on visions in a crystal ball *changes* your future, but the crystal ball does not show you this *changed* future, only the original future based on what you would do without foreknowledge.”

Pran asked, “What if I look into my future not to avoid bad things, but just to prepare for them?”

The Truthseeker chuckled. “You may have the intention just to prepare yourself, but that’s not what will happen. It’s nearly impossible for someone to see a tragedy in his own future and carry on as usual, without changing his plans. Let me tell you a story:

“A woodcutter who worked in a sawmill went to a Fortuneteller to see his future. He’d been warned of the risks of trying to avoid one’s fate, so he resolved only to prepare himself for the future, not try to change it. But then the Fortuneteller told him that he would lose his right arm the next day in a terrible accident at the sawmill.

“How could anyone foresee such pain and loss in their future and *not* try to avoid it? The woodcutter stayed home from work the next day. His boss had to do his job for him, so when the saw blade broke, the mill owner was the one who lost his arm.

“The following year, the country went to war, and all able-bodied men were drafted into the Army, including the woodcutter. He died in battle, leaving his baby boy fatherless and his wife a grieving widow. If the mill worker hadn’t looked into his future, he might have lost an arm, but then wouldn’t have been drafted with the able-bodied men and lost his life, and his son would have grown up knowing his father.

“The story had a happy ending for the mill owner, though. Being a cripple, he was never drafted. He not only survived the war, but married the worker’s widow and raised her baby as his own. You could say the worker didn’t prevent his fate, but merely *shifted* it onto someone else. Now do you see the dangers of looking into your own future, Pran?”

Pran nodded grimly. He considered what it might be safe for him to look up in the crystal ball, and asked, “How about if I just try to predict the weather?”

Mohinder smiled. “That’s an excellent idea. Weather is one thing you can prepare yourself for, but you can’t change. Wait, can Magicians control weather, Pran?”

“Not many can, except for small-scale cloud busting. I certainly can’t! Weather Control spells require several Magicians working together to be successful. My father says that’s a good thing, ’cause otherwise any

Magician wanting sunny weather could cause a drought to ruin crops.”

“In that case,” Mohinder said, “I’d say it’s pretty safe for you to look at what the weather will be for the next week or two.”

Pran proceeded to do just that. Looking at the weather was easy, since he didn’t need a detailed forecast, just something to show the magic was still working. He simply had the crystal ball show him the view from his bedroom window at noon of each day—not a very interesting vision of the future, but at least it seemed safe. He began by looking ten days into the future, as his father had instructed, and as expected was unable to see any visions. Then he decided to look at tomorrow and work his way forward for nine days or until the magic stopped working, whichever came first.

The crystal ball refused to produce any visions for Thursday, six days from now. He tried the following day, just to be sure, but again there were no visions in the crystal.

Pran’s father emerged from his study and said, “Kavik is well. That’s all he was able to safely communicate from the front lines by Telepathy, not just because of secrecy, but also because any more lengthy mental communication would distract him from watching and listening for the enemy.

“I wrote him a letter about the Truthseeker prophecy, coded it with a Cipher spell, and Teleported it into his uniform jacket. In it, I told Kavik not to conserve his gold supply, but use it before it disappears, reinforce his platoon’s Shield spells and blast the enemy with magic whenever possible. I also suggested that he and his fellow Army Magicians carry silver, as well as gold. I asked him to show my letter to his commander, but as our son is a mere Lieutenant, I doubt my warning will go much higher than that. If I’m able to meet with Colonel Kaldor tomorrow, I’ll give him more recommendations for the defense of Eldor to pass to the Magician General.”

Pran’s mother asked, “What do you mean, *if*? Didn’t Colonel Kaldor agree to meet with you?”

“I tried to contact him by Telepathy, but he wouldn’t answer. He’s probably out on maneuvers and unable to answer. Telepathy spells require

concentration, for the recipient as well as the sender, so it's not a good idea to respond to one if you're on horseback. I darn near ran my horse off a cliff once, answering a Telepathy spell!"

"Did you communicate with anyone else?" Mohinder asked.

"Just one other. Not a person, though, a dragon."

"A *dragon*?" Mohinder and Pran both exclaimed incredulously.

"Yes," Pran's father said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "One named Blue Lightning, from the White Mountain Elf Reservation and Dragon Sanctuary. I saved her life years ago, so she owes me a favor. If the gold disappears, I'm going to ask for her help in keeping Eldor from being conquered by the Maraknese."

Mohinder looked appalled. "You want to use a *dragon* to fight *humans*? We Truthseekers believe all war is wrong, but using dragons to fight humans would be monstrous, literally! It risks repeating the atrocities of the War of the Wizards, when entire cities were destroyed by dragon fire. Furthermore, the interspecies treaty forbids humans from using dragons as mercenaries. Would you break that treaty and risk widening the conflict just to gain a temporary edge during one battle?"

"Relax, Mohinder," Pran's father said. "I know about the interspecies treaty, and I never said I planned to use a dragon to fight anyone. What I *meant* was that if the prophecy is fulfilled, then Blue Lightning and I will discuss ways she can help Eldor without violating the treaty, such as tracking enemy movements from the air or helping deliver supplies. Perhaps she could fly citizens to safety if our town is overrun. If Pran and his friends manage to bring gold back from Earth, Blue Lightning could help transport it to where it's needed."

"Oh," said the Truthseeker sheepishly, "Sorry I misunderstood your intentions."

"That's quite all right. I can't say the thought of using a dragon to fight the Maraknese didn't cross my mind, but I didn't save Blue Lightning's life just to send her on a suicide mission against enemy Sorcerers. I told her I'd contact her again when I have a better idea of how she can help, but that after the gold disappears, I won't be able to reach her by Telepathy spell. She says she'll know when the gold disappears, as she has a small hoard herself."

"I thought dragons weren't allowed to own gold," said Pran.

"Technically, they're not. Under the terms of the interspecies peace treaty that set up the dragon sanctuaries, all dragon gold was supposed to be turned over to Magicians, so it's really Magicians' gold, but nobody enforces that part of the treaty anymore. After all, would *you* want to be the one snooping through dragon lairs for gold in the heart of the White Mountain Sanctuary, with angry dragons breathing down your neck—breathing *fire* down your neck?"

"No, I guess not," Pran said. "Father, I think I found out when the gold will disappear. The last day that the crystal ball showed predictions for is Wednesday. I was checking at noontime, so I'd say the gold will disappear sometime between Wednesday afternoon and Thursday morning."

"Good work, son. Crystal balls are sometimes inexact about the timing of future events, but if you're correct, that only gives us about five days. I should meet with our town's Magicians' Council tomorrow morning to warn them. Mohinder, I'd like you to come along and talk to my fellow Magicians. You heard the prophecy, not me, so I'm sure they'd prefer to hear it from you. If I still haven't managed to contact Colonel Kaldor by morning, I'll exercise my right to call an emergency meeting of the Magicians' Council. As long as our Chief Magician is in earshot of the Wizard Tower's bell, he'll show up for *that*. Since you're spending the night here with us, Mohinder, we can get an early start, if you're willing to come with me."

"Certainly," Mohinder agreed, "but I think Pran should come, too. He's the one who's going to restore gold to Rados, after all. I'm sure the other Magicians will want to talk to him. We may even find he has some valuable insights to add to the discussion."

Pran was afraid his father might laugh, but instead he asked, "Pran, would you like to attend a Magicians' Council meeting?"

"Of course!" Pran replied eagerly. Only full-fledged Magicians were invited to Council meetings, never apprentices, much less magic students!

"Good. Pran, show Mohinder where our stables are. I plan to get started first thing in the morning, so after you've seen to his horse, we'd all best turn in for the night."



11: WIZARD TOWER

Saturday dawned sunny and clear, a perfect late-summer day. After breakfast, Pran helped his father hitch Rocky and Mapleshade to the rockaway carriage while Mohinder saddled his own horse. The Truthseeker said, “May I offer a suggestion, Gilamond? Since I arrived yesterday evening, you haven’t had much time to discuss the prophecy with your son. I believe Pran is wise for his age, humble, and has good judgment. I suggest that during the carriage ride to town, you ask him what advice he would offer the other Magicians. The Magicians’ Council might not pay attention to a boy, but if you adopt Pran’s ideas as your own, and *you* say them, they’ll listen.”

Pran’s father looked thoughtful. “Thanks for the advice.” After checking the harness, he climbed into the front seat of the rockaway next to Pran and set the horses in motion with a few clicks of his tongue. The carriage moved off at a steady trot, with Mohinder’s horse following.

“So, Pran,” his father said, turning to look at him, since the horses needed no additional guidance once they were on the road to town, “what would you have me recommend to the other Magicians about Eldor’s coming gold crisis?”

“Well, I don’t know if Magicians have any influence over it, but there is one thing I think should be changed: that new law that makes sorcery illegal.”

His father asked suspiciously “What makes you think that should be changed?”

Pran had thought this through carefully. “Three reasons. First, threatening to arrest Sorcerers may cause loyal citizens whose only ‘crime’ is practicing sorcery to defect to Marakna to avoid punishment. Once there, they’d be drafted into the Maraknese Army to fight against us, or might even volunteer. They’d be more of a threat in Marakna than they’d ever be if they stayed here where we can keep an eye on them.”

“Doggone it, Pran, you’re right! I guess Parliament never thought the law through to its consequences.”

Pran quipped, “Do they ever?”

His father laughed. “What are your other two reasons?”

“If all the gold disappears, we might need some loyal Sorcerers around in Eldor to help defend against the Maraknese.”

“Another good point. And your third reason?”

“Mohinder said my friends and I will bring back gold from Earth, but he didn’t say we’d be able to restore *all* of Eldor’s gold.”

“I don’t see how you could, son. Eldor has the most gold of any kingdom on Rados, so even if you managed to sail a hundred merchant ships laden with gold all the way from Earth to the Eldorado harbor, you couldn’t replace all our gold.”

“Well, if I’m only able to bring a limited amount of gold back to Eldor, we might need some loyal Eldorean Sorcerers to transform lead into gold to replace the rest.”

His father beamed at him. “I hadn’t thought of those things, and perhaps my fellow Magicians wouldn’t either, as we’re just too prejudiced against black magic. I’m proud of you, son. Mohinder was right about you having wisdom beyond your years.”

It wasn’t often Pran heard such praise from his father, and he smiled in gratitude.

The wheels thumped loudly as they crossed the wooden slats of the Flat Rock Bridge. On Saturdays, this bridge was seldom used except by local farmers taking their produce to market. They’d passed a few of the

slow farm wagons on the way to town, but since farmers usually delivered their produce in the morning and drove back before noon, it was unlikely they would see any on the way back.

As soon as they'd crossed the bridge, entering the town of White River Junction, Pran stuck his head out of the window and looked up at the familiar, blue-gray spire of the town's Wizard Tower. The top of the Tower was visible for miles, and here at the town limits most of the shaft was in view as well. From a distance, it looked like a large lighthouse, rising smooth and slender into the sky until it broadened out at the top into a large bulge which contained the battle room. However, at four hundred fifty feet high, the Wizard Tower was taller than any lighthouse in the world, and whereas lighthouses were painted in distinctive patterns so sailors could recognize them, the Wizard Tower was built of bare, unadorned stone.

In the center of town, near the Wizard Tower, was the town garrison. As soon as they reached it, Pran's father pulled the rockaway to a halt by the curb. He told Mohinder, who reined in his horse next to the carriage, "I need to stop here at the garrison. Whenever Colonel Kaldor holds drills to see how quickly Magicians can get to the Wizard Tower, he first warns the garrison commander, Colonel Stele. I'm about to sound the alarm bell atop the Wizard Tower to summon the town's Magicians to an emergency meeting of the Magicians' Council. If I don't warn Colonels Kaldor and Stele of my plans beforehand, then when they hear the bell, they'll think White River Junction is under attack.

"Pran, hitch us up to the rail while I go in, will you please?" His father exited the carriage and approached one of the gate guards whose dark blue uniform bore the stripes of a Corporal, a burly young man armed with a halberd and short sword. The guard seemed to recognize him, and after exchanging a few words, pointed him toward the commander's office.

While Pran tied his father's horses loosely to the hitching rail in front of the garrison, he had a strange feeling he was being watched from behind. Turning around, he saw nobody on the street, but caught a glimpse of clothing in the maple tree across the street from the garrison. Pran walked

closer to the tree and saw a small, blond head peeking down from the upper branches. Although he couldn't see the boy's entire face through the leaves, it appeared to be the little blond Novice he'd met on the way to the circle of Sorcery a few days ago. He asked, "Jelal, is that you up there?"

"Hi, Pran," the little Novice said enthusiastically. He scampered down the tree to the lowest branch like a monkey, then dropped to the ground as lightly and gracefully as a gymnast. "I thought it looked like you and your father, but it was hard to tell from way up there, so I wasn't sure until I heard your voice."

This being the first time he'd seen the little Novice in the daylight, Pran took the opportunity to examine him more closely. The boy's blond hair shone cleanly in the sun, his face was lightly tanned, with a few freckles near his nose, and his eyes were the gray-blue color of slate. Jelal's small size was why Pran had originally thought him too young to be a magic student, but his piercing, slate colored eyes shone with such keen intelligence that Pran no longer doubted that he was. "What were you doing up a tree, Jelal?"

"I like climbing trees. I'm a boy," Jelal said with a grin, "what do you expect?"

"But *here*? Don't the soldiers across the street give you any problems?"

"Naw, I live near here, so most of them know me by now. Even if they didn't, since I'm just a little boy, they don't care where I climb trees, as long as I stay out of the garrison compound. What about you? What brings you to town today?"

"Oh, my father has some business with the Magicians' Council this morning."

Jelal looked puzzled. "I didn't think they met at the garrison."

"No, he stopped here because—" Pran hesitated, unsure of how much he could reveal. "Well, you'd soon find out this much for yourself, anyway—he's going to ring the bell in the Wizard Tower to call an emergency meeting of the Magicians' Council. He stopped to tell the garrison commander first, so they don't think our town is under attack when they hear the bell."

"Wow," Jelal said, obviously impressed. "Why is your father calling the emergency meeting?"

"Sorry, I can't tell you," Pran said.

Jelal pouted. "I thought you said we were friends."

"Yes, but national security comes before friendship."

Jelal's slate blue eyes probed Pran's. "Are you saying that you wouldn't even tell your best friend, Kimbar?"

Pran chose his words carefully, as Kimbar might become one of his companions, and then he'd have to tell him. "I can only tell those who have a need to know."

A fleeting smile crossed Jelal's face. "Fair enough."

Pran observed, "You don't seem very disappointed. Why do I get the feeling you were just testing me?"

Jelal grinned. "If you and I are going to be friends, Pran, I have to know that you can be trusted to keep secrets."

"So you have secrets of your own, eh?"

Jelal said evasively, "Who doesn't?"

"Speaking of secrets," Pran said, "my father found out about the circle of sorcery."

"Really? Did he find out who was there?"

"At first, he only knew about Sekar, Samir, and Pathik, but the next day he learned about Garwin, Kimbar, and me being there, too."

Jelal's eyes widened with genuine surprise. "He caught you and your friends too? How did that happen?"

"When my father gave Samir and Pathik their punishment, they told him I'd been at the circle of sorcery too. He always has a Lie Detector spell active, so he knew they weren't lying."

"I see." Jelal's face was unreadable. "Do you have any idea how your father found out about the circle of sorcery?"

"Well, he noticed Sekar, Samir, and Pathik had trouble casting spells in lab the next day, but that wasn't all," Pran said, shaking his head in puzzlement. "Somehow, my father knew things only someone who was there that night should have known. I don't think he found out through

magic, or else he would have known from the start I who was there. At first, I thought Garwin or Kimbar had told him, because only a friend would have revealed everything *except* for the fact that me and my buddies were there, so who else could it have been? Well, you were there, too, of course...”

As he looked at the little Novice standing in front of him, awareness suddenly dawned in Pran’s mind. “It was *you*, Jelal, wasn’t it!” he said accusingly, raising his voice. “*You’re* the one who told my father! Why, you little sp—”

Pran’s mouth suddenly snapped shut against his will as Jelal made a horizontal gesture with his thumb and forefinger. No longer able to talk or even open his mouth, Pran stared at the little boy in wide-eyed disbelief. He was surprised any Novice would know such a spell, but even more shocked Jelal would use it on him! Although Lockjaw spells cast using silver lasted no more than a few hours, they were considered so insulting that nobody *ever* used them on friends or family, other than colicky babies. His father only taught the spell to apprentices, reasoning that if one magic student used it on another, it would lead to a fight.

Pran felt his fists clench with anger. If Jelal were his size, Pran would’ve been tempted to beat him until he took back the spell, but he wasn’t the type to pick a fight with a smaller boy.

As if reading his mind, Jelal said, “Peace, friend. Let’s talk quietly inside your carriage instead of shouting in the street, and I’ll explain.”

The two boys walked back across the street to where the rockaway was parked and climbed inside. Jelal shut the door, took the seat farthest from the entrance, and said, “I’m really sorry your father discovered you were at the circle of sorcery. He wasn’t supposed to find out. You and your friends did me a favor that night by letting me join you, and I promised to return the favor, remember? So I only told him about the *other* boys who were there, not you and your friends. I was trying to help you—understand?”

Pran grunted, pointing to his mouth.

“Oh, the Lockjaw spell! Sorry.” Jelal reversed the gesture he’d made earlier.

As soon as Pran's mouth was unsealed, he snapped, "Don't *ever* use that spell on me again!"

"Sorry for silencing you that way, Pran, but I can explain. You were about to say loudly, in public, that I was spying for your father."

Pran said angrily, "Well, it's true, isn't it?"

"Pran, shouting it out in the street like that would've revealed your father's secret to the whole world! How would your parents feel about that?"

Remembering the conversations he'd had with his parents about giving away secrets during wartime, Pran admitted, "They'd be very upset."

Jelal nodded. "So, now you understand. I didn't want to use that spell on you, but I had no choice. Are we still friends?" he asked, extending a small hand.

Pran reached out and shook the little blond boy's hand, agreeing, "Friends. I don't usually hang around with young Novices, but there's something special about you, Jelal. I don't know what it is," he said, shaking his head in wonder, "but I can't manage to stay angry with you even after a Lockjaw spell! And thanks for not telling my father I was at the circle of sorcery."

"Hey, what are friends for?" said Jelal, smiling warmly at Pran.

Pran smiled back and said, "A seat just opened up in our magic school, Jelal, if you still want to transfer." For some reason he couldn't explain, he found himself eager for Jelal to join the class so he could see him more often. There was something different about the little boy that intrigued Pran, and he wanted to find out what it was.

"Great! I'd love to, if it's okay with your father. How did you get an opening?"

Pran began to tell the story of Sekar's expulsion, but before he got far, his father opened the carriage door, saw Jelal, and asked, "What are *you* doing in here?"

Pran said, "This is my friend Jelal."

His father climbed into the carriage and closed the door, then asked "How long have you two known each other?"

"We made friends a few days ago, at the, uh—" Pran stammered.

"At the circle of sorcery," Jelal said cheerfully, as if trying to help. "No need to act shocked, Master Gilamond; Pran knows I was your informant there. He figured it out himself."

"Well, a bloody poor informant you turned out to be, not telling me the names of half my students who were at that accursed event!"

"The reason I didn't tell you was that Pran and his buddies befriended me that night and helped get me in there without arousing suspicion. I couldn't very well turn them in after they aided me, eh? Besides, I promised to do them a favor in return."

"You could have at least told me you were protecting someone," Pran's father grumbled.

From their casual, familiar tone, it sounded to Pran like his father and Jelal knew each other surprisingly well, considering the little Novice wasn't even in the same magic school! That reminded him—"Father, Jelal told me he's thinking of transferring to our school."

"Really, Jelal? Do you think that's wise, during this stage of the—school year?"

"I think it would be a good move, because I could learn more in your school. It's okay with Master Alimar, as long as you approve."

"Turns out you're in luck," Pran's father said, "as a seat opened up last week. Well, Pran and I have someplace to go, and we've kept Mohinder waiting long enough. I'll see you in school on Monday, Jelal. Don't be late."

After the little blond boy had left the carriage, Pran said, "Wait; I just remembered what the prophecy said about my first two companions. Mohinder told me they're 'very special people, unlike any you've ever met before, and are more than they *appear* to be.' Well, ever since I met Jelal I've had a feeling he's a special person, more than he appears to be, so do you think maybe—"

His father smacked himself on the forehead. "Of course; why didn't I think of it? Call Jelal back, right away. Run after him if you have to! I'll ask Mohinder to come in here too."

Pran scrambled down out of the carriage and ran across the street, where he found the little Novice about to climb back up the tree he'd been sitting in earlier. "Jelal! Can you come back in our carriage for a minute? I need to tell you something," he said, careful this time not to say too much in public.

The two boys returned to the carriage and climbed in. Jelal again took the back seat farthest from the door, and Pran sat next to him. When Mohinder entered, Pran's father motioned him to take a seat in front, closed the door, and sat next to him.

"What's going on?" asked the Truthseeker.

"Mohinder, this little boy here, Jelal, fits your prophecy perfectly." Pran's father ticked off the points on his fingers, one by one. "First, Jelal's a special person. Second, he's unlike anyone Pran has ever met before. Third, he's more than he appears to be. And fourth, Pran recognized all this 'through intelligence, deductive reasoning, and humility,' like the prophecy said."

"I suppose I did," Pran agreed, "except I'm not sure how the 'humility' fits in."

"Think about it, son. As far as you knew, Jelal was just a Novice, and yet you still made friends with him! That shows humility on your part, as most Conjurers are too proud to make friends with a mere Novice."

Or *stay* friends with one after he casts a Lockjaw spell on them, Pran thought to himself, too embarrassed to mention it aloud. If he was being tested to see if he was worthy to find his companions, that had been the only difficult part of this first test.

His father continued, "When you learn more about Jelal, you'll *know* he fits the prophecy."

"If he's the one, then my first companion was certainly easy to find!"

Mohinder shrugged. "That's to be expected. The prophecy said you'd have 'three challenges, each more difficult than the last,' so naturally the first was easiest."

"What prophecy?" asked Jelal, clearly frustrated by not knowing.

"You'll find out soon enough," Pran's father said. "Jelal, I'd like you to meet Mohinder. Mohinder is a Truthseeker missionary, son of their prophet, Sehotra."

"Pleased to meet you," Jelal said, shaking Mohinder's hand with a formality that Pran found amusing, coming from a twelve-year-old boy.

"Likewise," Mohinder replied with a smile.

Pran's father said, "Jelal, I'm calling an emergency meeting of the Magicians' Council, and you need to be there because it involves you. Pran and Mohinder need to know your true identity to decide if you fit the prophecy, so I believe it's time you introduce yourself *fully*. Don't worry; I have an Anti-Eavesdropping spell on this carriage—as you already know."

"Are you sure it's safe to tell them?" the little Novice asked.

"It's necessary. Pran and Mohinder: what we're about to discuss is classified information. Will you swear never to reveal it to anyone?"

"I swear," Pran agreed.

Mohinder said, "Truthseekers don't swear oaths, but we do not lie. I give you my word as a Truthseeker that I won't reveal anything said here."

"I believe you," Pran's father said, "as I have a Lie Detector spell active, and I'm sure Mouse does too."

Pran looked down at the floor, confused. "There's a mouse in here?"

"No, that's me," Jelal said with a grin. "I'm Mouse."

"You're a *mouse*!?" Pran exclaimed. "What kind of sorcery—"

"No, silly," Jelal laughed. "It's my code name."

Pran's father said, "Mouse is a full-fledged Magician."

Pran gasped. "How can anyone so young be a Magician, and since when do Magicians need code names?"

"They do when they work for the EIA," Jelal said, referring to the Eldorean Intelligence Agency. "I'm not just a Magician; I'm also a spy, code-named Mouse."

It was Mohinder's turn to gasp. "The government's using *children* as spies? That's outrageous! How can they do such a thing, even in wartime?"

Jelal said, "Because I'm not really a child. Believe it or not, I'm the oldest person in this carriage. It's a long story," he said with a shrug. "Most Magicians, soldiers, and spies know me only as Mouse, while others in White River Junction know me only by the name Jelal. I want to keep it that way. To avoid blowing my cover and making me change either my

codename or my cover name, call me Mouse when we're in the Wizard Tower, but outside the Tower call me Jelal."

Pran examined Jelal carefully. If his boyish appearance were just an illusion, then it was an excellent magical disguise, perfect in every detail. Finally, he said, "Well, Jelal, you certainly *are* 'more than you appear to be!' It seems you and I are going to be seeing a lot more of each other, and not just in school."

"What do you mean?" Jelal asked.

Mohinder recited, "According to prophecy, 'After the magic teacher's son recognizes his new friends for what they really are, he will know they're the ones to accompany him.'"

The little spy opened his mouth to ask more questions, but Pran's father interrupted, "Jelal, I realize you want to know where you'll accompany Pran, and for what purpose, but we'll explain that in front of the Magicians' Council. Let's go now, as time's a-wasting."

Mohinder got out and mounted his horse, and they started off again. They rode the remaining three blocks to the Wizard Tower in silence, with Pran unsure what to say to Jelal, this ordinary looking little boy who was apparently an adult, a Magician, a spy, and his future partner on a quest to the mythical land of Earth.

Just short of the Tower, they stopped at the inn named The Wizard's Beard. Pran's father paid a groom there to take care of their horses, and then the four of them walked up to the broad base of the Wizard Tower.

It was a highly secure building, as only Magicians and authorized soldiers were allowed inside. All civilian visitors, even magic students, had to be escorted by an armed guard or member of the Magicians' Council. Pran had only been here a few times before, always as his father's guest.

Although the Tower technically belonged to the civilian Magicians' Council, it was guarded by the Eldorean Army due to its strategic importance for the city's defense, especially in wartime. Today, a squad of ten soldiers guarded the arched entrance to the Tower, four armed with longbows, four wielding wicked-looking halberds, and the final two, including the Sergeant who was evidently their leader, wearing swords.

From the battle room far above, lookouts with Eagle-Eye spells had a full view of the entryway to see who was at the door, and if necessary, seal it remotely and attack assailants through murder holes in the floor. Nobody could Teleport into the Tower from outside, because the entire structure was shielded against that type of entry.

Depending on the threat level, arrow slits in the walls were sometimes manned with archers as well. However, most of the time (unless an attack was imminent), the Tower was only lightly manned, because the ancient Wizards had built it to be virtually impregnable to physical or magical attack. For that reason, it had stood unharmed for thousands of years, with a little help from modern Magicians and their additional protective spells.

The Sergeant of the Guard said, “Welcome, Master Gilamond. Who do you have with you?”

Pointing to each of them in turn, Pran’s father said, “This is Mohinder, son of the Truthseeker prophet; this is my son, Pran; and this boy’s a Novice who’s transferring to my magic school next week.” Although he avoided giving either Jelal’s real name or codename, the Sergeant didn’t bother asking. After all, such a small boy was obviously no threat.

“Very well, you may proceed,” the Sergeant said, waving them by.

Pran’s father passed through the doorway into the base of the Tower, with Pran, Jelal, and Mohinder following. As they stepped inside, Pran saw Mohinder pause to run his hand along the seamless, smooth, blue-gray stone wall of the Tower, a look of wonder on his face. It was hard for most people to believe the Wizard Tower was millennia old, as its condition was still flawless both inside and out, untouched by time or the elements. Pran, of course, had been inside the Tower before, on annual magic class field trips and occasional visits to the Magicians’ library.

The base of the Tower was divided into six wings, presumably because the Wizards had wanted it to resemble a hexagram, the symbol of magic. However, instead of being pointed like the tips of Magicians’ pendants, the wings were rounded to create more interior room, so from the outside, Pran thought the wings looked like the Tower’s feet.

The first wing, with which Pran was most familiar, contained the Magicians' library. It also held rooms for the town's Loremaster and its Chief Magician, which served as their offices whenever they were in the Tower, and their bedrooms in time of siege. Because the current Chief Magician, Colonel Kaldor, was also Battalion Magic Officer, during a siege he would more likely stay in the Army officers' quarters above the battle room.

The second wing contained a kitchen and mess hall that could feed over fifty men at one sitting. The kitchen was crewed by battalion headquarters personnel, because sleeping quarters in the Tower would be crowded during a siege, with no room for separate sleeping quarters for any civilians except Magicians.

The third and fourth wings were set up as barracks for the soldiers on duty, mostly archers. These two wings together housed one platoon of forty-five soldiers (not including the Platoon Leader and Magic Officer, who slept in the top of the Tower), plus the necessary kitchen staff. During times of high alert when two platoons were assigned to Tower duty, they would share the same barracks, as at any time half the men would be on duty while the other half were resting, eating, or preparing for their next shift.

The fifth wing of the Wizard Tower had enough beds for all the civilian Magicians during a siege. It was close quarters, but at least they weren't bunk beds like the soldiers had.

The sixth and final wing was an armory and storage room containing weapons, armor, food, and water. Additional supplies were stored at the top of the Tower, both in the battle room and above it in a room next to the officers' quarters.

The inside of the Tower was brightly lit by Mage-Light spells, but all around the walls were sconces with candles in them, ready to be lit in case the spells failed. Near the center of the room, a lit lamp on the communications desk gave further evidence of the Army's mistrust of magic. Pran could tell from its smell that this lamp burned kerosene, the new fuel distilled from rock oil which was cheaper than whale oil, although

it gave off a less pleasing scent. Seated behind the communications desk was the Platoon Sergeant, and a messenger stood nearby.

"Master Gilamond," the Sergeant said, "are you here to give a tour of the Tower to your son and his friends?"

"No, I'm bringing them to a meeting of the Magicians' Council."

The Sergeant's brow furrowed. "I wasn't aware of any meeting today."

"There's none scheduled, but I'm about to call an emergency meeting."

"I'll alert the Tower Duty Officers up in the battle room, Lieutenants Ryker and Hakon," said the Sergeant. At his desk, two tubes descended from the ceiling: a voice tube, magically enhanced to allow conversations with the battle room four hundred feet above, and a message tube that soldiers at the top used to drop weighted notes down to this desk.

Jelal sighed and muttered, "Oh great, Lieutenant *Hakon* is the Magic Officer on duty." He whispered something to Pran's father, who nodded and said, "No, Sergeant, don't tell them we're coming. I want to see for myself how alert they are up there." He gestured with his hands and vanished.

"I guess you three will have to take the stairs," the Sergeant said, pointing to a doorway behind him that led to a cylindrical shaft that housed the spiral staircase.

After they'd entered the staircase and shut the door, Mohinder said, "Why didn't your father Teleport us with him?"

"He wasn't being rude," Pran said defensively. "He's just used to coming here with other Magicians. But Jel—"

Jelal snapped, "Inside the Tower, refer to me as *Mouse*, if you don't want me to use another Lockjaw spell on you! There are soldiers in here who don't know my real name."

"Okay, Mouse, you're a Magician too, or so you claim. You must have some gold that you can use to Teleport us, don't you?"

"I only have a little bit of gold hidden on me, to avoid blowing my cover, and I save it for true emergencies. Spying is a dangerous profession, so I never know when I might need to defend myself against an enemy Sorcerer or spy, even inside Eldor. Not that I really need *gold* to defend myself,"

Jelal bragged, as his hands blurred and two daggers appeared. "See? And besides knife fighting, I'm also expert in all forms of unarmed combat."

Mohinder sighed. "Well, martial arts skills won't Teleport us up the Tower, will they?" He shook his head in resignation. "We'd better start walking, boys. There are a lot of stairs to climb before our meeting, and we told Pran's mother he'd be back by sunset."

Jelal stashed his daggers back under his clothes as quickly as he'd produced them and said, "Race you to the top, Pran!" Without waiting for a reply, the little spy rushed past Mohinder.

Pran followed with a grin, taking the steps two at a time. The spiral staircase wound around tightly, and was lit only by arrow slits set at landings every twenty feet of height. Pran knew that these slits, which were currently unmanned, were magically shielded so arrows or spells could be shot out of the Tower, but none could come in.

Jelal's legs were shorter than Pran's, but the little Magician was surprisingly quick, and he'd had a slight head start. Pran finally passed him, but he had to go to the outside to do so, and the necessary burst of speed tired him. He ran around the narrow, stone steps, spiraling higher and higher up the Tower, wondering if he'd ever reach the top. Pran desperately needed a rest to catch his breath, so he finally stopped, panting for breath, and put his hands on his knees.

Jelal passed him, but stopped just above him, smiling with amusement. He was breathing hard, but not as out of breath as Pran, and taunted, "All that sitting around in magic school and studying has made you out of shape, Pran. I'm a lot smaller than you, but I can still beat you in a race!"

Pran wasn't about to give up that easily! He recovered his breath after a minute, but pretended to still gasp for air so he could catch Jelal off guard. "You're right," he said, leaning against the wall and panting dramatically. "I guess I do need to get outside more."

Jelal stood in the middle of the stairway and laughed.

Pran used the opportunity to dash ahead of him on the inside, catching the little Magician by surprise.

Pran was himself surprised when the stairs ended just seconds later, as he arrived at the top landing, finding his way blocked by the door to the battle room. No wonder Jelal had been amused—there had only been a few more yards to go when Pran had stopped to catch his breath. As Jelal ran up the final steps behind him, Pran boasted, “I beat you!”

Jelal burst out laughing again. “You tricked me, Pran. I thought I had you beat, but you were just faking it! You’re a pretty good actor. Maybe you’d be a good spy, too. Ever think of becoming one?”

“No thanks. You did have me beat, if you’d only kept going,” Pran admitted. “I guess you *are* in better shape than me.”

“Well, my life keeps me active,” Jelal said, “climbing in and out of windows, running over rooftops, scaling walls, and things like that. It’s an exciting life. When I’m not working or masquerading as a Novice, I have plenty of free time to spend playing with other kids. I don’t need to study in the evenings, I have no chores to do, and no family to support.” He smiled. “It’s almost the perfect life.”

Noticing Jelal’s use of the phrase “other kids,” Pran looked at him skeptically. “Mouse, you really are just a twelve-year-old boy, aren’t you? You just made up that story about the Disguise spell, right? I know the difference between the way kids and grownups behave, and you can’t fool *me*—you’re a boy, just like I am. It does make a good story,” he admitted, “being a spy disguised as a boy, but you don’t need to make up stories to impress people.”

Far from being upset at being found out, Jelal grinned, looking pleased with himself. “Well, then, I guess I did fool you. Kids are the hardest to deceive, so I must be doing my job well. Pran, I really am an adult spy, but in a way, you’re also right about me being a little boy. I’m not using a Disguise spell—this is the way I *always* look. Physically I’m only twelve, but chronologically I’m over a hundred and thirty years old. I stopped aging in 1695.”

Pran’s jaw dropped. “You mean—an *Eternal Youth* spell?”

Jelal nodded.

“That spell isn’t supposed to exist!” Pran exclaimed. “There are stories of Wizards using it, but it was supposed to have been lost forever when

they became extinct. Furthermore,” Pran said critically, “any spell that changes the natural aging process has to be sorcery, like the Rapid Aging spell Maraknese Sorcerers use against our troops.”

“You’re right; it was black magic,” Jelal admitted, “and the spell *was* lost, but someone rediscovered it—and then lost it again, unfortunately.”

“But why would anyone,” Pran asked, “even a Sorcerer, cast an Eternal Youth spell on a twelve-year-old boy?”

Jelal sighed. “It’s a long story, so I’m afraid I’ll have to tell you some other time, but what’s important is that the spell made me remain a child. Because I still look, feel, and act like a twelve-year-old, I’m really more of a boy than an adult. As I tell everyone who knows my secret, Pran, think of me as a boy, but a very *experienced* boy.”

They heard heavy breathing approaching below them, and soon Mohinder appeared at the landing. “That was quite a climb, he panted. “Is this the top, I hope?”

“Yes,” Jelal said, “The door ahead leads directly to the battle room.”



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Jelal paused with his hand on the door and said, “Pran and Mohinder, I remind you to call me Mouse inside this Tower, but don’t use that name *outside* the Tower without my permission. I realize that if you accidentally call me Mouse around other kids, they might think it’s just my nickname, but there’s still a danger of blowing my cover. Besides, nicknames have a way of catching on, and if that happened, I’d have to change my identity to avoid being compromised. I already change it every couple years to avoid suspicion, and I don’t like doing it more often than that. With my, uh, condition, I can’t keep the same name or live in the same town for more than two years, because people get suspicious about a boy who never grows up.”

Pran asked, “Do you mean the name you told me when we first met wasn’t your real name?”

“For the time being, it *is*. Sorcerers can also do Lie Detector spells, so an EIA Magician did the Naming spell on me,” Jelal said, referring to a simple, ceremonial spell usually cast on newborn babies. “That way, not even a Truthseeker can catch me lying about my name.

“I barely remember all the names I’ve gone by over the years, but I *like* my current name, so don’t compromise it by speaking it inside the Tower to people who know me as Mouse! I try to limit the number of people who know the two names are connected. In White River Junction, people who

know both of my alter egos include Master Gilamond, Master Alimar, my local handler, and now the two of you.”

“What’s a handler?” asked Pran.

“That means controller, or spymaster,” Jelal explained. He opened the door and beckoned them to follow. “Come on, they’ll be waiting for us.”

Pran and Mohinder glanced nervously at each other, then followed the little Magician through the door into a large, circular room known as the battle room, the first of three levels atop the Wizard Tower. Above the battle room were the Army officers’ quarters, which also had room for some of the civilian Magicians, and above that was the belfry, with bells to alert the town of approaching danger or summon the Magicians’ Council to a meeting. On the roof of the belfry was a dragon landing pad. It had gone unused since the Age of Wizards, but Pran suspected that if the war went badly enough, his father’s dragon friend, Blue Lightning, might be invited to land there.

The walls around the battle room were punctuated by large windows, not mere arrow slits like they had seen while ascending the stairs. These windows had no glass, but Pran knew they were secured by many spells, to protect against missiles cast by catapults and ballistae as well as to shield occupants from the high winds that buffeted the outside of the Tower at this great height. Along each window, Archers stood watch with the aid of Eagle-Eye spells.

Spaced along the floor near the walls were machicolations, better known as murder holes, which guardians of the Tower could use to drop boiling oil, stones, spears, or other missiles on any enemy foolish enough to try a direct assault on the Tower from below. Of course, Magicians could also shoot spells down through the murder holes, but why waste gold on a spell when a stone would do the job?

Pran’s thoughts were interrupted by someone clearing his throat nearby. He turned away from the window to see a communications desk, almost the twin of the one at the base of the Tower, except this time, the voice tube and message tube led down into the floor.

“Excuse me,” said the young, blond, broad-shouldered officer seated behind the desk. He wore a Lieutenant’s rank, like Pran’s brother, Kavik,

along with the crossed arrows insignia of the Archery Corps, the branch in charge of Tower security. "I'm Lieutenant Ryker, the Platoon Leader on Tower Duty. Are you Pran, son of Gilamond the Magician?"

"Yes, sir. This is Mohinder, and this is my friend—uh, Mouse."

"Yes, your father told me you'd be coming," Lieutenant Ryker said. "He's waiting for you on the other side of the battle room with our Magic Officer, Lieutenant Hakon."

As they walked away from the desk, Jelal grumbled, "So, we have to deal with *Hakon*."

"You don't like him," Pran observed. "Why not?"

"Obviously you've never met him, or you wouldn't need to ask!"

The two boys and Mohinder walked around the circular stairwell, past a large, crescent-shaped room that hugged the stairwell on the other side of the battle room. Pran knew that this served as a conference room for Magicians' Council meetings, as well as a small dining room or mess hall, with food brought up from the main kitchen below by dumbwaiter. They found Pran's father standing by the window, talking with a tall young Army officer.

The officer turned as they heard Pran, Jelal, and Mohinder approaching. Upon seeing Jelal, his lip curled, and he said, "Hello, Rat. I hear you've been blabbing your secret identity to these two."

"They had a need to know. And I'm Mouse, not Rat—as you well know, Hakon," Jelal replied, spitting the Lieutenant's name as if it were a curse.

"Of course," Lieutenant Hakon said mockingly, "Agent Rat would be much *bigger*."

Pran suppressed a laugh as he looked the officer over. Lieutenant Hakon had greasy black hair, an aquiline nose, and a goatee that made his narrow face look even longer. He was wearing the field uniform called "battle blues," its collar bearing the rank of Second Lieutenant juxtaposed with the gold embroidered hexagram insignia of the Army Magic Corps. At his waist hung a short sword, which Pran knew Army Magicians carried not just for its usefulness as an edged weapon, but also because pointing

a steel blade at an enemy enhanced the power of most attack spells. Pran asked, "How do you two know each other?"

"That's classified," Jelal said.

Lieutenant Hakon said with a sneer, "Let's just say I've known this little rodent since we were the same size. I've matured since then, but unfortunately he hasn't, so his EIA handlers are more like babysitters for him." Turning to the Truthseeker, he said, "And you must be Mohinder, son of the alleged Truthseeker prophet. Don't bother trying to convert me to your little cult, as Army Magicians are grounded in reality, not fairy tales. And Pran," the Lieutenant said, "I've heard a lot about you."

Pran braced himself to receive his own insults, but Hakon continued in a more pleasant tone, "Your brother Kavik and I were classmates at the Military Academy. He's a fine officer and a good Magician. Such a pity he got stuck in an Infantry unit instead of being assigned to Archery." He shook his head and clucked his tongue with exaggerated sadness.

Pran's father had been listening with an expression of detached amusement, as if accustomed to the young officer's taunts, but now he countered, "Yes, my son Kavik talked about you too, Lieutenant Hakon. He said with your grades at the Academy, you could have had your pick of any branch, so it was a crying shame that you settled for Archery."

Hakon chuckled and said, "Touché. Now before you call that emergency meeting of the Magicians' Council you were telling me about, Master Gilamond, let me contact Colonel Kaldor. He's out on maneuvers with the Cavalry, which is why he didn't respond to your attempts to contact him by Telepathy spell, but he'll communicate with *me*. He knows my platoon has Tower duty this week."

Jelal snorted. "*Your* platoon? Since when do they allow Magic Officers to be Platoon Leaders? It's Lieutenant Ryker's platoon, not yours!"

"You know what I meant, Hamster," Hakon said, misstating Jelal's codename again in an obvious attempt to insult the little spy.

Pran's father said, "Gentlemen, let's try to remain civil, shall we? Yes, Lieutenant, please contact Colonel Kaldor for me. Tell him I'm calling an

emergency meeting of the Council, and that if he wants to ask me why, I'll await his own Telepathy spell."

Lieutenant Hakon was silent for a minute or two as he looked out the Tower window, a look of deep concentration on his face. Then he turned to Pran's father and said, "Colonel Kaldor would rather discuss your reasons for the meeting in person, in case Maraknese Sorcerers have found a way to eavesdrop on Telepathy spells. He says only to ring the Tower bell if you feel strongly that the *entire* Magicians' Council must hear your message *without delay*. Otherwise, he will return tonight and meet with you then."

Pran's father said firmly, "We need to ring the bell."

Lieutenant Hakon led them back to the communications desk near the top of the stairs, where the Magic Officer had a brief discussion with Lieutenant Ryker. The Platoon Leader nodded, then reached up to a bell pull with a round, red sign on it saying, "Emergencies and battle drills only." Pran instinctively covered his ears, but found it unnecessary, as the belfry was magically insulated from the battle room to dampen the din.

First to respond to the bell was Colonel Kaldor, Chief Magician of White River Junction and Battalion Magic Officer, who Teleported up from the base of the Tower. Tall and lean, Kaldor had close-cropped gray hair, steel-gray eyes, and a short beard like Pran's father's. He wore Eldorean Army officer battle blues similar to Lieutenant Hakon's uniform, plus black leather riding boots with iron spurs. In his left hand, he carried his hat, the broad-brimmed blue felt hat of the elite Cavalry branch, emblazoned with the rank of Lieutenant Colonel.

No sooner had Colonel Kaldor's feet materialized on the floor than he demanded, in a crisp, commanding voice, "How large is the enemy force moving against our city, and when will they be in position to attack?"

"I have no knowledge of enemy troop movements," Pran's father answered. "I called this emergency meeting of the Council to discuss a future crisis." He pointed to Pran, Mohinder, and Jelal. "I've invited these three to the meeting because they are directly involved."

Kaldor said, "Do you realize that except for drills authorized by the Chief Magician, that bell has not been rung in over fifty years?"

"I'm aware of that. However, any member of the Magicians' Council has the right to call an emergency meeting."

"Only if there's an imminent danger to the town, not a 'future crisis' as you say."

"Although an attack may not be imminent," Pran's father said, "I believe this meeting is necessary, not just for the security of our town, but for all of Eldor. In fact, I'm willing to stake my position in the Council on it."

Kaldor looked him in the eye with a steely gaze and said coldly, "You just *did*." Then he turned away to greet the other Magicians who were materializing in the battle room.

Pran breathed a sigh of relief that his father's confrontation with the Chief Magician was over. Even without using magic, the man radiated power. He was glad Kaldor was on Eldor's side, because the Colonel was not someone he'd want to go up against in battle.

One by one, the other Magicians of White River Junction Teleported into the battle room from below. Kaldor told each of them, with the same authority in his voice as if he'd ordered the bell rung himself, that this was an emergency meeting, not a drill, and instructed them to go to the conference room.

The crescent shaped conference room appeared to have been built after the rest of the Tower, as its walls were plaster instead of the smooth, magically hardened stones set by the ancient Wizards. Pran's father led him inside the room, which was brightly lit by a Mage-Light spell, its walls covered with maps of the city of White River Junction, the surrounding countryside, Eldor, Marakna, and the world. The room was dominated by a long, crescent shaped, wooden table, with kerosene lamps for backup lighting. The inner side of the table, being smaller, held only nine seats, but the outer edge had about twice as many. Pran's father directed him to the outer side of the table and told Pran to sit on his right, and Mohinder on his left. Jelal took the open seat next to Pran, perhaps wanting to sit next to somebody close to his own size. Pran, too, felt glad to have another boy sitting next to him rather than a grownup Magician, although he had to remind

himself that Jelal was no ordinary boy, but rather, in his words, “a very *experienced* boy.”

Five minutes later, Pran’s father told him, “They’re all here now,” just as Colonel Kaldor entered the room and closed the door. The room gleamed with an impressive amount of gold, with each Magician wearing gold chains, bracelets, and rings on each finger. All of them wore daggers on their belts, and the seven Army Magicians present (Colonel Kaldor, Lieutenant Hakon, and five Captains) also wore swords.

Pran knew from his brother that due to space limitations, not all Army Magicians attended Magicians’ Council meetings. The city garrison was battalion sized, a thousand troops in five companies formed of twenty-two platoons, each with its own Magic Officer. Company Magic Officers attended Council meetings, but not Platoon Magic Officers (other than the one currently on Tower duty), or there would have been no room for any civilian Magicians.

All seven Army Magicians sat along the inner edge of the table, with Colonel Kaldor at the center, and one seat empty. The lone civilian Magician on that side was Loremaster Lokor, the Deputy Chief Magician. Pran whispered, “Father, why do all the Army Magicians take the inside seats? Are they considered more important than civilian Magicians?”

“The Chief Magician and his deputy have always sat on that side. Army Magicians used to sit on the outside when the Chief Magician was civilian, but then other Magicians in civilian specialties fought about who should sit along the inner edge, the perceived position of importance. They argued endlessly about whether a Loremaster was more important than a Magical Doctor, and whether a Beastmaster outranked an Herbmater or a Fortuneteller. When Colonel Kaldor was elected Chief Magician, he decided that to avoid arguments, from now on only Army Magicians and the two elected Council leaders will sit on that side.”

Kaldor hit his gavel once, and the room immediately fell silent. “I call this emergency meeting of the Magicians’ Council to order, and remind you that anything discussed here is considered secret and should not be repeated outside these walls. Let us hear first from

Master Gilamond, who I expect will tell us why he brought us all here. Gilamond, you have the floor.”

There were murmurs of surprise from around the table that a magic teacher had called the meeting, rather than Colonel Kaldor, the town’s Chief Magician.

“Thank you, Colonel Kaldor,” Pran’s father said. “Gentlemen, most of you already know my son, Pran, a Conjuror in my magic school. The little blond boy sitting next to him is Eldor’s smallest secret agent, code-named Mouse, from the Eldorean Intelligence Agency. On my left is Mohinder, a Truthseeker missionary, son of the prophet Sehotra. He came to me last night with some disturbing news. Mohinder, would you please repeat what you told me?”

Mohinder told the assembled Magicians the prophecy that all the gold would soon be gone from the world. A somber silence fell in the room, until he informed them that Pran and his friends had the task of its restoration, eliciting murmurs of disbelief. When Jelal heard the place he was expected to go with Pran was Earth, his eyes widened, but to his credit, he didn’t object.

When the Truthseeker had finished, Pran’s father said, “Mohinder was not lying, as any of you with an active Lie Detector spell can verify.”

“Truthseekers *never* lie,” Mohinder pointed out.

“I wasn’t implying they did. After hearing this prophecy yesterday, Pran and I tried looking into the future with two different crystal balls, but neither of them would show any visions after Wednesday. My son believes the reason is because there won’t be any gold then, and I think he’s right. As you all know, for a crystal ball to work correctly, it must be resting on gold dust at the time a vision comes true, not just when a Magician looks into it.”

Master Alimar, the other magic teacher in White River Junction, cleared his throat. He had dark brown hair, a neatly trimmed beard, and was definitely on the rotund side, as the indigo Magician’s robe stretched over his ample belly could have made a small tent. Alimar’s robe, like Pran’s father’s, was fastened with a gray belt, the color of lore mastery

and teaching. He said, "Master Gilamond, perhaps something is going to happen to your crystal balls between now and then. How secure do you keep them? Maybe somebody will break or steal them."

Colonel Kaldor said, "Possible, but if Pran's theory is true, then even our Fortuneteller would have trouble predicting events beyond this week. Have you had any difficulty, Reshef?"

Everyone turned to look at the tall, middle-aged Magician whose indigo Magician's robe was girded with a yellow belt, the color of divination. Reshef cleared his throat and admitted, "Yesterday I apologized to customers and closed my shop early because I couldn't predict anything beyond the next few days. I thought perhaps I was becoming ill."

Doc Parador gazed at Reshef and then said, "Your aura looks healthy enough to me." Slim, clean-shaven, and handsome, Parador wore a robe fastened with a blue belt, the color of Healing magic. Despite being only twenty-eight, he was the town's primary Healer, having earned the distinguished title of Magical Doctor (MD) at the Royal Academy of Magic.

Colonel Kaldor asked, "Did *anyone* here have any success yesterday predicting events beyond next Wednesday?"

They all looked at each other, but nobody spoke up.

Pran's father said, "Just as I feared. To resolve any doubt, I suggest we test Alimar's idea that something will happen to my crystals to stop them from predicting the future. The crystal ball here in the battle room is completely protected from accidents, theft, quakes, hurricanes, or other disasters. Colonel Kaldor, may we give it a try now?"

"Certainly. Master Alimar, since you raised doubts about his conclusion, why don't *you* use the Tower crystal to try predicting something after next Wednesday?"

"Gladly," Alimar said. He walked over to a marble pedestal draped with a cloth, uncovering it to reveal a large crystal ball, over a foot in diameter. The top of the pedestal was bowl shaped, and lined with gold dust, so the crystal ball was resting on gold.

Alimar rested his pudgy hands on the ball and gazed into it. A minute later, he stepped back, a surprised look on his face. “Nothing appears! Nothing at all.”

Pran resisted the urge to say, “We told you so.”

Smiling faintly, Pran’s father said, “Thank you, Alimar. Let’s assume the Truthseeker prophecy is correct. I suspect that Marakna will be responsible for the gold’s disappearance, as they know our Army Magicians would be defenseless without gold.”

Alimar cleared his throat loudly and said, “It’s lunchtime. Before any further discussion, I move that we send down a request for lunch so it’ll be ready by the time he’s through speaking.”

Pran’s father explained to him and Mohinder, “The Wizard’s Beard Inn, across the street, is under contract to cook hot food for us during Council meetings. It’s much better than the Army food from the mess hall downstairs.”

Kaldor asked, “All in favor?” The chorus of “ayes” was unanimous, and Kaldor passed around a sheet of paper for each person to write down his lunch order. When everyone had done so, he asked Lieutenant Hakon to carry it to the communications desk. Pran knew that the officer at the battle room desk, Lieutenant Ryker, would roll up the paper, tie it with a string weighted by a lead ring, and drop it down the message tube to the base of the Tower, far below, where it would strike a bell on the other communications desk.

After the message was sent down, Kaldor announced gravely, “I find the Truthseeker prophecy and our own lack of success using the crystal ball to be consistent with the theory that Eldor’s gold is going to disappear, and share Master Gilamond’s opinion that Maraknese Sorcerers will be the cause of it. Mohinder, can you give us more details of this land where Pran, Mouse, and their two unknown companions are supposed to go, the world called Earth?”

Mohinder said, “The Angel of Truth told my father that Earth’s a very dangerous, immoral, and frightening world, so shockingly different from Rados that visiting it can drive an adult insane. A child’s mind, on

the other hand, is more adaptable and resilient, able to handle strange experiences that would drive an adult mad.”

Lieutenant Hakon greeted Mohinder’s remarks with a snort of derision. “Excuse me, but everybody knows Earth is just a myth, a fairy tale. Are we supposed to base our plans on children’s stories and nursery rhymes?”

“Perhaps Loremaster Lokor can help settle the issue of whether Earth is real,” Colonel Kaldor suggested.

Pran looked at Lokor, whose kindly, time-weathered face peered out from behind a flowing white beard. The Loremaster’s indigo Magician’s robe was fastened with the same color gray belt worn by magic teachers, but twice as wide to indicate the importance of his station as White River Junction’s Loremaster. The elderly Magician said, “Yes, Earth is indeed a real place. The legends and children’s stories about it are based on truth, and the description that the young Truthseeker gave is accurate.” His gentle blue eyes looked around the room for a reaction, and he added, “I see some of you look skeptical, but Earth isn’t just something I’ve read about in books. I, myself, have traveled there.”

Amid gasps of surprise and disbelief, Lokor held up one wrinkled hand for patience and said, “Let me explain. As a young boy, I was fascinated by stories about Earth, and read everything I could about it in my spare time. When I graduated from magic school, I became a Loremaster’s apprentice partly so I could have the opportunity to research stories of strange, distant, and mythical lands, including Earth.

“Imagine how excited I was when my master told me that for many generations, Loremasters have guarded the secret of how to get to Earth, passing the knowledge down to each successive Loremaster. I couldn’t wait to finish my apprenticeship, because my master, who was getting on in years, promised me that on the day he handed me my journeyman papers, he would also tell me how to travel to Earth.

“Using the secret portal he showed me, I visited Earth myself, as Loremasters are allowed to if we follow strict rules. I found that ‘mythical’ world to be as exciting and glamorous as I’d hoped, but even more

dangerous and disturbing than I'd feared. Although I'd planned to stay on Earth for an entire month, I had to return after one week because I couldn't take it any longer. Despite the shortness of my visit, I narrowly escaped with my sanity.

"Loremasters are not allowed to share the secret of how to travel to Earth with anyone other than the town's Chief Magician, except in extreme emergency. I suppose the current situation would qualify, but I must first seek approval from Eldorado. You might need permission from the King himself to bring anything back from Earth to our world, though. For centuries, travel to Earth has been forbidden to all but Loremasters, and even we Loremasters are never allowed to bring anything *back* from Earth."

"Why not?" asked Pran.

"Earth hides a great many evils," the old Loremaster said, shaking his head, "some of them terribly powerful. You may have heard tales speculating that not all of the Wizards died off, but some escaped to Earth. That may or may not be true, but my visit to Earth convinced me that if Wizards did move there, they did not take their knowledge of magic with them. The power of today's Earthlings does not come from magic as we know it, but from their own arcane arts, which they call *tek-no-low-gee*, a force even more dangerous than black magic. As a result, many Earthlings have become as powerful and destructive as the Wizards of old.

"The benefits of *tek-no-low-gee* are alluring. It allows each Earth man to do the work of a hundred through machines that multiply his strength, speed, and mental abilities, and lets every Earth woman live like a queen by commanding legions of machines to do housework for her. With mechanical servants freeing them from what we consider women's work, many Earth wives choose to learn a skilled trade, join the workforce, and work alongside men.

"However, *tek-no-low-gee* has its sinister side as well. It lets Earth's scientists wield forces more powerful and dreadful than any magic known today. Scientists on Earth have created fearsome weapons every bit as devastating as the spells wielded in the War of the Wizards, weapons

that make every Earthling more powerful than the mightiest Magician on Rados! It doesn't take a strong warrior to wield them, either—even a child the size of Mouse, equipped with an Earth weapon, could defeat the mightiest swordsman on Rados."

Jelal's eyes widened. "If that's true, shouldn't we bring Earth weapons back to Eldor? With weapons that powerful, we could win the war easily, even without gold!"

Lokor shook his head. "That is forbidden, and I hope it remains so. Remember our history—the spells Wizards used in their final war killed off half the human and animal life on Rados, including the Wizards who cast them. Even if the Magician General desires it and the King allows it, I would be very wary of introducing Earth's horrible weapons to Rados, lest we suffer the same fate as the Wizards. You must bring nothing back from Earth except gold."

A soldier knocked on the door of the conference room to announce that the lunch order from the Wizard's Beard had been delivered to the base of the Tower.

Alimar offered, "I'll bring the dumbwaiter up with a spell so we can start eating sooner. No need to conserve gold now, if it'll all be gone in a few days!"

Jelal nudged Pran. Nodding his head in the direction of the plump magic teacher, he whispered, "Alimar's always in a hurry to eat. It takes a lot of food to fill that huge stomach of his."

Pran stifled a laugh.



When they resumed the meeting after lunch, Pran's father said, "Loremaster Lokor, I know this is asking a lot, but would you be willing to go to Earth again to help my son and Mouse restore Eldor's gold? You're the only one here with any experience on that world."

Lokor shook his head. "I'm much too old for such adventures—I doubt my heart could take it. And if anything happened to me on Earth, I'm too old to be Healed magically."

Jelal protested, "Wait a minute! Why are you asking *him* if he's willing to go, when nobody asked *me*? Everyone just assumed I'd go."

Colonel Kaldor pointed out, "As a spy, it's your job to take risks for Eldor."

Jelal frowned, anger and hurt pride showing in his eyes. Pran feared that unless someone said something quickly to mollify his friend's pride, he might refuse to go on the quest.

Master Alimar, who was currently acting as the little spy's magic teacher, said diplomatically, "What he means, Mouse, is that we're all aware of your loyalty to Eldor, bravery, and unequalled talent. Of course someone as brave and loyal as you would go, so it would've been an insult to your courage to ask if you were willing."

Jelal's frown turned to a smile of amusement, as if aware he was being humored but enjoying the flattery anyway. "I understand how you can all take my unparalleled courage for granted, but you should have asked first." He shrugged. "I'll go, but naturally I'll expect hazardous duty pay."

Pran breathed a sigh of relief.

"Of course," the Chief Magician agreed. "I'll send coded letters to both the Royal Magician and the Magician General, warning them about the prophecy. I'll tell them about the quest to restore Eldor's gold, ask permission to send you to Earth and bring back gold, and request any assistance the Crown can provide. In my letter, I'll suggest that the members of the quest be generously rewarded on their return, including hazardous duty pay for Mouse. Don't expect to be paid in gold, since we'll need every coin you bring back for Eldor's defense, so start thinking of what else you might desire for a reward instead.

"Now, will anyone else volunteer to go to Earth with Pran and Mouse? Their two other companions referred to in the prophecy are doubtless also kids, and I don't want four boys journeying to a strange world without adult supervision."

Jelal protested, "Without adult supervision? What about *me*; don't I count?"

"Oh, pipe down, Mouse," Pran's father said. "You always tell those who know your secret to think of you as a child, so don't complain when we do."

Jelal grinned sheepishly and closed his mouth.

Kaldor asked, "How about you, Doc Parador? If anything happens to Mouse, Pran, or his friends, they could use a trained Healer with them."

"Sorry," Parador said, "but you heard Mohinder and Lokor—Earth is so different than Rados that it's too much of a shock for an adult mind to take. In fact, I hope Mouse's mind is as supple and flexible as his childlike body, because he's older than any of us."

The Truthseeker's eyes flitted thoughtfully between Parador and Jelal, then he said, "I don't believe either Doc Parador or Loremaster Lokor matches the prophecy's description of one who is to accompany Pran to Earth. What do you think, Pran? My father said you would know, of a certainty, if somebody is destined to join you on your quest."

"I'm sure they're both good Magicians, but I don't think they fit the prophecy."

Colonel Kaldor said, "The reason I'm looking for a volunteer is not to *replace* the companions from the prophecy, but to *supplement* them, so it's not crucial that the person fits the prophecy. If our Loremaster and Doctor consider themselves too old to go to Earth without risking their sanity, then perhaps one of my young Army Magicians will volunteer," he said, looking expectantly at the five Captains and Lieutenant Hakon. "If the mission succeeds, you can expect medals, glory, and rapid promotion."

Jelal whispered to Pran, "I sure hope Hakon doesn't volunteer."

Pran nodded his agreement.

When none of his officers spoke up, Kaldor said sternly, "Men, let me remind you how things work in the Army. One of you *will* volunteer for this mission. Either you speak up on your own, or I *tell* you which of you is volunteering!"

Lieutenant Hakon said, "I volunteer."

Jelal groaned softly and rolled his eyes.

"Outstanding," said Colonel Kaldor. "Now, Pran and Mohinder, before we dismiss you so the Magicians' Council can make plans for the defense of the city, do you have any questions for us?"

Mohinder asked, "How are they going to get to Earth? I'm afraid the prophecy didn't say."

Lokor said, "The secret of traveling between the two worlds has long been kept hidden from all but Loremasters and Chief Magicians. All I can say is they'll travel through a portal, like I did."

"How far away is the nearest portal?" asked Pran.

"Not far," Lokor said evasively. "Please understand that even the *existence* of the portals to Earth is secret. Their location is revealed on a need-to-know basis, and you don't need to know yet. You will also need a special amulet to travel through the portal, but we only have one in White River Junction, so I will request four more from Eldorado."

Jelal asked, "When should we start out on this quest, and how long do we have to complete the mission?"

Colonel Kaldor said, "You'd better leave as soon as the gold disappears, and come back quickly. We won't be able to hold out long against the Maraknese armies without gold."

Pran asked, "Mohinder, did you or your father find out how we're supposed to get our hands on large quantities of gold once we get to Earth?"

"No, again the prophecy didn't say," the Truthseeker answered.

Lieutenant Hakon snorted. "Your prophecy sure didn't say *much*, did it?"

Colonel Kaldor barked, "Lieutenant, show some respect to our visitor!"

"Yes, sir."

Loremaster Lokor said, "Pran, even though Earthlings don't use gold for magic, they still consider it valuable for its beauty and rarity, so they won't just give it away. You may be able to trade for small amounts, but to obtain enough gold to help us, you'll have to steal it. You might have to rob banks or even steal gold from their royal coffers. It sounds dangerous, but remember, you'll be the only magic users in that entire world. However, with gold rarer on Earth than in Eldor, I doubt you'll find enough there to restore *all* of our gold."

Pran's father said, "If they can't bring enough gold back to Eldor to replace what we lose, somebody will have to create the rest of it. There's only one way to do that—sorcery, turning lead into gold."

Colonel Kaldor pointed out, "Sorcery is now illegal in Eldor."

"That's right," Pran's father said, "but if that law were repealed, it would make it possible to replace some of the missing gold using sorcery. My son thinks there are also other reasons for legalizing sorcery immediately. Would you repeat them to the Council, Pran?"

Pran summarized his arguments for legalizing sorcery, explaining that it was better to keep Eldorean Sorcerers in Eldor, where they could help defend against the Maraknese, than have them defect to Marakna, where they could be drafted into the enemy's army. When he finished, there were murmurs of agreement from around the table. Kaldor said, "I think I speak for all of us when I say Pran's reasoning is logical, and the law criminalizing sorcery should be repealed. I will talk to the Magician General and ask him to recommend it to the King."

"Thank you, sir," Pran said, trying to hide the overwhelming pride that he felt. He could hardly believe the city's Chief Magician had accepted an idea from him, a mere magic student, and would present it to the King. He wished he could tell Kimbar and Garwin!

Colonel Kaldor said, "If there are no more questions, next we need to discuss how to defend the city without gold—information that should be heard *only* by soldiers and members of the Magicians' Council. Mohinder and Pran, thank you for the invaluable help you've given us today, but I'm afraid I have to ask you to leave the Tower now. After all members of the quest have been identified, we'll meet with them to discuss further preparations, such as what supplies to bring to Earth and what to expect in that strange world. We won't need the entire Magicians' Council to meet next time, just the five questers, Mohinder, Loremaster Lokor, Master Gilamond, and me. Let's set a time and place for the meeting now, and if you haven't found your other companions by then, you can start preparations without them."

Pran's father suggested, "How about Monday afternoon in my magic school at three-thirty, right after classes end for the day? Pran, Mouse, and I will already be there."

Jelal said, "You'd better make it at least a half hour after school lets out. You don't want to meet while other students are around to see us,

because children have loose tongues.” He laughed and added, “Myself excepted, of course.”

“Okay,” Kaldor agreed, “we’ll meet Monday at four o’clock at Gilamond’s school. If you find your other two companions from the prophecy, bring them too, but only reveal what the Truthseeker told you, not what was discussed at today’s meeting.” Turning to address the entire Magicians’ Council, he said, “The Council will recess now, to give Pran and Mohinder a chance to leave before we start discussing tactics for the city’s defense.”

Everyone stood up from the table, and the Magicians gathered in small groups to talk. Pran’s father told him, “Don’t be disappointed that you were asked to leave, son.”

“I’m not. But I wish I could tell Kimbar about my quest to another world.”

“I know it’s hard keeping things from your best friend, but you’ll have to. Unless he turns out to be one your other two companions, which I seriously doubt! Go straight home, and tell your mother not to cook for me tonight, as we’ll be placing orders for supper here. We’ll probably meet late into the evening, too, so tell her I may spend the night here and return tomorrow.”

“Can I take the carriage, father?”

“No, I’ll drive it back in the morning myself. You still have time to walk home.”

Pran felt it unfair that even though he was about to embark on a dangerous mission to help save Eldor, his father still didn’t trust him to drive the family carriage! He said, “I know you can’t Teleport anyone out of the Tower, but can you at least spell me down to the base of it?”

To Pran’s surprise, his father offered, “I’ll Teleport you and Mohinder *both* down.”

The Truthseeker smiled. “Why, thanks, Master Gilamond, that’s most generous of you.”

Pran’s father cleared his throat awkwardly. “Well, if the gold’s going to vanish anyway, I might as well use it up.”

As Mohinder’s smile faded, Pran rolled his eyes and asked, “What about you, Mouse? Are you coming with us?”

Jelal shrugged. “Sorry, pal, but technically, I’m a member of the Magicians’ Council. I don’t often attend meetings, because it might blow my cover to be seen entering the Tower, but since I’m already here, it’s best that I stay and participate.”

Pran’s father said, “Son, it’s time to go.”

Pran stepped back and held Mohinder’s hand so they could both be Teleported with one spell. As his father gestured and pointed to them, the battle room faded from view.



13: FLAT ROCK BRIDGE

Almost as soon as Pran's father cast the Teleportation spell on them, they found themselves back in the base of the Tower. Mohinder swayed on his feet, disoriented, and Pran tightened his grip so the Truthseeker wouldn't fall. After a moment, Mohinder released his hand and said, "Thanks, I'm okay now, but that sure was different; a bit unnerving. Still, much easier than walking down hundreds of steps, so be sure to thank your father for me again later."

Pran said, "Sorry he was rude when you thanked him upstairs. He's not good at accepting compliments."

Mohinder waved off Pran's apology. "He's not the first man I've met who gets embarrassed by kind words and says things he later wishes he hadn't."

"Exactly," Pran said, glad the Truthseeker understood.

As they emerged from the doorway, blinking in the late afternoon sunlight, Mohinder said, "You're heading home, but I have a family to visit in town. We'll talk more about your quest when we meet Monday after school. Until then, may the Spirit of Truth be with you." He tipped his hat, then headed to The Wizard's Beard Inn to get his horse.

By the time Pran reached the Flat Rock Bridge at the western edge of town, he found the bridge and road beyond deserted. With only an hour until sunset, farmers had long since returned home from taking their produce to market.

Once he was on the wooden truss bridge, the sound of rushing water below drew Pran like a magnet, and he paused to look over the railing. In springtime, when the mountain snows began to melt, water surged through the full width of the rocky riverbed. It was the first day of autumn, however, and the White River had returned to its normal levels. Some thirty feet below the bridge, a rush of shallow water cut through the center of vast, whitish-gray slabs of rock that gave the Flat Rock Bridge its name. Relaxed by the sight and sound of rushing water, Pran continued on.

Just as he passed the bridge's midpoint, two figures emerged from a hiding place by the far bank of the river and climbed onto the bridge ahead of him, the sun at their backs. Pran froze, fearing that without gold, he wouldn't be able to cast spells strong enough to defend against two determined bandits. As the two figures approached, he shaded his eyes from the sun and saw that they weren't bandits, just his magic school classmates, recognizing Samir's flaming red hair and Sekar's coldly handsome face topped with long, sandalwood hair.

Pran's momentary relief turned to dismay when he realized they'd been lying in wait for him, still believing he'd spied on them at the circle of sorcery. With all the excitement about the prophecy in the last couple days, he'd forgotten to watch out for his classmates! Pran noted they'd come prepared for either sorcery or white magic: each boy wore both a bone necklace and a silver chain around his neck, and a gold ring on one finger of each hand. He couldn't defend himself against all that with only his silver chain, partly used as it was.

Trying to sound casual, Pran said, "Hey, fellers, what brings you here today?" but his voice cracked, and he sounded as apprehensive as he felt.

Face twisted in fury, Samir yelled, "You little rat—you spied on us for your father!"

"No, I didn't," Pran protested.

"Oh yeah?" Sekar asked. "Then how did he know we'd been doing sorcery?"

Unable to answer without revealing who had *really* spied for his father, Pran remained silent. Better to take a beating, he reckoned, than to disclose his friend Jelal's identity as an EIA undercover agent.

The two boys stopped in front of him, blocking his path. Sekar observed, "The one time you show up at my circle of sorcery, your father learns all about it, but you claim you weren't spying! What do you think we are—stupid?"

"No, I don't think you're—"

Samir gave Pran a shove. "After my parents heard I'll be expelled if I get caught again, I got the worst whipping of my life."

"I'm sorry about that. I really am," Pran said, still hoping to talk his way out of it.

Sekar said icily, "Thanks to your father, and your treachery, I'm *already* expelled, but that's not even the worst of it. At the circle of sorcery, I stood up to defend you, saying you could stay. You made me look foolish in front of the other kids." His eyes were like daggers. "*Nobody* makes me look foolish. *Nobody*."

Pran realized they wouldn't let him pass without a fight, and the odds were against him. His father had taught him there was no shame in running away from an unfair conflict, so Pran backed away, preparing to turn and run back into town, but bumped into something big behind him.

Sekar yelled, "*Hold* him, Pathik! Don't let him get away."

"Got 'im," the big, bulky seventeen-year-old said, grabbing Pran's arms in an iron grip, forcing him to face the other two boys with his arms pinned helplessly to his sides. Restrained, there was no chance for Pran to cast spells, since he couldn't move his hands even to touch his silver. He looked up at the far side of the bridge, where a guardhouse defended the approach to White River Junction. The soldiers normally faced away from town, but there were windows through which they could see him, if only he could get their attention.

Sekar grinned malevolently. "Oh, don't expect any help from the bridge guards. They'll be asleep for another hour, thanks to Samir. We were going to use sorcery against *you*, too, but I think it's more satisfying to do it this way," he said, drawing back a fist.

Pran barely managed to tense his abdominal muscles before Sekar's first punch hit him in the stomach. Samir joined in the attack, and a hail of

blows landed on Pran's upper body. He tried with all his strength to twist out of Pathik's grip, or at least out of the way of some of the punches, but the big son of a butcher held him like a vise.

A few blows landed on Pran's head, bloodying his nose and lip and bringing stars to his eyes. Perhaps his head hurt their fists, because the boys returned to punching him in the torso. Knowing there was no way to avoid the blows with his hands pinned, Pran shut his eyes, praying for it to be over soon. Painful as the beating was, it would have been far worse if Pathik were throwing the punches rather than Sekar and Samir, who weren't as strong and whose fists weren't nearly as heavy.

After a minute, the hail of blows lessened, and Pran realized that one of his attackers had stopped. He opened his eyes as Samir said, "Sekar, that's enough. I think he's learned his lesson."

"Have you, Pran?" the tall boy asked, breathing hard.

Fearing Sekar was only pausing for breath before starting again, Pran gasped through swollen, bleeding lips, "Yes."

"Good," Sekar replied, with one last punch in the stomach for emphasis, "because if you snitch on us again, next time we won't be so *easy* on you. Pathik, throw this rat off the bridge!"

Still dazed from the blows, before Pran realized what was happening or had a chance to protest, Pathik held his upper body bent over the guardrail of the bridge. "Ya'd better hope that Gravity Shield spell ya cast yesterday's strong enough!" Pathik said, laughing as he pushed Pran over the railing.

Instinctively, Pran reached out to try to grab the edge of the bridge as he went over the side, but missed. He then reached for his silver chain, but had no time to attempt a spell to cushion the fall, as the stone slabs of the riverbed were approaching far too fast.



Samir laughed as he watched Pathik throw Pran over the railing of the bridge. While lying in wait for Pran, they'd discussed the Gravity Shield

spells cast yesterday in school, and Sekar had suggested it would give Pran a good, harmless scare if they threw him off the bridge.

Samir's laughter died when he heard Pran's body hit the rocks with a loud thud and a sickening crack. The color drained from his face as he realized what must have happened.

Pathik, who was peering down over the railing, said, "Uh, ya'd better come look at this. I don't think Pran *had* a Gravity Shield spell."

When Samir looked down, his eyes widened with shock, and he gasped. Thirty feet below, on the rocks, Pran's body lay limp and broken, a pool of dark blood forming by his head. He stammered, "We—we've killed him!"

Pathik asked dully, "Well, ain't that what he deserved, for spyin' on us?"

Samir whirled to face him, tears coming unbidden to his eyes. He yelled, "Shut up, you big oaf! *You're* the one who killed him! *You* threw him over the edge." He felt like punching Pathik. He and Pran had grown up together, and they'd been friends most of that time, until the magic teacher's son had haughtily refused to join in experiments with sorcery. Sure, Pran's snitching was inexcusable, but Samir didn't *hate* him. He'd come here today intending only to teach Pran a lesson—beat him up and scare him a little—not kill him!

"Well, he told me to do it," Pathik said, cocking his thumb at Sekar, who stood looking over the railing impassively, seeming either unsurprised or unbothered by what had happened.

"Then he's responsible, too," Samir said. "You *both* murdered him!"

"We *all* did," Sekar corrected, turning away from the railing to face him.

"*I* had nothing to do with his death," Samir protested. "All I did was punch him."

Sekar took two steps toward him. "What are you going to do," he asked slowly, his voice tinged with menace, "rat on us like Pran?" Pointing down to the riverbed, he said ominously, "You've *seen* what happens to snitches."

Samir backed away slowly, suddenly feeling very afraid of Sekar. "No, you know I'd never do anything like that, Sekar," he said, spreading his hands in a placatory gesture.

Pathik peered over the railing again. "Maybe he's still alive."

"Let's try Healing him," Samir said, hopefully. "We have to at least try." But before he could make a move to help Pran, they heard yelling from the White River Junction side of the bridge. A big, swarthy man in carpenter's overalls was advancing on them, waving a hammer menacingly, and bellowing. Most of his words were in a foreign language, but he shouted two words in Eldorean certain to attract attention from anyone in earshot: "Murderers! Assassins!"

"Come on," Sekar shouted, "let's get the hell out of here before we get caught!"

Despite Samir's growing misgivings about Sekar, he couldn't argue with that. After one last, sad look down at Pran's limp, bloody, broken body, he joined Sekar and Pathik in running off the bridge, away from town. Fortunately, the men in the guardhouse were still under his Sleep spell, which unbeknownst to Sekar, he'd cast using white magic, not sorcery.

Once they passed the guardhouse, Samir hazarded a look back at the bridge. He saw the burly carpenter standing with one hand on the railing, his broad shoulders slumped, staring down at Pran's body on the rocks below.



14: ANGEL OF MERCY

Pran opened his eyes and saw, leaning over him, a girl of exotic beauty unlike any he had ever seen before. Her skin was the rich, reddish-brown color of chestnuts on an autumn morning. She had large, black eyes that sparkled like obsidian in a perfectly symmetrical face. The girl was lovely enough to be a wood nymph, except for the fact that she happened to be clothed. She wore a white linen dress, cinched about the waist with a light blue belt. Considering the last thing he remembered was falling off a bridge, he reckoned he must have died, and she was an angel. He decided to come right out and ask her, “Am I dead?”

Flashing a pearly smile that made his heart flutter (proof enough that he was still alive), she said, “No, but had my brother not brought me to you right away, you would not have survived that fall.” She spoke with a foreign accent that made her voice sound even more melodious. Now that he knew she was a girl, not an angel, Pran guessed she was about seventeen. She extended a soft, brown hand above his face and asked, “How many fingers do you see?”

“Three,” Pran replied. Her skin was slightly darker than his classmate Fipin’s, her fingers long and delicate, and her hand as smooth as maple syrup. He had a powerful urge to reach up and touch that hand, but his body didn’t seem to be obeying his wishes right now.

"Right." She lit a kerosene lamp, held it above his face, and then after a moment gave a sigh of relief. "I worried because your pupils looked dilated," she explained, "but both your eyes have the same reaction to the lamplight, so it does not look like you have brain damage."

Ah, Pran thought, she must be a nurse's apprentice, since she looked too young to be a nurse. His injuries couldn't be too bad if a mere nurse's apprentice, without benefit of magic, had been able to treat his wounds so well that he didn't feel any pain. No pain at all... Suddenly frightened, he remembered hearing that if someone broke his back, he'd feel no pain, but would be paralyzed. He tried frantically to move his arms, and couldn't. Panicked, he demanded, "Why can't I move?"

"Do not be alarmed," she said. "I cast a spell to immobilize you until I finish the Healing. I did not want you moving around and injuring yourself further before then."

"You're Healing me with *magic*?" Pran asked, amazed.

"What did you expect," she replied with a silvery laugh, "bandages and poultices?"

He wondered how *she* could have cast Healing spells. Everyone knew that girls had no magic ability. Yet there could be no doubt about her gender, as her white dress stretched over some very lovely curves. Pran would have been less surprised to see an angel, after falling so far onto rocks, but instead, he'd found something even more marvelous and wonderful: a beautiful girl who could work magic!

She held his head up to tip a glass of cool water to his lips, and he drank gratefully. After letting him drink his fill, she said, "My name is Vitina. What is yours?"

"I'm Pran." He gazed back into her obsidian eyes until he felt himself blushing. Embarrassed, he averted his eyes, but then found himself staring at the curves of her body, and blushed even deeper. He tried to look elsewhere, but lying on his back, immobilized, the only other thing he could see from his position was a whitewashed ceiling above him. He wondered how long he'd been unconscious. "What time is it, and where are we?"

“It is Sunday morning, the day after your fall, Pran. You are in my room, in my house, on Immigrants Row. Yesterday, my father and my brother, Ravi, were repairing the roof of a house when they looked down and saw you get pushed off the bridge. Lucky for you, in my father’s years as a carpenter he has treated injuries similar to yours when workmen fall from a roof or ladder. He bandaged your wounds to stop the bleeding while my brother went for help. When he could not find Doc Parador, he brought me to you, since I also have skill and training in the Healing magic.

“You were hurt very badly—a concussion; broken leg, arm, wrist, and clavicle; multiple cuts and abrasions; cracked ribs; and internal injuries. I Healed your most serious injuries where you lay last night, including a bleeding head wound, ruptured spleen, and torn kidney. Then my father and I put your arm and leg in splints, laid you in the back of a lumber wagon, and drove you to our house.

“I cast a Pain-Relief spell so that if you awoke, you would be free of pain, and a spell to immobilize you so you would not move around and injure yourself further. However, I do not know how to bring someone out of a coma, so I had to hope you would come out of it yourself, Pran.”

Just hearing Vitina say his name somehow gave Pran a warm feeling inside. He said, “Thank you; I owe you and your family my life! I’m a magic student myself, and my father is a Magician, but everyone says girls can’t do magic. How did you manage to learn?”

Vitina smiled enigmatically and said, “We can talk more later, Pran. First, let me finish Healing you. I only Healed the life-threatening wounds, leaving the others until morning so I could rest. You still have broken bones, cuts, bruises, and abrasions.”

As she rummaged through drawers for gold to Heal him, Vitina added, “Do not be embarrassed, Pran, but in order to find your wounds and bandage them, my father had to remove your shirt and slit your pant legs all the way up to your hips. That is standard first aid procedure. It will also help me now, because I find it easier to Heal people magically without clothing in the way.” She pulled down the blankets that covered him and

observed, "Besides your wounds, you have bruises on your upper body and face. Were you in a fight before you were thrown off the bridge, Pran?"

"Yes," Pran said, "three boys attacked me. One of them held my arms so I couldn't fight back."

"You poor boy," Vitina said, looking at him with sympathy in her eyes. She began the Healing by removing the splint on his broken leg and then gently placing one soft, warm, brown hand on his thigh while casting a spell to mend the break, telling him what she was doing at each step of the way so he would not be surprised. After a few minutes, she said the bone had knit itself together sufficiently, and turned her attention to a gash in his calf. She unwrapped the bandage, then used a spell to sterilize and seal the wound. When she'd finished with that leg, she sponged it clean from ankle to thigh, using warm water from a large pot resting on the nightstand, then wiped him dry with a soft towel.

The touch of Vitina's hands and her Healing spells combined to unleash a flood of emotions in Pran. His magic training told him that the feelings of comfort, peace, contentment, relaxation, joy, and what felt like love for his Healer were easily explained away as side effects of the powerful Healing spells Vitina was using. But even though a small voice in the back of his mind told him this was the logical explanation for all his feelings, he refused to believe there wasn't something *more* happening between him and Vitina. How could her healing hands caress him so gently and tenderly unless she loved him? Regardless of how she felt, Pran knew he was in love with her, and that none of his father's cold, tedious explanations of "magical side effects" would convince him that this was not genuine love.

Vitina paused with her hand on his bare chest, where she was Healing his broken ribs. "Your heart," she said with alarm, "is beating very fast! Are you scared?"

"No," Pran said, "not at all."

Vitina repeated her tender ministrations on Pran's remaining injuries, and since wounds covered nearly his entire body, it was a time-consuming procedure. In the midst of it, the Pain-Relief spell she'd cast on him earlier

wore off. However, Pran's pain lessened with each injury she Healed, and since the thrill of her touch on his skin far outweighed any pain he felt from his remaining wounds, he did not interrupt her to ask for another Pain-Relief spell.

After what seemed like hours, pain mingling with pleasure as Vitina's soft, warm hands literally worked their magic on his body, she finally announced that she was finished and said, "You can sit up now, Pran. I have removed the spell that immobilized you."

The pleasant memory of Vitina's touch thrilled Pran to the core, and he lay still for a minute, basking in the remembrance of those soft, warm, delicate, brown hands. Her beautiful face and gentle touch had stirred feelings inside him that he'd never had for anyone before.

A worried tone entered Vitina's voice. "You *are* able to move, are you not?"

To allay her fears, Pran sat up quickly. Too quickly, it turned out, as his head felt dizzy, and spots danced before his eyes. Blinking rapidly, he fell back on one elbow, bringing his other hand up to his eyes to try to wipe away the spots.

"Do not move too fast just yet," Vitina said. "Your body has been to the edge of death, and you have lost a lot of blood. You must be hungry, and thirsty."

"Yes, I haven't eaten since lunch yesterday."

"I will bring you tea to help you get your strength back. My brother left you some clothes that he has outgrown at the foot of the bed, so you can dress yourself." She stepped lightly through the doorway and disappeared from view.

Pran realized that he was not only shirtless, but his pants were in shreds, yet felt no embarrassment. After all, why should he feel embarrassed that she'd seen him half-naked, if he'd been thrilled while she'd put her warm hands all over his body? Also, his body was not one to be embarrassed about, he thought as he looked in the mirror observing his taut, well-toned muscles under smooth, tight skin, including washboard abs and a well-defined chest.

He found her brother's shirt and pants at the end of the bed, a soft cotton shirt and sturdy hemp trousers, pulled off the remains of his pants, and put them on, thinking, *if these were clothes her brother had outgrown, how big was he now?* He turned up the sleeves of the shirt, but it was far too big in the shoulders, chest, and neck. He was able to turn up the pant legs so they wouldn't drag on the ground, but the shirt looked very baggy on him. Somehow, he felt more embarrassed that Vitina would see him dressed in these oversized clothes than that she had seen him half-naked, but there was nothing he could do about it. He had no gold for a spell to shrink the clothes, and didn't dare ask Vitina to cast one for him, after all the gold she'd spent Healing him!

While she was gone, Pran looked around at his surroundings. The room was slightly smaller than his own bedroom, but aside from a few feminine touches, appeared quite similar. He had been lying in a simple but comfortable bed, set with white cotton sheets, wool blankets, a soft, down pillow, and a pink quilt. To his left, by the head of the bed, was a nightstand on which the pot of warm water still rested on a towel. A shelf below held both a lamp and a candle. To his right, at the foot of the bed, another blanket of undyed wool lay neatly folded, and just beyond that lay a cedar chest for storing winter blankets. Past the foot of the bed, a small desk and chair were well-placed to take advantage of natural light from a gable window hung with yellow drapes. Books of assorted sizes filled a small bookcase in the far right corner of the room, near the desk. Across from him, Pran saw a sturdy wooden chair topped by an embroidered cushion, and next to that, a vase of wildflowers on a lace doily adorned an oak dresser. A padded rocking chair in the far left corner of the room, near the door, had a quilt draped across one arm and a pillow lying on the seat, hinting that Vitina had slept there last night watching over him.

She returned in a few minutes carrying a tin tray with a steaming pot of tea, cup, saucer, sugar bowl, and a large plateful of toast spread with butter and marmalade. While he'd been immobilized, Pran hadn't seen much more of Vitina than her face, so as she laid the tray on the nightstand

beside him, poured him a cup of tea, and stirred in some sugar, he used the time to take his first good look at the rest of her.

She probably was about seventeen, a year older than him, judging from her lovely curves and long legs. She let her long, black hair flow freely, the lustrous tresses reaching nearly to her shapely *derrière*. Her white linen dress, cinched about her slender waist with a pale blue belt, ended just above her knees, revealing smooth, brown calves and bare feet that were delicate and lovely. Pran had never seen anyone as beautiful as Vitina, not even the nymph Sekar had conjured at the circle of sorcery.

Vitina handed the cup of tea to Pran with a smile and sat down on the chair facing him, crossing her legs demurely at the ankles. As she sat, her dress rose slightly up on her legs, giving Pran a glimpse of firm, brown thighs. He thanked her for the tea and sipped gratefully. It was some kind of herbal tea, sweet, aromatic, and mild, with a pleasant flavor similar to licorice. He asked, "Does this tea have any special healing properties?"

"Do you *still* think I am an herbal healer?" Vitina laughed. "It is anise tea. My mother says it is good for the digestion, but I just like the taste."

"Yes, it *is* good; thanks for bringing it," Pran said self-consciously. He wanted to say something interesting and intelligent to impress her, but was at a loss for words. He sipped the tea slowly, using it as an excuse to remain silent. Finally, he asked, "Where are you from? I've never met anyone who looks like you before. I mean that in a good way; I think you're beautiful," he said, surprising himself with his own boldness.

"Thank you," she said, smiling shyly at the compliment. "My family comes from Pendor, an island south of Marakna. I was not born there, though. My brother and I were born in—" her smile faded "—another country. How we came to Eldor is a long story, and I would rather not tell it now."

Sensing that it was painful for her to talk about, Pran did not press her for details.

Vitina's warm smile returned. "I cast the Pain-Relief spell on you last night," she said, "and I was afraid it would wear off before I finished Healing you today. I am glad it lasted through the whole Healing, Pran."

“Actually, it didn’t,” Pran said sheepishly, “but I didn’t want to interrupt what you were doing to ask for another.”

Vitina raised her eyebrows. “You must have a high tolerance for pain.”

Pran shrugged. “Naw; with each body part you Healed, the pain lessened, so it wasn’t too bad.” *True, but not the whole truth.* He didn’t want to start a relationship with Vitina by deceiving her, so he looked into her eyes and confessed with a nervous smile, “Actually, I hardly noticed the pain, because I was enjoying your touch so much.”

Vitina rose to her feet, her dark eyes flashing with anger. “What kind of girl do you think I am? Do you think I was touching you for pleasure?”

“No, you don’t understand—”

“I understand well enough. I saved your life, and you pay me back by acting like I am some sort of cheap bar girl!” Vitina stormed out of the room in tears, slamming the door.

Pran sat still on the bed for several long minutes, frozen in shock by her reaction. Now his body was healed, but his heart was wounded, and he didn’t know what to do. He cursed himself for having been bold enough to say what he was feeling without thinking about how his words would sound when they came out.

He finished his breakfast alone, in silence, the bitter thoughts in his mind numbing his tongue to the sweet taste of the marmalade. He was hungry, though, not having eaten since lunch yesterday, so he wolfed down four pieces of toast gratefully. After he had finished eating and drank a second cup of tea, Pran felt his strength returning, and he was able to sit up without effort.

Shortly thereafter, he heard heavy footsteps on the stairs. His bowels filled with dread at the prospect of meeting Vitina’s father after the conversation that had just taken place. The bedroom door opened, but instead of the father, in strode a tall, muscular young man, about eighteen years old, wearing the blue hemp overalls of a carpenter. The young man, who Pran guessed must be Vitina’s older brother Ravi, had black eyes like his sister and a face that was darkly handsome except for a scar on his cheek. What Pran noticed most about him, however, was not his face

but his broad shoulders, bulging biceps, and hands that were tightly clenched into massive fists.

Ravi said angrily, in heavily accented Eldorean, “My little sister says that after we saved your life and she Healed you, you insulted her. She says you spoke to like a street corner wench. Is that true? *Answer me!*”

Pran was afraid his answer might determine not only whether he’d ever have a relationship with Vitina, but also whether he’d be beaten up for the second time in two days, with nobody to Heal him this time. “No, I assure you, she misunderstood me. I’m sorry I didn’t express myself well, didn’t choose my words well. I respect your sister, and owe her my life. I was only trying to be truthful to Vitina about my, er, feelings for her. I don’t mean physical attraction,” he hastened to explain, “I mean emotional feelings.” Seeing the young man’s large hands still balled into fists, he feared he had only dug his grave deeper, and blurted out, “*Please* don’t beat me up like they did yesterday!”

Ravi looked into Pran’s eyes for a minute, then his harsh look softened into a smile, and he chuckled. “Okay, little man, I believe you and accept your apology. Doc Parador says patients often think they have feelings for the Magical Doctor who saves their life, and I know my sister is attractive. But Vitina is used to casting *small* Healing spells that do not cause infatuation side effects, not treating seriously injured people like you. Also, she usually Heals women, so perhaps she forgot how Healing spells can affect teenage boys.” He was silent for a moment, then said, “My name is Ravi. How old are you, Pran?”

“I’m sixteen.”

“Ah, you are a year younger than Vitina. That is good.”

“Why?” Pran asked, surprised.

“It is usually *older* boys who want to take advantage of pretty girls like my sister. I think maybe I can trust you around her.” He walked over to the bed, clasped Pran’s hand in a vise-like grip that made him wince, and bent down to say, “After all, you would have to be a total ass to mistreat the person who just saved your life, no? Just be careful what you say to my little sister, as I do not look kindly on boys who hurt her feelings.”

"I will," Pran promised.

Ravi finally released his iron grip, and Pran retrieved his hand gratefully. He was glad this burly young man wasn't truly angry with him, as he didn't seem the sort of person one would want as one's enemy. "Is Vitina very angry with me?" he asked anxiously.

Ravi shrugged. "At the moment, yes. But girls her age change their minds like the weather, so do not worry." He smiled and sat down on the sturdy wooden chair across from Pran. "Tell me about yourself and your family."

"I have an older brother who's a Lieutenant in the Eldorean Army, an Army Magician. My father is Gilamond, the magic teacher."

"Your father and brother are Magicians?" Ravi sounded pleasantly surprised. "You do not have magic talent *yourself*, do you?"

"As a matter of fact, yes. I'm a Conjuror in my father's magic school."

Ravi looked at him quizzically. "Then why were you not able to protect yourself from being attacked and thrown off the bridge?"

Pran said, "There were three of them, and they knew magic too." To change the subject, he asked, "Is Vitina an Enchanter?"

"An Enchantress," Ravi corrected. "She was privately tutored, rather than attending magic school, but she passed the same exams, so she is a qualified Enchantress."

"Is she apprenticed to a Magician in White River Junction?"

"Yes, to Doc Parador, the same Magician who tutored her, but do not spread the news around."

Pran felt a twinge of jealousy that Vitina was apprenticed to the young, handsome, single Doctor. Doubtless, he thought, Doc Parador was able to spend much time alone with the raven-haired beauty! Envy and suspicion emboldened him to ask, "Do you think it's appropriate for a Magician to be secretly tutoring a beautiful, teenage girl? I mean, what if he decided to take advantage of her?"

Ravi smiled as if he found this strangely amusing. "I know Doc Parador, and Vitina has nothing to fear from him. In any case, it is common for Magical Doctors to have young, female nurses, so there is

nothing inappropriate with him tutoring a girl. Were you surprised to hear my sister could do magic?”

“Very! I never knew girls could do magic.”

“In our country, Pendor, some girls can, but we heard that Eldorean girls cannot, so we try to keep her ability a secret as much as possible.”

Pran said, “Why? It’s not illegal for a girl to do magic in Eldor, as far as I know.”

“No, but Doc Parador does not want word to get out that she is his apprentice. Also, my family has reasons of our own to keep my sister’s apprenticeship, and her magic ability, a secret. I cannot reveal all of them, but one is that Vitina’s magic can give our family a hidden advantage. Another is that my sister is of marriageable age, and with her beauty, we were hoping she could snare—”

Ravi stopped, evidently realizing he was talking in front of a boy who was himself romantically interested in her. “Now it is *I* who must apologize for not choosing my words well! What I mean is, we were afraid Eldorean men might be frightened away by a girl with magic abilities.”

“I know what you mean, Ravi,” Pran said, his voice betraying his feelings. “Vitina is very beautiful, but there’s also more to her than meets the eye. I can see how her talent might scare some boys off, although to me it only makes her more interesting.”

As he spoke, Pran suddenly realized Vitina fit the words of the Truthseeker’s prophecy: “The first two are two very special people, unlike any you’ve ever met before, and are more than they *appear* to be.” Likewise, the attack at the bridge must have been one of Pran’s “three challenges, each more difficult than the last.” When he’d taken a beating rather than disclose Jelal’s identity as his father’s informant, he’d fulfilled part of the prophecy: “The second companion will find him if he demonstrates courage, discretion, patriotism, and loyalty.”

Why hadn’t he realized all this earlier, before saying the words that had angered her? He sighed. The reason was obvious; he’d been too busy falling in love with Vitina to even *remember* the quest he was about to undertake for Eldor. Now by having angered her with his foolish words, he’d made his task of convincing her to join him that much more difficult.



15: VITINA'S DECISION

“Ravi,” said Pran, “I need to speak to Vitina and your parents about an urgent matter that threatens all of Eldor—all of Rados, in fact.”

Ravi regarded Pran curiously for a moment, then apparently seeing he was serious, nodded. “Let us go downstairs and talk. My parents do not speak much Eldorean, so I will translate.” Picking up the cast iron pot of water from the nightstand with one muscular arm, he said, “Follow me.”

Pran followed Vitina’s brother down a flight of narrow stairs into the living room. A faded couch with end tables on each side faced a large fireplace. The fire was not lit, as it was a warm day, but an andiron made from horseshoes lay ready with logs. Two worn but comfortable-looking chairs on opposite sides of the room completed the furniture. This was definitely not the home of a wealthy family, so Pran wondered how on Rados they could possibly afford to pay a Magician to tutor Vitina privately. An immigrant carpenter would be hard pressed to pay the tuition for Pran’s father’s school, let alone private lessons!

Ravi motioned Pran into one of the chairs, then went out onto the front porch to get his family. He returned with Vitina and their parents behind him, the mother wearing a green sari, and the father wearing the same style of blue, hemp, carpenter’s overalls as Ravi.

Before Pran could greet them, he heard his own father's voice in his head calling frantically, "*Pran, Pran, where are you? Are you all right?*"

Pran's physical senses dimmed as he concentrated on replying to the telepathic message. "*I'm okay now, father,*" he thought back. "*I'm in a house in White River Junction.*"

Pran heard Ravi's voice as if from the bottom of a well, asking if he was okay, but dared not answer for fear of losing the telepathic connection with his father. He tuned out all the voices in the living room, which were growing more concerned and agitated, to concentrate on his father's reply.

"*You're still in town, Pran? You were supposed to come home last night. Where have you been? Your mother has been worried sick over you!*"

Pran sensed enough of his father's emotions, through the telepathic connection, to know that his mother wasn't the only one who had worried about him. His father was feeling a mixture of concern for Pran's safety, and anger that he had not come home on time.

Pran knew he must be truthful about what had happened to him, because it was useless to try to deceive someone using a Telepathy spell. However, he didn't want to confirm his classmates' suspicions by being a snitch, so he decided not to volunteer too much information. "*On the way out of town, I was attacked and then thrown off the Flat Rock Bridge. I was badly injured, but a family here found me and brought me to their house. They saved my life. I was knocked unconscious when I fell, so I couldn't contact you.*"

Pran sensed shock and worry as his father asked, "*How serious are your injuries?*"

"*I'm all better now. They Healed me.*"

"*You were lucky to be rescued by a Magician's family! Who was it? Tell him I'll be eternally in his debt for saving my son's life.*"

"*It wasn't a Magician. It was an apprentice—a girl, an Enchantress.*"

"*A girl? Are you sure?*"

"*Quite sure, father!*" Pran sent, laughing to himself—or had he laughed aloud?

"*A female apprentice in White River Junction? Why haven't I heard about this?*"

"Her family kept her talent a secret, and so did the Magician tutoring her. Father, I believe she's supposed to go with me on my quest. I was just about to discuss it with her and her family."

"Well, Pran, it looks like you were doubly fortunate in meeting this family! Can you give me directions to pick you up?"

"I don't know their address, but I'm all right now, father. I can walk home."

"Your words sound brave, son, but I sense fear, and you're hiding something about your attackers. I can't let you walk home under those circumstances. I'll bring my carriage for you after you've had time to talk with the family, as I can tell you're eager to speak to them. After you've explained the quest to them, find out exactly where you are, so you can give me directions. Tell them I'll bring gold and silver with me to reimburse them for the metals they used to Diagnose and Heal you. I'll contact you again in about an hour." After a pause, he added, "I'm glad you're okay, son."

Feeling the emotion behind his father's words, Pran sent the words, *"I love you, too,"* just before his father ended the connection.

The room around Pran seemed to brighten and return to focus. He saw Vitina, Ravi, and their parents all huddled around him with worried looks on their faces.

"It's okay, I'm back," Pran said.

"What happened? Did you pass out?" Ravi asked.

"No, my father just communicated with me by Telepathy spell."

"See, I told you," Vitina said to her brother, but Pran had seen her worried look a moment earlier. "Pran, this is my father, Munjib, and my mother, Kala."

As Pran stood up to greet Vitina's parents, her father shook hands warmly with him. Munjib was even bigger than Ravi, but fortunately for Pran, his handshake was only firm, not painful. Kala gave Pran a hug, which embarrassed him slightly, but perhaps it was the customary greeting from women in their culture. He wondered if Vitina might follow that custom next time he met her, if she weren't still angry with him.

Pran explained, "My father contacted me to find out where I was and why I didn't get home last night. He said he's eternally grateful to you for

rescuing and Healing me. When he comes to get me, he'll bring enough gold and silver to reimburse you for what you used to Diagnose and Heal me."

Ravi gave a sigh of relief, saying "My parents let Vitina use all our gold on you, despite my concerns that they might never get it back. I warned them they would lose their money if you died, or if you were too poor to repay them. Last night I really thought you were going to die, and am glad I was wrong."

Pran exclaimed, "Not *half* as glad as I am!"

Ravi and Vitina both laughed, and when Ravi translated for his parents, they laughed too. Pran sat down again, happy that he'd broken the ice. Vitina joined her parents on the couch, and Ravi took a seat in the chair facing Pran, saying, "Now, tell us what you have to say that is so vitally important."

Pran said, "It affects all of Rados, and Eldor in particular. It's also secret, so you must promise not to tell anyone outside of your family."

Ravi translated for his parents, and everybody promised to keep the information secret.

Pran told about Mohinder's visit, the Truthseeker prophecy about the gold disappearing, and that his father and the other Magicians had confirmed the prophecy using crystal balls. Then he came to the part that involved Vitina and her family. "Mohinder said I'd need certain companions for my quest, people I *must* bring with me to Earth. I believe Vitina's one of them."

Vitina and her brother gasped. Ravi translated to their parents, and judging from the rapid, agitated speech that followed, they seemed quite upset to hear this as well.

Ravi said, "My parents find your story hard to believe. But assuming you tell the truth, what makes you so sure Vitina is supposed to go on your quest?"

"The prophecy said I wouldn't have to look for companions, because *they'd* come to *me*. It said my first two companions would be 'very special people,' unlike any I've ever met before. Mohinder said they're 'more than they appear to be,' and that I'd know they're the ones, after I learn 'who

and what they really are.’ Well, Vitina’s certainly more than she appears to be, and now that I know *what* she is, I’m sure she’s supposed to go on the quest. I mean, she’s an Enchantress, an apprentice Magician, and an excellent Healer, although she appears to be just—” he hesitated for a moment, “—a beautiful girl.”

Ravi said defensively, “She *is* a beautiful girl, and she is also my little sister. She should not go traipsing off on some dangerous mission to distant lands.”

Vitina chimed in softly, “That is for me to decide, is it not?”

Her brother ignored her, but Pran, encouraged by Vitina’s words, said to her and Ravi, “Please tell your parents what the prophecy said about those who are to accompany me on my quest. *Our* quest,” he corrected himself, as nobody had appointed him leader.

Ravi hesitated, looking reluctant, but then translated Pran’s words to his parents. Their responses sounded somewhat less agitated than before.

Pran asked, “What did they say?”

Ravi replied, “They would like to meet this Mohinder for themselves before making any decision.”

Vitina spoke up again, heatedly this time. “Just a minute. Are you not going to ask *me* what I think about all this? The decision is mine to make, is it not?”

“Of course,” her brother said.

Vitina’s black eyes flashed angrily. “Very well. I do not even need to meet Mohinder before deciding. I am *not* going. This is the most ridiculous story I ever heard—disappearing gold, legendary worlds, a mysterious quest! I think Pran made the whole thing up to get me to go with him, just so he can seduce me.” She glared at Ravi. “I do not know how *you* were so easily fooled. You are supposed to protect me from tricksters like him, older brother.”

“I did say you should not go,” Ravi pointed out.

“Yes,” Vitina said, “but only because you think it too dangerous for a girl as young as me, not because his story is a total fabrication, a pack of lies!”

Pran was starting to get annoyed with Vitina. He challenged her, “Why don’t you test me, to find out if I’m telling the truth?” When she did not reply immediately, he said, “What’s the matter, don’t you know the spell?”

The anger faded from Vitina’s face, replaced by a thoughtful expression. “As a matter of fact, I do,” she said quietly. A hint of a smile crossed her face, and her obsidian eyes took on a mischievous sparkle.

Pran looked away, feeling himself begin to blush. He had spoken too hastily again, but this time out of anger. *Me and my big mouth, suggesting a Lie Detector spell to the girl I’m falling in love with!*

Vitina continued, “Unfortunately, I do not have gold to spare for a Lie Detector spell. However, I will when your father arrives and pays me back.”

At first, Pran was relieved at his reprieve, but then worried that the wait would give Vitina more time to think of questions to ask him. Meanwhile, he asked Ravi the address of their house and directions for his father to get there. When Pran’s father contacted him again by Telepathy spell, this time Vitina and her family were expecting it, so they weren’t alarmed. After the telepathic connection had ended, Pran saw Vitina talking quietly with her parents on the sofa. Pran couldn’t understand their language, but every now and then they looked over at him. He feared that the three of them were conspiring to come up with questions to ask him after she cast her Lie Detector spell.

Vitina got up from the couch and, in a detached, clinical tone of voice, invited Pran to have lunch with her family, saying, “After what you have been through, your body needs plenty of food to get your strength back.” Her expression was carefully neutral, and she avoided eye contact.

In the dining room, Vitina took a seat on Pran’s right, but didn’t talk to him during lunch, choosing instead to speak with her parents and brother in Pendorean. A few times during the meal, Pran cast sidelong glances at her and saw a pensive look on her face. He caught her glancing furtively at him several times, too, out of the corner of his eye. Ravi made polite conversation with Pran about the weather and his school, but Vitina ignored all of her brother’s attempts to involve her in any conversation with Pran.

They had barely finished lunch before they heard Pran's father's two horse rockaway carriage arriving outside, the hoofbeats loud on the cobblestones. Munjib opened the door for the Magician, then said in broken Eldorean, "Please to come in."

Pran's father entered the living room wearing his finest Magician's robe and carrying an ornately inlaid wooden box in both hands. He set the box down on the nearest end table, looked Pran over from head to toe as if to verify he was still in one piece, then smiled broadly and gave him an uncharacteristically warm hug, saying, "I'm sure glad you're safe, son."

"Me too," Pran said. "Father, I'd like you to meet the people who saved my life. This is Munjib the carpenter, who found me under the bridge, his wife, Kala, and their son, Ravi. And *this*," Pran said with a warm surge of affection, "is their daughter, Vitina, the girl who Healed me."

His father seemed to sense Pran's feelings toward Vitina, for he gave Pran a knowing smile and a furtive wink. Then he turned to the family, saying, "I'm Gilamond the Magician. I'm not only pleased to meet you; I'll be forever in your debt for saving my son's life." He shook Munjib's and Ravi's hands, and then to Pran's surprise, hugged Kala and Vitina, whether because he knew it was the appropriate greeting in their culture, or out of gratitude for saving his son, Pran couldn't tell; perhaps both. At any rate, nobody objected, so Pran guessed that his father had properly observed Pendorean custom.

Ravi translated Pran's father's words for his parents, and Munjib gestured for everyone to sit down in the living room.

"Tell me, good people," Pran's father said, "how did you happen to save my son?"

Ravi said, "My father is the one who found Pran, but his Eldorean is not good, so I will tell the story and translate when necessary. He saw three teenage boys attack your son and throw him off the Flat Rock Bridge. My father yelled and scared them off, but no soldiers came from the guardhouse on the bridge." He described how they'd found Pran's unconscious body on the rocks below, bandaged and splinted his injuries, and brought him home for Vitina to Heal.

Pran's father thanked the family again and then asked, "Pran, who attacked you on the bridge?"

Pran hesitated, the words "rat" and "snitch" echoing in his mind as he thought of telling.

"Are you afraid of what they might do to you if you tell? Believe me, *they'll* have much more to fear than you will," his father said ominously. "I'll see to that."

"Father, I *can't*. Other kids already think I'm a snitch, so the last thing I want to do is prove them right. Nobody would ever trust me again."

His father sighed. "Yes, and it's my fault your classmates thought you'd spied on them." He suddenly sat bolt upright. "Wait; I think I know who did this to you. You even tried to warn me, 'They'll kill me,' but I didn't believe you," he said, smacking his palm on his forehead. "Don't worry; Sekar, Pathik, and Samir will get what they deserve, once I find some proof."

Pran said, "Father, please don't take matters into your own hands; it'll only make things worse. Besides, more violence won't solve anything."

"Who said anything about violence?" his father asked, but Pran had seen the dark look in his eyes. "I don't know why you'd protect them, son, after what they did to you!"

Pran said, "When they threw me off the bridge, I don't think they meant to injure or kill me. They thought I had a Gravity Shield spell—one of them even mentioned it as I fell. They didn't expect me to be seriously injured."

His father said, "That's right, I told everyone to cast Gravity Shield spells in your last lab. Why didn't you listen to me?"

"They know how to do Transmogrification spells, so Kimbar helped me cast a defense against that."

"Ah, I see," his father said. "Yes, that could've been even worse. If nobody were around to witness the spell, we wouldn't know what kind of animal to look for to reverse it. You could be lost forever in the woods, not even knowing who you were yourself!"

Turning to Vitina, he said, "So you're the young lady who Healed my son. I don't know how to thank you. If there's anything I can do for you or

your family, just let me know.” He motioned to the ornately inlaid box on the end table. “I trust this will be enough gold and silver to replace what you used to help my son.”

Vitina opened the box and found it filled to the brim with gold and silver. She protested, “This is far more than I used to Diagnose and Heal Pran. It is too much.”

Ravi spoke with his parents in their language, and then translated, “They say you should only repay us for whatever gold and silver Vitina used. Saving your son is something anybody would have done, without hope of reward.”

“Maybe in *your* country, but trust me, few Eldoreans would take a bleeding stranger into their house and use all their gold to Heal him! All the treasure in the world is nothing compared with getting my son back alive, but if the Truthseeker prophecy is correct, I’m afraid that in a few days the gold in this box will disappear. Then all that I’m giving you now will vanish except for the box itself, the silver, and these,” he said, sliding open a small, velvet-lined drawer at the base of the box to pull out two lovely necklaces, one of pearls, and the other of emeralds. “Please accept them as a token of my gratitude for saving my son’s life.”

After translating for his parents again, Ravi said, “We accept your gift with our thanks.”

Vitina reached into the box and picked out a small gold coin and asked, “Master Gilamond, would you say this coin is big enough to cast a Lie Detector spell?”

“More than sufficient. It should detect over a dozen lies before wearing off. I assume you want to check out the truthfulness of my son’s story? I’ve checked myself, and I’m afraid it’s true. All gold will disappear from this world within a few days.”

“It never hurts to be careful,” Vitina said. “Besides,” she said, smiling mysteriously, “I might have other questions to ask your son. Will you excuse us for a minute?”

A feeling of dread filled Pran’s stomach.

“Certainly,” Pran’s father said.

“Let us go into the kitchen and talk,” she said to Pran. She led him into a small but spotlessly clean kitchen, motioned him to sit at the table, and took a seat across from him. Holding the gold coin in her hand, her brow furrowed in concentration for a moment, then she placed the newly gray coin on the table and asked, “Pran, is it true what you told us, that the gold will disappear soon?”

“Yes.”

“What about the quest you described? Is it really necessary for me to go to Earth with you and your friends, to restore the gold to Rados?”

“I believe so, yes. You are one of the people described by the prophecy.”

“So, you *were* telling the truth!” Vitina’s surprise was evident. “Now, let us see. Did the Pain-Relief spell wear off while I was still Healing you?”

Pran could see where this was heading, and felt himself blush. “Yes,” he said nervously.

“Then why did you not ask me for another spell?”

“I already told you this morning. I’m afraid if I repeat it, you’ll just get angry again.”

Vitina pressed on, “When you told me that you were ‘enjoying my touch,’ were you saying it to try to seduce me, to get me to touch you more intimately?”

“No, absolutely not!” said Pran indignantly. “I was just trying to give an honest answer. I didn’t mean that your touch was arousing me, just that I enjoyed the contact. I’m sorry if it sounded inappropriate.”

Vitina looked puzzled. “If you were not aroused, why were you ‘enjoying my touch’ too much to ask for another Pain-Relief spell?”

Pran sighed. With her Lie Detector spell, he had no choice but to tell the truth. Feeling his face turn red again, he whispered, “Because I was falling in love with you.” He feared he’d ruined his chances with Vitina by telling her too soon how he felt about her, but she’d *forced* him into saying it with her questions, so it wasn’t really his fault.

A look of comprehension dawned on Vitina’s face. “Oh... I am sorry I misunderstood you earlier. I have heard that patients often imagine they are falling in love with their Healer.”

Pran wasn't sure whether to be relieved that she forgave him, or insulted by the fact that she didn't think his love for her was real! "I don't think I'm just imagining my feelings," he protested.

Vitina said, "No, it is just a side effect of the Healing spells; that is all. I should have expected a reaction like this. It is quite common in patients, they say. In fact, if my master, Doc Parador, had been the one who saved your life, you might have fallen in love with *him*."

Pran laughed.

"I was not joking," Vitina said. "It has happened to him before."

"With boys?" asked Pran. He started to laugh again, but then saw she was serious.

Vitina said curtly, "I think that is enough questions for now."

When they returned to the living room, Vitina spoke to her family in their language. Afterward, she translated for Pran. "I told them I verified the truthfulness of everything you said. I also told Ravi that I am no longer angry with you, and that he should not be either."

"Thank you," Pran said. His father looked at him curiously, but didn't say anything.

Vitina turned and spoke to her parents again in Pendorean, and what she now said seemed to take them by surprise. A heated argument followed, which Vitina eventually appeared to win. When the talking finally stopped, her mother gave her a hug, with her father and brother following suit.

"What was that all about?" asked Pran when it was over.

Vitina said, "I told my family that I now agree to accompany you on your quest."

"Fantastic," Pran said. His heart leapt, and he knew it was more than just relief that the quest would not lack one of its prophesied members. Even if Vitina didn't like him the same way he liked her, he was still overjoyed at the thought of her being near him.

"My parents tried to talk me out of it," Vitina said, "but—"

"But when my sister makes up her mind to do something, there is no talking her out of it," Ravi finished, grinning. "She is very strong willed."

Pran said, "She sure changed her mind quickly. A few minutes ago she wanted nothing to do with me or the quest."

"That is another thing you will find out about my sister," said Ravi. "She does not let anyone talk her into something, but she reserves the right to change her mind on her own, anytime she wants."

Pran said, trying to sound casual, "Well, I'm really glad she's coming." Not wanting people to think he said that only because of his attraction to her, he added, "I mean the mission probably wouldn't succeed without her, since the prophecy said she's supposed to come."

"That's right," his father agreed. "Now Pran, I need to get you home."

Vitina spoke with her parents in Pendorean, then replied, "They asked what I should pack for the journey to Earth."

Pran's father clapped his hand to his forehead. "I've been so worried about Pran, I almost forgot to tell you. We'll discuss that in a meeting tomorrow afternoon at four o'clock at my magic school, so please come. Mohinder and Loremaster Lokor will be there to advise us with their knowledge of Earth." He turned toward Pran. "Well, son, we'd better be off, or your mother will be frantic with worry. Besides, there's someone else waiting for you at home."

Probably Kimbar, Pran thought. He thanked Vitina's family again and said, "See you tomorrow, Vitina."

She said, "See you tomorrow, Pran," giving him a hug that made his heart beat faster. Feeling the heat rush into his face, Pran turned his head so his father wouldn't see him blush.



16: A DOUBLE LIFE

While Vitina and her family gathered outside on the porch to see him off, Pran untied Rocky and Mapleshade from the hitching post, then climbed into the rockaway. As his father clicked his tongue at the horses and the carriage lurched into motion, Pran waved goodbye to Vitina. To his delight, she waved too, flashing her pearly smile, and he leaned his head out the window and smiled back. As they drove away, he turned backwards in his seat to watch the beautiful, brown girl through the back window of the carriage, until the carriage crested a small hill, and the raven-haired beauty was no longer visible.

On the ride home, Pran answered his father's questions with one word answers, as his mind was elsewhere, thinking of Vitina's lovely smile as she waved goodbye to him. He tried to burn that image onto his brain so he could hold the memory in his mind until he saw her again.

As soon as they arrived home and pulled up near the carriage house, Nako came bounding out to greet them, barking joyfully, with Pran's mother close behind. She threw open the side gate and ran to meet the carriage, apron strings flapping in the breeze, as Pran climbed down out of the rockaway. His feet had barely touched the ground before Nako jumped up on him, practically knocking him over. "Hey, I'm glad to see you, too," Pran laughed, "but relax. I've only been gone a day and a half."

Pran's mother reached him next and hugged him tightly. She said with tears in her eyes, "I assumed you'd just spent the night in town because the meeting ran late, but when your father showed up alone today with no idea where you were, I was afraid I'd *lost* you!" She hugged Pran for a long time, only letting go to wipe her eyes with the handkerchief that his father offered her, then continued, "We went to Kimbar's house to see if he knew where you were, but he hadn't seen you either. All of us were so out of our minds with worry that we were about to organize a search party, until your father finally remembered he could to use magic to find you!"

Pran's father explained, "Normally magic would be the first thing I thought of, but I was so frantic with worry that I couldn't think straight. Thank God you were conscious by then, son, so I was able to locate you with a Telepathy spell. If you were still in a coma, I would have had to cast a different spell—one to search for your body." He shuddered visibly.

Pran's mother said, "I wanted to go with your father to bring you home, but he said you wouldn't want me to make a crying scene like this in front of the girl who rescued you." She stepped back and composed herself, brushing her hair back from her tear-streaked face, then looked Pran over from head to toe. "Gilamond, did you check his body to make sure he's fully Healed?"

Pran said, "There's no need for that. I'm fine now, mother. My rescuer did a good job of Healing me."

His father said, "You can see our boy is okay now, dear."

She asked, "Where on Rados did he get those baggy clothes he's wearing?"

"Pran can answer that later, but I can take care of the fit right now," Pran's father said, removing a small gold coin from his pocket. He pointed to the shirt and pants Pran had borrowed from Ravi, and the clothes shrunk around Pran's body until they fit as snugly as his very own. "Let's go inside now, so he can explain things to everyone at once."

Pran's mother said, "Not until you two eat something. I have supper ready in the kitchen."

They went in the side door and through the summer kitchen into the main kitchen, where Pran saw a familiar face grinning up at him from

the table. "Hi, Pran," Jelal piped up. "I bet you didn't expect to see me again so soon."

Pran's father explained, "I thought you two should get to know each other better, so I invited Jelal to stay with us for a while."

Pran smiled back at Jelal, saying, "Glad to see you again. We have a lot to talk about."

His mother interrupted, "First eat, then talk. Your body needs lots of food, after what you've been through."

"That's just what Vitina told me," Pran remarked. As he began eating, he realized Vitina and his mother were right, judging by his appetite, which had recovered with a vengeance. He felt famished, wolfing down two helpings of shepherd's pie in the time it took everyone else to eat one, and drinking a full quart of freshly-pressed apple cider.

After everyone had finished, Pran helped his mother clear the table. She was in such a hurry to hear what had happened to Pran that she left the dishes in the sink to wash later, something unheard of for her. They adjourned to the living room, where Jelal sat next to Pran on one couch, and his parents sat together on the other.

Pran said, "I know you want to hear what happened to me on the way home yesterday," then proceeded to tell about all that had happened since leaving the Wizard Tower. He gave a few more details than he had with his father earlier, telling them that he'd been outnumbered three to one and unable to reach his silver chain in time. Again, he left out the identity of his attackers, but nobody asked. Perhaps his father had told them not to bother asking for names until Pran was ready to tell them. At any rate, his father had already guessed who'd done it.

He recounted how he'd woken up to find Vitina bending over him. "She's so beautiful. I was sure she was an angel, and I'd died and gone to heaven," he said, smiling at the memory.

His mother said softly, "You really like her, don't you?"

Pran wasn't sure whether she meant that as a question or an observation. He was embarrassed to answer, but it would be rude to ignore her, so he gave her a polite nod and continued. He tried not to pause again long

enough to leave openings for any more embarrassing questions! When he related how Vitina had Healed him and brought him breakfast, he took care to skip over the feelings that had stirred in him, and the words he'd said that had angered her. Naturally, he did not disclose the personal questions Vitina had asked while using the Lie Detector spell. He ended his story with his realization that Vitina should be coming on their quest, and her acceptance.

After Pran had finished, his father said, "Now it's your turn, Jelal. The Council agreed that Pran and his companions should know your life history, and I'm sure Pran's eager to hear it. Ilandra, there are secrets involved that I'm afraid you don't have a 'need to know,' so if you don't mind leaving the room—"

"No problem," Pran's mother said. "I still have dishes to wash in the kitchen."

Jelal cleared his throat. "Um, Gilamond, if you don't mind, could you also leave us for a while? I want to tell my story to Pran alone, boy-to-boy."

Pran expected his father to protest at being asked to leave his own living room, but instead, he winked at Jelal and said, "All right, I'll leave you 'boys' alone to get to know each other better while I give my wife a hand with the dishes."

"Thanks," Jelal said. After Pran's parents had left the room, the little spy explained, "One reason I asked him to leave us alone, Pran, is because I don't like telling my life story to more than one or two people at a time. You see, it's very personal, and a little bit embarrassing."

Pran said solemnly, "I promise not to laugh."

"Oh, you can laugh if you want," Jelal said, grinning, "but only at the funny parts."

Pran smiled. "You sound just like Kimbar."

"Great, then he and I should get along just fine! Okay, here goes my life story. Most of it is more sad than funny, I'm afraid.

"Like you, Pran, I was born the son of a Magician. My father wanted to have a Magician son to follow in his footsteps, but his first child was a girl, and my older brother had no magic ability. My father was delighted

when I showed signs of magic talent, and since I was also a bright child, he enrolled me in magic school a year early, when I was only twelve.

“Being younger and smaller than my classmates, I compensated by clowning around and showing off. I loved using magic to play practical jokes, mostly harmless tricks like making someone’s dog talk and say something rude about him in public.”

Pran’s eyes widened. “You knew how to make dogs talk?”

Jelal grinned. “I knew how to make it *seem* that way! I combined a Ventriloquism spell with a spell to deepen my voice, so it appeared that it was the dog talking.”

Pran laughed. “I’ll have to try that sometime. I’ve done a lot of practical jokes with Kimbar and Garwin. Not all of them involving magic,” he added, remembering the swimming hole incident with Kimbar.

Jelal looked interested. “Can you tell me about them?”

“Some other time. Let’s hear the rest of your story.”

Jelal nodded. “My father and magic teacher both warned me of the dangers of using magic lightly—as I’m sure your father has too, Pran—but I ignored their warnings. I rarely used magic for any useful purpose, unless you count putting neighborhood bullies in their place.”

Pran smiled. “I’d count that. Putting bullies in their place *is* useful.”

“Definitely,” Jelal agreed, “and for someone as small as me, it was sometimes a necessity. However, my father didn’t see it that way. Since he didn’t even approve of me using magic to take revenge on bullies, you can imagine how he felt when I used it for fun—playing jokes on friends, neighbors, or unsuspecting townsfolk. But in my eagerness to find spells I could use to trick my friends, I *did* spend a lot of time studying spellbooks, and so became the top student in my class.

“In my Novice year, at age twelve, I found a cave and went exploring. I knew how to illuminate my way with magic, so I thought it safe to go alone. By the way, I now realize how dangerous it is to explore caves alone, so don’t try it yourself,” he advised Pran.

“Deep inside the cave, I spotted a hole midway up one wall that looked as if it might open out into another chamber. It was too small to crawl

through, even for me, but just big enough to poke my head in and look around. I cast a Mage-Light inside, which illuminated every corner of the chamber far better than a lantern. Nobody could've seen inside the chamber without magic, as the hole wasn't big enough to fit my head and arm through at the same time, so it would have been impossible to hold a lamp or torch in the opening while looking inside."

Pran said, "Someone could've *dropped* a lit torch through the hole."

Jelal shrugged. "I suppose so, but nobody had, as I didn't see any spent torches below the hole on the other side. Anyway, when I poked my head in, I saw that the hole opened up into a chamber which looked like a dead end. On the floor of the chamber just below my head, I saw an object that someone must have pushed through the hole. It was too far down to reach by hand, so again, not easily accessible without magic.

"I still had some silver left, so I levitated the object and was able to retrieve it: an old wooden box of curious workmanship, inlaid with runes. Inside, I found only a book, bound in the finest leather and embossed with symbols of power. With trembling hands, I opened it. Its pages were filled with magic spells; some written in shiny gold letters, and others in rusty brown print. It was written in Old Eldorean, so there were some words I didn't understand, but from the titles I could decipher, all the spells sounded powerful. It had to be a relic from the ancient Wizards!"

Pran asked skeptically, "If it was such a powerful spellbook, why didn't it have protective spells to keep you from opening it?"

"The book must have had spells to protect it from aging, otherwise its leather cover would have rotted after all those years," Jelal said. "As far as Anti-Theft spells, I can only guess. Maybe its owner had to hide it in a hurry because he was being chased and didn't have time to guard it with spells, then he was killed before he could retrieve it. There's also a chance the book's owner didn't know magic. We'll never know for sure.

"I put the book back in the box and hastily exited the cave, running all the way back to my house with it tucked under my arm. I couldn't let my father know about it, or he'd make me turn it over to him, so I hid it in my room to impress my friends later with my magic knowledge. I thought if

I learned the spells in that book, I'd be the best Magician in Eldor! I was tired of my father, teacher, and others criticizing me as just a practical joker who'd never be a good Magician."

Pran said, "Some people say that about Kimbar, too, but he claims they're just jealous."

Jelal shrugged. "Maybe he's right. Anyway, as I said, the spells were written in Old Eldorean, so there were some words I didn't understand. I tried reading a few of them aloud, and they worked most impressively! The only problem was that as soon as the magic took effect, the words disappeared from the page. Quite a few pages were already blank when I found the book, so the original owner of the book must have used some spells before stashing it in the cave. Of course, I tried copying the spells to paper to use them again later, but they wouldn't work when read aloud from my own handwriting, only from the pages of the book printed with the special ink."

Pran said, "Then that really was a relic of the ancient Wizards! My father says they're the only ones who ever knew how to pen such spellbooks. It's a lost art. We know they wrote them using either gold ink or blood, but somehow they also embedded the magic spells within the print itself, so that *anyone* could cast the spells."

"Even an inexperienced Novice like me," Jelal said with a wry smile, "although at the time, I thought my own skills were responsible for my success in casting spells from that book. Anyway, my mother's thirtieth birthday was coming up, and I planned a special gift for her. I had found a perfect spell in my book: Eternal Youth! This was a spell that my father and magic teacher had both claimed was impossible. They'd say, 'Perhaps it was known by the ancient Wizards, but if so, such knowledge was lost forever when the Wizards disappeared.' I thought that casting an Eternal Youth spell on my mother on the eve of her thirtieth birthday would be the best possible birthday gift, letting her stay twenty-nine forever. Also, I hoped that by casting the spell, I'd make a name for myself, become famous!

"The night before my mother's birthday, I asked her to come up to my room and close her eyes, saying that I'd give her her birthday present a day

early. Then I took out the Wizard's spellbook that I'd found and read the Eternal Youth spell, which was written in rusty brown letters. When my mother heard me chanting, she opened her eyes in alarm, but I finished reading the spell before she could think to stop me.

"Just as I'd chanted the last word, my father rushed into the room and cried, 'What on Rados are you doing? That sounded like sorcery!'"

Pran exclaimed, "Are you saying your Eternal Youth spell was black magic?!"

"Exactly," Jelal said. "You didn't think *white* magic could keep people young forever, did you? Eternal youth goes against nature, and you know that anything that goes against nature is sorcery. I'd already figured out that the spells in rusty brown print were written in blood, but I didn't think my parents would mind my using sorcery if the spell would keep my mother young.

"My father tore the spellbook from my hands, demanding, 'What was that spell you cast?' He looked at the page I had open, but both the spell and its title had already vanished.

"'Eternal Youth,' I answered triumphantly, waiting to see if my mother would turn younger. She looked unchanged, but I wasn't disappointed, because I assumed the spell would only work to prevent *future* aging.

"My father, far from being pleased at my gift, was furious at me for having tried sorcery on my mother. He went into a tirade about the dangers of an inexperienced child using sorcery on anyone, least of all a parent. I have to admit he was right, but his words still stung when he bellowed, 'Try to remember, from now on, who is the *Magician* in the family, and who is the foolish little *boy*!'

"After he stormed out of the room, slamming the door behind him, my mother took me aside. She hugged and comforted me, saying she understood what I'd tried to do for her. She told me she was grateful for my gift, whether my spell worked or not, and hoped it would indeed work.

"Father was afraid I might have accidentally cast a *harmful* spell on my mother, so he insisted on taking her to a Magical Doctor the next day. I had to go along, too, because if anything turned out to be wrong with her,

it would be my fault. The doc examined my mother and found nothing wrong with her, but no sign that the Eternal Youth spell had worked, either. Mother and I were disappointed, but my father was relieved. However, he asked the doc to check me as well, 'Just in case.' When the Doctor examined me, his face turned grave, and he informed us that the spell I'd used had either backfired, or was designed to grant eternal youth to the person who *cast* it!"

Pran asked, "Didn't you think of that beforehand? Why didn't you ask your father to look over the spell before you cast it?"

"It's easy to second-guess me now," Jelal said defensively, "but I was only twelve. What would you have done if you'd found a Wizard's spellbook when you were twelve? I admit I was foolish, hasty, and overconfident. I'm still not sure what went wrong with the spell, but since it was written in Old Eldorean, there were a few words I was unsure of. I thought it said it granted eternal youth to the person you pointed to while reading the spell, but I might've misunderstood. Or maybe the spell backfired on me—there was a mirror in the room, and perhaps I glanced in it at just the wrong time. As you might know, that's one of the most common ways to make a spell backfire." He shrugged. "No matter now, what's done is done."

"My father consulted several other Magical Doctors, including one who specialized in diagnosing and treating sorcerous curses, but none of their attempts at treatment were successful. Our town Loremaster informed us that the spell was irreversible. I was already the smallest Initiate in my class (thanks to having started a year early), so I was horrified to find out I was doomed to live the rest of my life as a twelve-year-old boy." Jelal sighed. "If only I'd brought the book to my father first, instead of trusting in my own abilities!"

"Do you still have the Wizard's spellbook?" Pran asked eagerly. "Can I see it?"

Jelal shot him a dark look. "If I did still have it, would you really want to look at it? Haven't you learned anything from my story, or the fate of the Wizards?"

"I'm sorry. I was just curious, that's all."

“Curiosity like that can kill you! My father burned the book as soon as he’d confirmed what had happened to me. At first I was angry with him, but later realized he’d made a wise decision. The power of the Wizards was never meant to fall into our hands. If, as some say, Wizards were destroyed by their own magic after their spells became too powerful for even *them* to control, then one of their spellbooks could mean doom for today’s Magicians, too.

“Over the next three years, while I was still in magic school, the Eternal Youth spell’s effects on me became noticeable. My friends grew taller and stronger, but I remained the same. My classmates began to tease and bully me for being small. When I finally confessed that my own spell had caused my condition, my schoolmates laughed at me, calling me ‘the miscaster.’

“When I graduated from magic school I tried to get an apprenticeship, but no Magician wanted to hire the famous ‘miscaster,’ for fear my spells might backfire again. My family moved to another town, where people didn’t know me, but I had no better luck there. Every Magician who interviewed me wanted to know how old I was and why I looked so young. When they found out, they didn’t want to take me on as an apprentice either. My father finally took me on as his apprentice, since nobody else would have me.

“I was embarrassed to tell anyone else about my condition, but unable to keep it a secret long. After a few years, when I didn’t grow, rumors started that I was either a changeling left by evil fairies or a Sorcerer who had turned himself young with black magic. When the rumors spread, parents no longer let me play with their children, and we decided to move again.

“After I’d finished my apprenticeship with my father, I couldn’t find work as a journeyman Magician, with no clients or patrons willing to hire me and no Magicians willing to let me be their partner. I’d come of age by then, and wanted to move out of my parents’ house, but had trouble finding work that would allow me to support myself. Even though I was willing to do an honest day’s labor, there were many jobs I didn’t have the physical strength to do, and as for work dealing with the public, nobody wanted to hire a child, or someone with the

appearance of a child. After all, they said, what customer would trust work done by a boy as small as me?

“Eventually I did find work, but it only paid enough to rent a small room on the seedier side of town. The only jobs employers would offer me were ones ordinarily held by children: busboy, messenger boy, shoeshine boy, delivery boy, newspaper boy, and similar low-paying, demeaning work. Oh, how I came to hate any job title ending in ‘boy’! I tried them all at least once, sometimes quitting when I got tired of it, other times getting fired for my ‘arrogant attitude.’ Customers treated me like just a lower-class, twelve-year-old boy, so being an eighteen-year-old magic school graduate, I found that hard to put up with for long!

“Depressed at my inability to find a real job, unwilling to move back in with my parents, and desperate for money, I finally resorted to crime. Nothing serious, just—”

“Burglary, right? That’s what I would’ve done, in your place.”

Jelal snapped, “Who’s telling this story—you, or me?” Then he folded his arms with a huff and looked away, pouting. He didn’t look like any secret agent now, just a little boy who’d had his feelings hurt and was about to cry.

Pran was troubled by Jelal’s reaction, even though he knew it was his fault for interrupting. “I’m sorry, Jelal. Go on with your story.”

Jelal looked back at him, scowling. “You ruined my surprise! Now I’m not sure if I even *want* to tell you the rest.”

“Please, Jelal, I’m really interested,” Pran said, as gently as he could. “And I’m sorry for interrupting. I really am.”

After a moment, Jelal sighed and said, “Okay, just don’t do it again.” Then he composed himself until the pouting little boy was gone, replaced once more by the confident, mature spy. “You guessed right, Pran. Desperate for money, I resorted to crime, but nothing serious, just burglary. For the first time, I found something I was good at, being small enough to climb in and out of windows, and able to use my magic abilities to cast Invisibility spells, open locks, crack safes, and so forth.

“After a few very profitable years, my success at burglary gained me a reputation among shopkeepers, wealthy homeowners, and sheriffs throughout Eldor, but nobody was able to catch me. Finally, Magician detectives with the Royal Bureau of Investigation set a trap for me, catching me red-handed.

“While I was awaiting trial, an RBI agent offered me a choice: be convicted of burglary and languish in prison, or join their sister organization, the Eldorean Intelligence Agency, where my skills would be put to good use in His Majesty’s secret service. They required my answer before my case came to trial, because a trial would draw too much publicity to make me of much use afterwards as a spy.

“It was an easy choice for me, and as it turned out, a good one, both for me and for our country. Being recruited by the EIA was the best thing that ever happened to me. I discovered my true calling as a spy, or rather, His Majesty’s secret service discovered it in me. Once I tried spying, I found it exciting, enjoyable, and financially rewarding. The EIA has other Magicians among its spies, of course, but I’m the best.”

“That’s very modest of you,” Pran quipped, and Jelal laughed. “But isn’t being a spy awfully dangerous?”

“Sure, there are risks,” said Jelal, “but that’s half the excitement! Actually, it’s not that dangerous if you know what you’re doing, as long as you don’t get lazy or overconfident and forget to watch your back. I *know* I’m the best, but those who only *think* they’re the best—but really aren’t—are in for trouble.”

“So, how old are you really, Jelal?”

Jelal paused for a minute as if trying to remember. “I’m so used to saying I’m twelve that I lose track of how old I really am! Let’s see; I was born in 1684, and this is the year 1823 A.W.W., so that makes me one hundred and thirty-nine-years-old.”

“Wow, that’s old!”

Jelal shrugged. “I suppose so.”

“Do you have any family?”

“My parents died long ago,” Jelal said, his face unreadable, “as did my brother, sister, and all my childhood friends. But my brother’s and sister’s descendants are still alive, and I visit them when I can. I get along best with the younger ones, the children and teenagers.

“In my visits to the palace over my years as a spy, I’ve become good friends with some of the young nobles and princes. In fact, when King Orban was a boy, I was his close friend and playmate. I still have a special relationship with the King, who says that when I’m with him, it brings back childhood memories. His son Taryn and I were best friends just a few years ago, when we were the same size—I mean to say *Prince* Taryn, third in line to the throne.”

Pran’s father stepped into the room and asked, “Isn’t Jelal done telling his story yet?”

“He’s been bragging and dropping names,” Pran said, grinning. “He claims he’s a personal friend of both the King and Prince Taryn.

“That may be true, but it’s nearly bedtime, and you have school tomorrow.”

“Well, I guess I’ve told him enough about me. In fact, if I said any more, I’d have to kill him,” Jelal said, his eyes sparkling mischievously. “But seriously, Pran,” he added, “don’t discuss what I told you until we get safely to Earth, far from Maraknese spies.”

Pran’s father snorted. “‘Safely to Earth,’ you say? From the stories I’ve heard, you might as well say ‘safely into Maraknese High Command headquarters!’”

“What stories?” asked Pran, his curiosity aroused.

His father frowned. “Ask Loremaster Lokor tomorrow. He’ll loan you the books.”

Pran said goodnight to his parents and Jelal (who made himself at home in the spare bedroom across the hall), and got ready for bed. Just as he was about to blow out the lamp on his nightstand, his father entered the room, sat down on the edge of the bed, and said, “I’m interested to know what you think of Jelal. You’ve had the chance to spend time with him on several occasions, and now heard his true life story. What’s your impression of him?”

Without hesitation, Pran replied, "I like Jelal. He's a very interesting person, with a good sense of humor. A little conceited, perhaps, but it was fun talking with him and hearing his story." Then he frowned. "The only thing that bothers me is the way he got so upset when I guessed what he was about to say next. I thought he was going to cry. That doesn't make any sense, if he's really an adult, does it?"

His father shook his head sadly. "My own impression is that Jelal isn't the most emotionally stable person. Life hasn't been easy for him, and he's prone to depression. You see, while he stayed young, his parents, brother, sister, and all his friends grew old and died, leaving him all alone.

"Furthermore, as a spy, Jelal has had to live not only the so-called 'double life' of other secret agents, but a *true* double life: half child and half adult. His need to act at certain times like a boy, at other times like a man, has given him something of a split personality, so in a way he is really two people, Jelal and Mouse.

"In his adult personality, as Mouse, he's capable of killing the enemy as coldly and efficiently as any assassin. But when he's fully immersed in his child persona, as Jelal, his judgment is as poor as any twelve-year-old. He tends to forget details of Mouse's mission, as if it's not really *his* mission, or even neglects his duties to run off and play with friends his size! Tonight, I think the reason Jelal had me leave the room was so he could revert to his child personality, because around adults who know his secret he feels the need to be Agent Mouse.

"With all his emotional problems, it bothers me that I'll be trusting Jelal with your life on this journey." Pran's father sighed and sat silently for a minute, then said, "But hey, I don't mean to worry you, son. Jelal is a full-fledged Magician, he's used to handling dangerous situations behind enemy lines, and he's skilled in martial arts, so he probably *is* the best choice to accompany you to Earth. And if Jelal does become unstable during your trip, Lieutenant Hakon will be there to keep an eye on him, so you won't be in any—I mean the *mission* won't be in any—danger." He affected a comforting smile and said, "Goodnight, son; see you bright and early in the morning."

Pran found his father's smile unconvincing after his hints that Jelal could be a dangerously unstable companion. But no, he thought as he blew out the lamp, Jelal was a friend, and Pran already felt a true bond with him. He decided to trust his own feelings about Jelal, regardless of what others said.



17: COVER STORY

The next morning, Pran woke up eager to get to school and see the looks on his attackers' faces upon finding him still alive, especially Samir's, since he was a former friend. He gulped down breakfast hurriedly, finishing long before Jelal, who turned out to have quite an appetite for someone so small. As he watched Jelal help himself to seconds on pancakes and bacon, Pran asked, "Are you *ever* going to finish eating?" His father had already left, Teleporting to work because the prophecy meant there was no need to conserve gold.

"What's your rush?" asked Jelal.

Pran sighed. He didn't want to say the reason aloud with his mother around.

Jelal finally pushed his chair back from the kitchen table. The two boys shouldered their knapsacks and said goodbye to Pran's mother and Nako. By the time they made it to the front gate, Kimbar and Garwin were approaching, so Pran felt obliged to stop and wait for them.

"Good morning," Kimbar said cheerfully. "You're out early, Pran. Usually on Mondays *we* have to wait for *you*. Why such a hurry to start this week's lessons?"

"I have my reasons," Pran said, not quite ready to disclose them.

Kimbar asked, "What's this little Novice from Master Alimar's school doing here, Pran?"

"Jelal's in our school now. He just transferred."

"But he doesn't live near us," Garwin pointed out smugly, "so why's he walking out of your house this morning?"

"Because he slept there last night."

Garwin's eyes widened. "Why'd you let a little Novice boy you just met last week sleep over with you?" He tilted his head and looked at Pran oddly. "Was Kimbar right in what he said about you on the way home from the circle of sorcery?"

Pran burst out laughing, and said, "Don't be silly, Garwin. It's not that! I'm not falling in love with Jelal!"

"Then why was he walking out of your house this morning? What's so special about this little Novice, and what is he to you?"

Jelal shot Pran a warning glance, and Pran bit his lip. "Sorry, I'm not allowed to tell anyone."

Kimbar said, "Come on, Pran, we're your best buddies! You can tell us anything."

Garwin added, shaking his head, "After all the years we've been friends, Pran, I'm disappointed in you, keeping secrets from us like this."

"Let's just start walking, or we're going to be late for school," Pran urged. He wasn't only changing the subject. He didn't want to miss the reaction on Samir's face upon seeing him still alive.

Garwin crossed his arms and said stubbornly, "I'm not taking another step until you tell me what's going on!"

"Fine, then we'll just go on without you," Pran said.

Kimbar said, "I'm with Garwin on this. I'm staying here too until you tell us."

Pran sighed. "Jelal, can't we tell them at least some of it? I trust them."

Jelal hesitated, then asked Garwin and Kimbar, "Can you keep a secret?"

"Sure," Garwin said.

"Of course," Kimbar agreed.

Pran wondered how much the little spy would reveal, since everyone had made clear that both his identity *and* the mission could only be revealed to those with a 'need to know.'

Jelal looked around as if checking for eavesdroppers, then beckoned for them to huddle together. As he joined the huddle, Pran said, "Please make it quick, Jelal, okay? I want to be on time."

Nodding, the little spy whispered, "My father works undercover for the Royal Bureau of Investigation."

"Your father's an RBI secret agent?" Garwin exclaimed, his eyes wide.

"Shh, not so loud!" Jelal whispered, looking around again furtively. "Yes, that's right. He's had reports that Maraknese Sorcerers have infiltrated Eldor and may be recruiting magic students in White River Junction. First they turn a student to sorcery, then they try to get him to betray Eldor. My father can't go undercover as a magic teacher, since he can't do magic, so he asked me to do it for him."

"I see," said Kimbar, sounding impressed.

Jelal continued, "Master Alimar's school turned out to be clean, so my father arranged with Master Gilamond for me to transfer to his school and check it out. I don't have to do anything dangerous, just keep my eyes and ears open." He started walking, and to Pran's relief, Garwin and Kimbar followed.

"Ah, so that's what you were doing at the circle of sorcery," Garwin guessed, "spying for your father. I should have known it wasn't Pran who told on our classmates."

"I didn't tell on any of you," Jelal said, looking worried that he'd said too much.

Garwin said, "Don't worry. Even if you did, your secret's safe with me, since national security's involved. But if you wanted to keep an eye on the boy leading the circle of sorcery, I'm afraid you're a few days too late. Master Gilamond expelled Sekar last week for being too much under the influence of sorcery to cast spells in lab. I'd been *wondering* where he got his knowledge of sorcery, but what you just told us would explain it."

Jelal said, "Thanks for the information."

"Come on, let's hurry," Pran urged. "I need to get to school on time today." Without waiting for the others, he began to walk faster.

Running to catch up with him, Jelal asked, "Do you think they believed me?"

"Yes, that's a good cover story," Pran said. "Did you just come up with it now?"

"Glad you liked it, but it's not just a cover story. I made up the part about my father, of course, but the rest is true. Why do you look surprised, Pran? Didn't you know all the best cover stories are based on truth?"

"No, I didn't," Pran confessed.

"The RBI isn't sure exactly where Maraknese agents are recruiting magic school students, but from what I've seen so far, it's more likely your father's school than Alimar's. You didn't think I transferred to your school just because I *liked* you, did you?"

"No, of course not," Pran lied, feeling somewhat disappointed.

Jelal's knowing smile made Pran suspect the little spy had a Lie Detector spell active.

As the other two boys caught up with them, Garwin said, "So, Pran, are you ready to tell us why you're in such a hurry to get to school on a Monday morning?"

Pran sighed. "Okay, but keep walking, and you've got to promise not to tell."

"It seems you have a *lot* of secrets today," Kimbar observed wryly.

"Yes," Pran said, "and I'm afraid there are some I still can't tell you. A lot's happened in the last few days."

Garwin asked, "Did you just admit you're going to *continue* keeping secrets from us?"

"It's not up to me," Pran said. "I have to keep some things secret from everyone without a need to know. I *can* tell you what happened to me on Saturday, but we only have time for the brief version now. Jelal already knows the full story."

Kimbar and Garwin looked stunned to hear he'd told Jelal before them.

"To make a long story short," Pran said, "On Saturday, I was attacked on the way home from White River Junction, beaten up, thrown off the bridge, and left for dead. Fortunately, someone found me and Healed me. I haven't reported my attackers' names because I don't want to look like a snitch after so many kids already think I snitched on them last week. But I think my father already suspects who they are."

Garwin said, "I think I know too: Sekar, Pathik and Samir. Am I right?"
"You guessed it."

Kimbar's green eyes went wide. "Samir? I don't believe it. After you and Garwin, he's my best friend!"

"He was my friend too, once, but now he's betrayed me," Pran said bitterly. "He, Sekar, and Pathik tried to kill me, throwing me off a thirty foot bridge onto the rocks."

Kimbar muttered, "Now Sekar and Pathik, that doesn't surprise me at all."

"Wait a minute," Garwin said. "We were supposed to cast Gravity Shield spells in lab last week, remember? Maybe they *weren't* trying to kill you when they threw you off the bridge."

Pran nodded. "Yes, I thought of that, too. That's why I'm in a hurry to get to school. I want to watch Samir's face when he comes in and sees me still alive. His expression might show whether he wanted me dead or not."

Kimbar said, "I'll watch him too. I know Samir well—or at least I *thought* I did," he said, shaking his head, "so I should be able to read his face. It'll be interesting to see, anyway, because to him, it'll be like you came back from the dead. He might think you're a ghost and run out of school screaming," he said with a laugh.

Garwin said, "More likely he'll run away so he won't be arrested for attempted murder. I'll watch him too. Three pairs of eyes are better than one."

Jelal said, "Make that *four* pairs of eyes. My father," he said, winking at Pran, "has taught me to be very observant, so I'm sure I can read his face."

Pran smiled, glad he'd have a trained spy helping him watch, along with his other two friends. "Samir'll be easy to spot when he arrives, as he's the only redhead in the school."

"You told me Sekar was expelled, but what about Pathik?" asked Jelal. "Shouldn't we watch him, too?"

"Ever since my father made him repeat his Conjurer year, Pathik has looked at me like he wished I were dead," Pran said with disgust. "Why would today be any different?"

Without warning, Kimbar said, "Race you to school!" and took off running. They were too close to school to make up for his head start, so

Kimbar arrived first, but Pran was a close second. He and Kimbar paused on the porch to catch their breath and allow the others to catch up, so they could all enter the school together. Garwin arrived third, and Jelal, with his short legs, was last.

As the four boys entered the classroom together, Pran was relieved to see that only a few other students had arrived, and Samir and Pathik were not among them. Pran, Kimbar, and Garwin put their knapsacks on top of their usual desks, Pran in the center, Kimbar on his right, and Garwin on his left. Kimbar offered Jelal the empty desk ahead of him, but the little spy said, "Thanks, but I think I'll stand for now and watch the door."

Pran said, "We'd *all* better stand watch." He led the other three boys to the far side of the room, where they had a good view of the front door.

They didn't have long to wait before Samir walked into the classroom, all alone, and wandered slowly over to his desk near the back of the room. Dropping his books on the desk, he collapsed into his seat and sat gazing straight ahead, a blank expression on his face. There were dark circles under his eyes, and he looked worn and haggard, his red hair straggly and uncombed.

Pathik lumbered into the classroom next and plopped himself down in the seat next to Samir. He looked up, saw Pran, and his eyes went wide. Pathik whispered something to Samir, then nudged him into alertness so hard that the smaller boy grunted with pain.

When Samir looked up and saw him, to Pran's amazement, the red haired boy beamed a smile of relief. Springing from his seat as if reenergized, Samir strode over to him, saying, "Thank God you're here, Pran! And you're *okay!*" He looked Pran up and down, an expression of concern crossing his face. "You *are* okay, aren't you?"

Pran was so bewildered that he could only nod dumbly.

At that, Samir actually hugged him, saying, "I'm so glad! Your father did a great job Healing you." He stepped back, shaking his head. "I couldn't sleep the last two nights; I was so worried about what happened to you, Pran."

By this time, the whole class was staring at Samir, but he didn't seem to notice. Pran stared at him too, astonished. *Were those tears in his eyes?*

He was so confused by Samir's reaction that the words came out sounding more like a question than an accusation as he stammered, "What you, uh, *did* to me, you mean?"

Samir hung his head. "I know how it looked, but I really didn't mean to harm you, Pran. Well, except for a few punches, I mean, 'cause I was angry at you for snitching on us. When you fell, and it turned out you had no Gravity Shield spell, I wanted to go down and try to Heal you. But then a man came toward us screaming bloody murder, so we had to run away. I'm so sorry, Pran."

Pathik, who had walked over to stand behind Samir said, "Me too, Pran. I didn't mean ta kill ya, just teach ya a lesson." He kept glancing nervously between the teacher's office and the schoolhouse door as if contemplating escape.

Samir caught the direction of Pathik's glance and blanched. "I suppose you told your father who ambushed you? Prison, I think I could handle, but your *father*—" Samir's voice trailed off in fear, and he shuddered.

Kimbar, his voice harsher than Pran's, said, "No, Pran *didn't* tell his father who attacked him. Personally, I don't understand why he'd protect your identity, after what you did to him."

Finally seeming to notice Kimbar, Garwin, and Jelal, Samir asked, "You guys all know?"

"Yes," Garwin said, "But Pran made us promise not to tell anyone else."

Now it was Samir's turn to look bewildered. "Why?"

Pran said, "Because I'm trying to prove a point—that I'm *not* the snitch you think I am. I never was."

"You mean we attacked you for—nothing?"

Pran nodded. "That's right."

Tears now flowed visibly down Samir's cheeks. "Oh, Pran, I'm so sorry."

Pran stared at him in amazement. This wasn't going at *all* the way he'd planned!

Garwin said, "Pull yourself together and sit down, Samir, before Master Gilamond comes out here."

"Who's that little blond boy with you?" Samir asked sleepily, as Kimbar and Pran steered him back to his desk. "I think I've seen him somewhere before."

With his mind so preoccupied by Samir's unexpected reaction, Pran barely heard the question.

Kimbar answered, "That's Jelal, a Novice transferring here from Master Alimar's school."

The rest of the class was staring at Pran, Samir, and Pathik. Before they could ask any questions, Pran's father stepped out of his office with his apprentices in tow. Today, his father was wearing a sword, so students immediately began whispering to each other about what this might signify. Fipin finally raised his hand and asked, "Master Gilamond, why are you wearing your sword in school?"

"I don't want to alarm you, as it's not likely the enemy will advance all the way to White River Junction, but the Magicians' Council wants all of us to take precautions, just in case. I'm sure most of you heard the bell summoning the town's Magicians to a meeting of the Council this weekend. One thing decided there was that all Magicians are to wear swords from now on, for the duration of the war. As most of you know, if you point a sword at an enemy when casting an attack spell, it enhances the power of the spell, and if magic fails, the blade can be used to defend yourself.

"We also want all magic students to wear their belt knives to school every day, from now on, not just when we're practicing attack spells. Any of you who own swords can wear them to school too, as long as you keep them sheathed in the classroom. Short swords *only*, please, with the blade no longer than your arm—we can't have your sword tip knocking over lab equipment whenever you turn around!"

Yuli blurted out, "Oh, the Council meeting was about the *war*! I thought Sekar had followed through on his threat to complain to them about his expulsion."

A few boys laughed, but when they saw their teacher's face darken at the mention of Sekar's name, they stifled their laughs or turned them into coughs.

After marking the attendance, Pran's father introduced Jelal, but before anyone could ask questions about the new Novice, he sprang

another surprise announcement on the class. “Due to current events, there will be a slight change in the curriculum, starting today. Again, I don’t want to alarm you, but in case the war takes a turn for the worse, we need as many magic students as possible able to defend themselves, especially the fourth year students, the Conjurers. So this week—and perhaps for the duration of the war—we’ll skip my morning lecture, ‘Theory and Principles of Magic,’ and instead have two Magic Labs each day.”

There were scattered cheers, and Pran realized that he and his friends weren’t the only ones who found his father’s lectures boring. His father held up a hand for silence, but Pran noticed the corners of his mouth twitch into a slight smile. “Wait until I reveal the first new spell you’ll be learning; I think you’ll be even more pleased. Normally, we don’t teach it until the end of the school year, and then only to Conjurers, because it’s thought that younger boys are too likely to use it for mischief. Although come to think of it,” he said, looking directly at Pran, “you can get into just as much trouble with a Silence spell.”

Pran’s eyes widened. How did his father know?

“Today, I will teach all of you—” Pran’s father paused for effect, all eyes on him in hushed expectation “—the spell for Invisibility.”

The class erupted in whoops and hollers of joy, with Kimbar cheering the loudest.



18: SAMIR'S REPRIEVE

About an hour later, Kimbar said, “Congratulations, Pran, you did it—turned yourself invisible and then back again. Now move over and let me have my turn,” he ordered, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. But to his obvious frustration, Kimbar wasn’t able to make any of his body disappear, not even his hands or his head. After the third try, still with no results, Kimbar slammed his palm down hard on the table, his gold ring making a loud *bang* that turned all heads toward him.

Pran said, “Kimbar, relax!”

Kimbar grumbled, “I’ve been looking forward to this spell for the last three years. I’m a Conjuror now, not some Novice; I should be able to do it easily! I see the first two *Charmers* were able to turn themselves invisible.”

“Maybe you’re trying too hard,” Pran suggested.

Kimbar looked over at Pathik and swore aloud upon realizing even that dumb son of a butcher had managed to turn his *head* invisible. In Pran’s opinion, that caused a definite improvement in Pathik’s appearance, but it certainly didn’t make Kimbar any happier.

Pran’s father, who was close enough to have heard Kimbar swearing, clapped his hands together and announced, “Class, I think it’s time for a break. Those Conjurers who have not yet mastered the spell can continue practicing this afternoon, along with the Charmers

and Initiates. You may go outside now for a few minutes until your math teacher arrives.”

Kimbar was muttering under his breath as they walked outside, evidently still upset about his lack of success in casting the Invisibility spell. Pran had an idea how to take his friend’s mind off his failure and, at the same time, answer something that had been bothering him all morning. “Guys,” he said to Kimbar and Jelal, “let’s go behind the schoolhouse so we can talk more privately.” Once behind the building, Pran asked, “What did you think of Samir’s reaction when he saw me this morning?”

Jelal volunteered, “I use a Lie Detector spell, so I know he told the truth.”

Kimbar scoffed, “You needed a *spell* to know that? It was totally obvious.”

“I agree, Samir was sincere, but it doesn’t make sense,” Pran said, shaking his head in puzzlement. “Two days ago, he acted like my worst enemy, but today he’s acting like a friend. I don’t get it.”

Kimbar suggested, “Hey, maybe after you fell off the bridge, he and Sekar had a falling out, if you’ll pardon the pun.”

“After I was *thrown* off the bridge, you mean. Come to think of it, when they were punching me, it was Samir who finally told them to stop, and he wasn’t the one who threw me off the bridge; Pathik was, after Sekar told him to do it.”

Kimbar said, “Sekar must have planned the ambush. Pathik doesn’t have the brains to come up with a plan like that, and Samir isn’t mean enough.”

Jelal added, “Pathik wasn’t lying when he said he didn’t mean to injure you, but he sure didn’t look as sorry as Samir. I think Pathik’s just relieved you didn’t tell on him.”

At that moment, their math teacher rode up on his horse, so the three boys had to go back inside. On the way back in, Pran whispered to Jelal, “When did you cast your Lie Detector spell?”

Jelal answered, “I *always* have an active Lie Detector spell. It comes in handy in my line of work.”

Upon taking roll, the young math teacher appeared nearly scared out of his wits to see a large, headless boy sitting in the back row. It was of course Pathik, who had proven unable to cancel the Invisibility spell he’d

cast on his head. Halfway through the class, the Invisibility spell wore off on its own—much to Pran's disappointment, as he'd been hoping Pathik's ugly mug would be hidden from view forever.

When lunchtime came, Garwin went off to eat with the apprentices, as he often did when he had questions for them about magic, so Pran decided to invite Jelal to join him and Kimbar for lunch. While he was retrieving his sandwiches from the school's magically cooled icebox, Samir approached Pran and asked hesitantly, "Could I possibly join you for lunch? I need to talk to you. I'll understand if you don't want to speak to me after what I did on Saturday, but I'm really sorry about that; I mean it."

Pran's curiosity got the better of his anger, which was already on the wane. "Okay," he agreed, "but it won't just be the two of us. I'll be eating with Kimbar and Jelal, the new Novice. Anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of them, too."

With a wounded look in his eyes, Samir said, "You don't have to be afraid to be alone with me, Pran."

"I'm not afraid of you," Pran replied truthfully. He wasn't afraid to face Samir in a *fair* fight, especially not at that moment, when the boy looked so exhausted and brokenhearted.

Samir smiled tentatively, but his eyes seemed haunted by an inner pain. He followed Pran over to the tree where Kimbar and Jelal sat waiting.

Upon seeing Samir, Kimbar sat bolt upright, saying, "You invited him to eat with us, after what he did to you?"

Pran said, "He wants to talk to me. Let him talk." Noticing Samir's uneasiness, he said, "Have a seat, Samir, and relax. We're not going to hurt you." He felt almost sorry for the boy, as weak and broken as he appeared—a far cry from his appearance two days earlier at the bridge. "Now then," he said when he and Samir had seated themselves under the tree next to Kimbar and Jelal. "What did you want to talk about?"

Samir swallowed. "Do they really know everything that happened at the bridge?"

Pran said, "Yes."

“Okay,” Samir said. A tremor ran through him. “I—I want to apologize for what we did to you. We thought you’d snitched on us for being at the circle of sorcery last week. Your father even hinted you were there spying for him—or at least I *thought* he did. Why would he let us think that, if you weren’t the one who turned us in?”

Pran said, “He was angry at me for being at the circle of sorcery, so he thought it a fitting punishment to turn my classmates against me. It worked all too well.”

“That’s terrible,” Samir said, “your own father setting you up like that!”

Kimbar said angrily, “Not as terrible as what *you* did to Pran. Was it his *father’s* fault you left him lying bleeding under a bridge, half dead? I don’t think so!”

“I’ve been trying to say how sorry I am,” Samir said. “The last two nights, my conscience kept me awake until almost dawn. When I heard you hit the rocks and saw your body lying there, broken and bleeding, I felt sick. I was afraid you were dead, and if we’d killed you, I thought I deserved to die too. If you hadn’t shown up for school today, I was planning to turn myself in and take my chances with the law, with Sekar, even with your father. I thought you had a Gravity Shield spell; I really did! You’ve got to believe me, Pran,” he pleaded, tears welling up in his eyes again.

“I believe you,” said Jelal, who had the benefit of an active Lie Detector spell.

“I do, too,” Pran said, not needing a spell to sense Samir’s sincerity.

“Thank you,” Samir said with obvious relief. “Pran, when I saw your body lying on the rocks in a pool of blood, motionless, I thought you were dead,” he said, tears streaming down his face, “but I wanted to go down and see if you were alive, to Heal you if I could. I *would’ve*, too, except a big, brown-skinned man walked toward us on the bridge, swinging a hammer. He was a foreigner, but he spoke enough Eldorean to get people’s attention, yelling, ‘Murderers!’” His shoulders slumped. “I’m sure you think I’m just making that up.”

Pran couldn’t help smiling. “No, I know you’re not making that up, because I’ve met the man. He and his family rescued me.”

Samir dried his tears on his sleeve. "That's great. I was *hoping* someone would rescue you. After we got chased off the bridge, I wanted to tell someone where to find you, so they could take you to Doc Parador to be Healed. But Sekar—" Samir shook his head. "He said if I told anyone about the incident, I'd suffer the same fate as you! I'd thought he was my friend, but when he started threatening me, I saw what he's really like. Sekar cares nothing for anyone but himself.

"So, Pran, what happened after you fell off the bridge? Did that foreign man take you to your father, did he bring Doc Parador to you, or did he find some other Magician to Heal you?"

"Let's just say he brought me to someone who could Heal me," Pran said. He was not yet ready to trust Samir with the news that he'd met a girl who could do *magic*... the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen... a girl who was destined to accompany him on a quest to save Eldor. Why, if Samir and the others hadn't attacked him, he never would have met Vitina! At the thought that Samir had helped bring him together with the beautiful brunette, Pran said spontaneously, "I forgive you, Samir," and shook his former attacker's hand.

Samir grinned the broad grin of a man who'd been granted a last minute reprieve by the King on execution day.

Pran explained, "Painful as it was, Samir, if you and the others hadn't attacked me on the bridge, I never would have met Vitina. And if I'd never met her—" He stopped, not wanting to reveal the prophecy, nor ready to talk about his feelings toward Vitina, feelings he'd never had for anyone before.

Samir asked incredulously, "Pran, are you falling in love?"

Pran blushed, embarrassed that it was so obvious!

Kimbar grinned. "You really do have the hots for her, eh? Well, if *you* forgive Samir, I guess I have no choice but to forgive him too." He also shook Samir's hand, but warned, "Just don't hurt my friend Pran again, okay?"

"Don't worry," Samir said. "I'll be Pran's friend too, from now on. I'll never again let him down or betray him."

That settled, the four boys finally began eating. They barely had time to finish before the school bell rang to signal the end of the lunch break.

During the afternoon's academic classes, Pran looked back at Samir several times and noticed him having a great deal of trouble staying awake. It was as if all that had been keeping Samir awake in the morning were feelings of guilt, which had dissipated as soon as Pran forgave him. During history class, Samir fell asleep entirely, but fortunately for him, the history teacher was too nearsighted to notice him sleeping in the back row.

In the break between history class and Magic Lab, Pran nudged Samir awake, saying "You're in no shape to do magic this afternoon, Samir. You know what my father said; if you're not feeling well enough to do spells, just let him know."

Samir whispered, "I'm afraid to talk to your father. What if he's already guessed I was one of your attackers? First he'll turn me into a toad, then he'll step on me!"

"Don't be silly, Samir!"

Samir looked up at Pran hopefully.

"That would be sorcery, and my father doesn't do black magic." Realizing from Samir's crestfallen expression that this wasn't the reassurance he needed, Pran added, "Let *me* handle my father." He walked up to the teacher's desk and cleared his throat.

His father looked up from his notes. "Yes, what is it?"

"It's about Samir," Pran said.

His father sat bolt upright, a spark of anger in his eyes. His hand strayed to his sword.

Pran continued, "Samir's exhausted from not being able to sleep. He's in no shape to cast any spells today, let alone an Invisibility spell, so can you excuse him from lab and let him go early? He really needs to go home and rest."

His father looked astonished. He beckoned Pran closer, then whispered, "Do you mean he *wasn't* one of your attackers?"

Aware his father used Lie Detector spells, Pran didn't answer the question. Instead, he said, "Samir's my friend. I have nothing to fear from him."

His father opened his mouth, and then closed it again. Finally, he asked, "Are you sure?"

Pran nodded.

His father yelled, "Samir!"

Samir, who'd been half-doing again, jolted into wakefulness.

"Front and center, Samir," Pran's father said firmly.

The redheaded boy edged his way to the front of the classroom as if dreading every step, reminding Pran of the kitten Pathik had forced toward the fire last week. When he finally joined Pran in front of the teacher's desk, Samir's face was tight with fear.

"My son tells me that you're too tired to cast any spells today."

Samir nodded, swallowing nervously.

"Do you want to tell me what guilty thoughts have been keeping you awake at night?"

Looking panic-stricken, Samir shook his head quickly.

"I thought not. Be grateful that you have a true friend in my son, someone who looks after your interests. Make sure you honor his friendship and act to deserve the trust he places in you. Go home and rest, Samir; you're dismissed."

Samir bolted from the room, forgetting his knapsack in his hurry to leave.

During their regularly scheduled Magic Lab, Kimbar had several more chances to practice casting the Invisibility spell, and finally succeeded. "Why did it take me so much longer than the others?" he asked Nahshon.

The apprentice reassured him, "You can't rush things when you're learning a difficult new spell. You need to relax and take your time. This morning, you were trying too hard, and you were in too much of a hurry to see results—or rather, *not* see the results."

Pran said, "Didn't I tell you that you were trying too hard?"

By the end of the lab, all the Charmers had managed to cast their Invisibility spells correctly, too. The Initiates were mostly successful (Oren only managed to turn *half* his body invisible, but that was still better than what Pathik had done). Meanwhile, Pran's father told the Novices to just sit back and observe the older boys. Pran knew this made sense, as it was pointless to try to teach such an advanced spell to Novices only two weeks into the school year, and would only use up valuable time the older boys needed to master the spell.

At the end of Magic Lab, Pran's father announced, "I'd like Pran and Jelal to stay after school. The rest of you are dismissed."

As the rest of the class filed out of the schoolhouse, Garwin lingered behind. Eyeing Jelal suspiciously, he asked, "Why'd Master Gilamond ask you two to stay after class?"

Jelal answered quickly, "Extra credit assignment."

"Is that true, Pran?" Garwin asked skeptically.

Pran hesitated. "In a manner of speaking. We have this, er, project to do—"

Jelal stopped him short, saying, "Remember, we can't tell *anyone*."

"Oh, come off it, Jelal," Garwin complained. "You already told me where your father works, and about your little undercover mission here. That's obviously why you're meeting with Master Gilamond after class. Why don't you let me stay and help you?"

Pran sighed. "I'm sorry, Garwin. There are some things we can't discuss with you, much as I'd like to."

Garwin said angrily, "Fine, if you don't want my help, *be* that way! I could have given Jelal more information about Sekar, you know. Jelal's father will just be wasting his time if he investigates any other White River Junction students besides him." He picked up his books and stormed out of the classroom, slamming the door behind him.

Pran's father raised his eyebrows. "Well, Jelal, I see you've already used your secondary cover story on Garwin."

The little spy said, "Yes, and it worked pretty well. I even let Pran in on the fact that there's some truth to it."

"Indeed there is. If you have time, Jelal, you *should* investigate Sekar. He's up to no good, I can tell you that. I'd also be very interested, personally, to find out where he was Saturday afternoon when Pran was on his way home.

"By the way, son, I know what you did for Samir today, and I don't just mean asking me to let him leave early because he was tired. That was a very noble thing you did, forgiving him. I'm not sure I could have done the same, in your shoes. You acted like a man, son—not just any man, but a *fine* man—and I'm proud of you."

Pran beamed at the compliment.

"I have to admit, though, I'm not totally comfortable with your being friends with him again," his father warned, fixing Pran's eyes in a stern gaze.

Pran insisted, "You can trust him now. Samir and I had a good talk today. He's had a change of heart."

His father asked, "What do you think, Jelal?"

"I agree; Samir doesn't wish your son any harm. Not anymore. But I'll be keeping an eye on him, just to make sure he behaves!"

Pran's father said, "Okay, for now I'll trust your judgment about Samir's change of heart, but I'll be watching him, too. Now boys, while we're waiting for our guests, help me arrange eight student desks in a circle."

After they'd put the desks in place, Jelal chose one that let him keep his back to the wall, facing the door. Pran had barely sat down next to him before they heard hoof beats stop outside the schoolhouse.



19: JELAL'S ACCUSATION

The two boys ran to the window and saw Mohinder dismounting from his horse. Pran held the schoolhouse door open for him with a smile, saying, “Good to see you again, Mohinder.”

“Likewise,” said the Truthseeker, tipping his hat. He paused at the threshold, looking curiously at Pran. “I sense a change in you since we last met. It’s only been two days, but you seem older, somehow, Pran. Something has happened to you; do you care to tell me about it?”

Pran asked, “Have you become a prophet like your father?”

Mohinder laughed, stepping into the room. “You’re not the first person to ask me that. It’s in the blood, I suppose, so someday I’ll be expected to take my father’s place. But you haven’t answered my question.”

Pran pursed his lips. “Two things happened to me in the past two days; one painful, and one joyful. The happy event was meeting another member of our party.”

Mohinder’s eyes scanned the room. “I guess he hasn’t arrived yet. He *will* be coming to our meeting, won’t he?”

Jelal laughed, quipping, “Your father better not hang up his prophet’s mantle just yet, Mohinder.”

Pran’s father said sharply, “Jelal, show some respect!”

"His observation is true," Mohinder said humbly. "I still have much to learn before I can take my father's place."

They were interrupted by the *clop-clop* of a two-horse carriage approaching. Heading to the window again, the two boys saw a clarence cab halt at the schoolyard gate. The driver walked around to the passenger door, extending a gloved hand to help Vitina climb down from the carriage.

Pran ran to open the schoolhouse door, grinning from ear to ear to see the beautiful, brown-skinned girl again. As she walked up the steps, he exclaimed, "You came!"

"Of course," Vitina said, her smile making his heart beat faster. "I do not usually travel by cab, but I thought it best to use some of the gold your father left us while I still can."

"That was smart," Pran agreed.

"Well, Pran," Vitina said, laughing, "will you invite me in, or will you continue to stand in the doorway and block my way?"

"I'm sorry," Pran said, stepping aside. "Please come in." He noticed Jelal staring at Vitina with what appeared to be an expression of deep distrust, but had no idea what could have stirred the little spy's suspicions.

Today, Vitina wore a summer length dress of pale green linen, revealing lovely brown calves and two inches of thigh. Around her neck glittered one of the gold chains given to her by Pran's father to pay her back for Healing him.

Mohinder asked, "Is *she* going to be one of your companions?"

"That's right," Pran confirmed.

Mohinder said, "Now I understand. I had assumed only boys would be going on the quest. I fear having a girl along will complicate things."

Vitina's eyes flashed, and she asked, "What do you mean?"

"No offense intended. I just mean that when a teenage girl accompanies two or three boys to a strange land, without a chaperone, romantic feelings may distract from the quest. If two boys become rivals for your affections, it could lead to jealousy and anger."

Pran felt himself blushing, and Vitina also looked embarrassed. To their relief, the awkward moment was interrupted by Colonel Kaldor,

Lieutenant Hakon, and Loremaster Lokor materializing in the center of the room. All three wore plain clothes today, rather than Army uniforms or Magicians' robes, although Pran glimpsed sword hilts poking out from beneath their cloaks.

Pran's father observed, "Dressed as civilians today, eh?"

Colonel Kaldor gave him a dark look. "We thought it best to be inconspicuous in case anyone caught sight of us through the windows. Is there an Anti-Eavesdropping spell on this building?"

"Yes," Pran's father confirmed, "and I reinforced it this morning."

"Good," Kaldor said. "Boys, close the blinds." Once Pran and Jelal had done so, the Colonel cast a Mage-Light in the now-darkened classroom. "Good," he said, "everyone's here, or at least everyone we know about. Now, whoever is responsible for this girl, please send her home so we can get started. This meeting is on a need-to-know basis."

Pran said, "She *has* a need to know, Colonel. This is Vitina, the fourth member of our party. She'll be traveling to Earth with us."

Lieutenant Hakon sneered, "You've got to be kidding. If we can't take more *Magicians* to Earth, and I'm not allowed to bring my archers, let's at least bring more magic students, not useless *girls*. Leave your girlfriend behind, Pran."

Vitina spoke up angrily, her dark eyes flashing like live coals. "I am not his girlfriend, and I do not appreciate being called a 'useless girl!' If you are going to leave anyone behind as useless, leave this little blond boy," she said, cocking her head toward Jelal, who was still eyeing her suspiciously. "I assure you I will be far more useful on this mission than *him*. I did not volunteer to risk my life on Earth just to be a babysitter."

Pran tried to calm her down, saying, "My father and I know how useful you are, Vitina, but there are good reasons that 'little boy' is coming with us, too. Like you, he's more than he appears to be."

His father chuckled. "Obviously, not everybody here knows each other. I think before we go any further, we'd better have full introductions."

Jelal said, "Not so fast! Nobody's introducing *me* until we find out more about this girl, Vitina. I don't trust her."

Pran said, "You don't have to act that way just because she insulted you."

"My personal feelings have nothing to do with it. Vitina, what country are you from?"

"I am from Pendor," Vitina replied.

"She's lying," Jelal said coldly, "as any of you with a Lie Detector spell can tell. She may *look* Pendorean, but she has a trace of a Maraknese accent. She's an enemy spy!"



20: VITINA'S SECRET

Colonel Kaldor quickly moved to bolt the front door, while Lieutenant Hakon drew his sword and pointed it at Vitina.

“No,” Pran cried, “she saved my life!” He placed himself between Hakon and Vitina. “If you want to attack her, you’ll have to go through me.”

Hakon snorted. “If that’s the way you want it, so be it.” With his sword pointed at Pran, he raised his left hand to cast a spell.

There was a bright flash of light, and Pran flinched instinctively, but to his amazement, the sword flew from Hakon’s hand and clattered to the ground while the Lieutenant yelped in pain. Hakon, looking as stunned as Pran, grabbed his sword arm with his left hand as bright drops of blood fell to the floor.

Pran’s father stood with his sword pointed at Hakon. He spun to face Kaldor just as the Colonel drew his own sword, a three feet long cavalry saber. Pran expected Jelal to take the Chief Magician’s side in the dispute, but to his relief, the little spy just stood silently watching, as did Mohinder and Loremaster Lokor.

Kaldor ordered, “Gilamond, sheathe your sword, and tell your son and his friend to move away from the girl. I won’t harm you or the boys, but that girl is dangerous.”

Pran's father shook his head, his own sword tip pointed at Kaldor's chest. "No, Colonel, you sheathe *yours*. Vitina saved my son's life, and I promised her I would never forget it. I cannot let anybody harm her, even if she does turn out to be a Maraknese spy." With a wry smile, he added, "Though I do hope she's not, because I'd hate to be hanged for aiding the enemy."

"Then for the sake of your neck, Gilamond, I hope she has a good explanation for her accent," Kaldor said. He slid his sword back into its scabbard, but kept one hand on its hilt and continued to block the door. Meanwhile, Hakon appeared to be busy casting a Healing spell on himself, his face a mixture of pain and concentration.

Pran's father asked, "Vitina, can you explain your accent? Where are you really from, and why did you lie to us? It would behoove you to tell the truth this time," he warned. "More than one of us has an active Lie Detector spell."

Vitina said, "I am sorry I lied, but I was ashamed to tell the truth. My parents were born and raised in Pendor, but then captured by raiders and taken to Marakna to be sold as slaves. They met on our master's farm, where my brother and I were born into slavery. My parents managed to escape with my brother and me five years ago, when I was twelve.

"Now do you see why I did not want to tell the whole truth? I am not only the *daughter* of slaves, I am an escaped slave myself," she confessed, tears of shame rolling down her beautiful, brown cheeks.

Pran put his arm around her shoulder. "It's okay, Vitina," he said gently, "I understand now why you lied. Don't worry; it's not important to me where you were born or who your parents were."

When Vitina finally stopped crying, Pran grew aware of everyone staring at his arm around her. Feeling extremely self-conscious, he lifted his arm from her lovely shoulders and returned to his seat. In his embarrassment, he began to wish he hadn't made that gesture of support toward her, until Vitina shot him a grateful half-smile that made it all worthwhile.

Colonel Kaldor, who had mercifully waited for Vitina to stop crying, now demanded, "What are you and your family doing in Eldor now? Are you spying for your Maraknese masters?"

"No, never!" Vitina insisted, the fire returning to her eyes. "Believe me, my family hates the Maraknese for enslaving us. If they conquer Eldor, my family and I will likely die, because the Maraknese kill escaped slaves."

Kaldor asked, "Why did your parents agree to let you go on this quest? Do they think that if you go to Earth, then you can stay there safely even if Marakna conquers Eldor?"

Mohinder exclaimed, "For God's sake, Colonel, it's not important what her parents' motivation was for letting her go! All that matters is her own motivation, and she's telling us the truth. I sense in her no ill will, nor any desire to deceive."

Pran's father said gently, "Vitina, you know the goal of our quest: to fetch gold from Earth, so our Magicians can defend against the Maraknese invaders. Will you do your best to make the mission a success, even at the risk of your own life?"

Vitina looked up, her dark eyes meeting his. "Yes, that I will. If I help Eldor win the war, then even if I die on the quest, my family will survive."

Kaldor said, "Okay, I'm satisfied that Vitina is telling the truth, that she's not a spy."

"Me too," said Jelal.

"She's also brave," Kaldor observed. "So are *you*, Gilamond, for attacking my Lieutenant and ordering me to sheathe my sword! If you were one of my soldiers, I'd have you thrown in the stockade, but you are not, so what should I do with you?"

Hakon said, "Sir, remove him from his teaching position and have him arrested for attacking an officer. That spell he used could have killed me if his aim had been off and he'd hit me in the chest instead of the arm."

"How do you know I wasn't aiming for your chest?" Pran's father asked. "You were about to attack my son! Colonel Kaldor, if anyone should be punished, it's Hakon, for trying to attack innocent children, the very people going on the quest to save Eldor. I demand you remove him from this mission. I don't feel safe having a sword-happy hothead like Hakon around my son, and he wasn't supposed to go on the quest anyway."

Hakon countered, “And I demand that you remove Gilamond from this meeting, sir. He attacked me, threatened you, and disobeyed a direct order.”

Kaldor said, “Gentlemen, please! I have half a mind to throw *both* of you in the stockade if you don’t stop bickering.”

Mohinder offered, “Colonel, with your permission, I think I can talk these two into settling their differences peacefully.”

“Be my guest,” Kaldor said with evident relief.

“Lieutenant Hakon should not have pointed his sword at Pran and threatened to attack him and Vitina,” the missionary said. “However, his actions are understandable, since he thought she was an enemy spy, so he did what he’s trained to do as an Army officer. Likewise, Master Gilamond should not have attacked Hakon, but he was defending his son, so his actions are understandable as well. Now if you’ll each apologize to each other, we can get on with the meeting. Remember, we’re all on the same side. Now, which one of you will be gracious enough to apologize first?”

Mohinder folded his arms and stood waiting for the two men to apologize, but it seemed he might have a long wait. Hakon and Pran’s father looked at each other expectantly, each clearly thinking the other man should be the first to apologize.

Colonel Kaldor finally broke the silence. “Lieutenant, you will apologize to Master Gilamond.”

“Yes, *sir*,” Hakon barked, as if to emphasize he was only apologizing because he’d been ordered to by a superior officer. “I’m sorry I threatened your boy.”

“And I’m sorry my spell hurt your hand so badly, Lieutenant.”

Pran noticed Hakon hadn’t apologized for threatening *Vitina*, and his father hadn’t exactly apologized for *attacking* the Lieutenant, but it was a start.

The Truthseeker smiled and asked, “See, was that so hard? Now, instead of tormenting this poor girl with more questions, if someone’s ready to explain how she fits the prophecy and why she’s essential to the quest, I think we should listen.”

“She may be a girl,” Pran’s father said, “but she’s no ordinary girl. She’s an Enchantress.” Without revealing how Pran had fallen off the bridge, he told how Vitina had Healed him afterwards. “I don’t think even Doc Parador could have done a better job Healing my son, considering the seriousness of his injuries. As you said yourself in the Council meeting, Colonel, if anything happens to the questers on Earth, they’re likely to need a trained Healer. Vitina’s an excellent Healer, and also fits the prophecy as a special person, someone who’s more than she appears to be. Being only seventeen, hopefully she’s also young enough to travel to such a bizarre world without risking her sanity.”

Everyone murmured their assent.

Vitina said, “Now that Master Gilamond has told you why I should go to Earth, I would like to know why anybody thinks this insolent little boy is qualified to go with us,” she said, looking at Jelal.

Colonel Kaldor told the little spy, “Since you’ll have to trust each other with your lives, you can trust Vitina with your identity as well, but please be quick, as we have much still to discuss.”

Jelal said, “I’ll give her the brief version. You may find this hard to believe, Vitina, but I’m not the young boy I appear to be. I accidentally cast an Eternal Youth spell on myself when I was twelve. That was over a century ago. I’m a 139-year-old Magician in a twelve-year-old body. I’m sure you don’t believe me—”

“But of course,” Vitina exclaimed, “that explains the way you talk! I thought you were just—”

“An arrogant brat?”

“Exactly,” Vitina agreed with a smile. “I thought you were conceited and rude, talking as if you were Head Boy at the Royal Academy when you look barely old enough to be a Novice!”

Jelal explained, “Usually I talk like a child to hide my age, but here I felt no need, being among those who know and those who will be my companions on the quest. But there’s more. The reason it’s essential for me to hide my age from most people is that I work for His Majesty’s secret service, the EIA.”

"The Eldorean Intelligence Agency?"

"That's right," Jelal said with a touch of pride, "I'm a spy, code-named Mouse." Looking around the room, he instructed, "During today's meeting, everyone should call me only by my code name, Mouse."

"Ah," Vitina said, "now I understand. It all fits—the way you have been acting and why you were so suspicious of my accent. But what about this Army officer? Why was he so eager to attack me?"

Hakon explained, "Vitina, when I drew my sword on you and Pran, I meant nothing personal by it. I was acting, as always, out of loyalty to my kingdom, trying to defend against what I perceived was a threat to Eldor."

Mohinder informed them, "He speaks Truth."

"I know," Pran said, surprised at his own certainty. "I can *feel* it."

"Lie Detector spell?" asked Jelal.

Mohinder said, "No, Pran has the Truthsense. The Spirit of Truth is with him."

"Regardless of how you know," Hakon said, "I'm glad you believe me. It would be hard for me to lead this mission if you didn't trust me."

The Lieutenant's assumption that he was the leader led to an uproar. "What do you mean, '*lead* this mission?'" Jelal asked indignantly. "I thought I would be leader."

"Lieutenant Hakon wasn't in the prophecy," Mohinder added, "so he shouldn't even be *going* on this quest, much less leading it."

Vitina said, "A few minutes ago, this hotheaded soldier tried to kill me!"

"He was going to attack me, too," Pran pointed out, "just to get to her!"

Pran's father demanded, "Why should we trust him to lead the mission after he pointed a sword at my son?"

"Yes," Loremaster Lokor agreed, "he does seem a bit too sword-happy to me."



21: CHOOSING A LEADER

Colonel Kaldor held up his hand for silence and said, “The leader of the quest has not yet been decided. This is a most unusual mission, as it was not initiated by the military nor by Eldorean Intelligence, so neither the Army nor the EIA can claim leadership rights.

“As the town’s Chief Magician, I could appoint a leader for you,” the Colonel said with a sidelong glance at Hakon, “but I don’t want a mutiny after you get to Earth. Instead, we’ll put it up to a vote.”

Mohinder asked, “Colonel, before we vote, shouldn’t we wait until Pran finds the final member of the quest?”

“When will that happen?”

“I’m afraid we don’t know when the final companion will show up. The prophecy said Pran won’t have to look for companions because they’ll come to him, will seek him out if he proves himself worthy. So far he’s proven worthy, so I have confidence his final companion will seek him out.”

Pran said, “The prophecy did give a big hint about my final companion: the teenage relative I never knew I had. Is there a way we can find out who it is through magic? Can’t we just test all my classmates and the students in Master Alimar’s school to see if they’re related to me?”

Foremaster Lokor shook his head, “There is a Paternity spell, but it only identifies father-son or father-daughter relationships. I know of no

spell to identify more distant relationships like half-brother, cousin, or second cousin once removed.”

Lieutenant Hakon cleared his throat. “Sir, Pran might have a relative he doesn’t know about, but *someone* has to know of it, maybe even someone in this room! Gilamond, tell us the truth: does your son have any half-brothers or half-sisters?”

Pran’s father bristled at the insinuation, and he half rose from his chair, face flushed with anger. “Are you accusing me of sowing my crops in another man’s field, or letting another man sow crops in *my* field?”

Colonel Kaldor said, “Peace, gentlemen! I’ll take that as a ‘No.’ Obviously we can’t question Pran’s classmates’ parents that way and expect to keep the mission secret, so we’ll have to hope the prophesied final companion shows up in time to go to Earth. Let’s proceed with the vote for quest leader. The floor is now open to nominations.”

Pran’s father rose to give what seemed a well-rehearsed speech. “Mouse is the obvious choice for leader. As a trained spy, he has the skills needed for this quest. He has experience conducting dangerous missions in foreign lands, working undercover in total secrecy, and returning alive. He’s an expert in all major forms of martial arts. The skills he’s used successfully as a spy are the same type of skills that will be necessary in this mission to Earth.”

Pran supposed some boys would be hurt to hear their father nominate someone other than their own son, but not him, for he knew his father was right. There was no doubt Jelal was the most experienced, most qualified, and the only logical choice for leader. Except maybe Lieutenant Hakon, he realized with dismay. He sure hoped nobody voted for Hakon! Perhaps the man had some leadership skills, but leading soldiers into battle was far different than convincing three or four kids to cooperate in a strange land. He imagined Hakon as quest leader forcing him to march into danger by pressing a sword point to his back.

Lieutenant Hakon said, “Well spoken, Gilamond. However, I have an objection. Colonel, may I speak frankly?”

“Of course. Nothing you say here will go beyond these walls.”

“Colonel,” said Hakon, “you know as well as I do that Mouse has no leadership experience. He has no experience as a team player, either, because he always works alone. But what bothers me most is that I feel his personality is—well, unstable. I’m not sure I’m ready to trust our lives to someone who is emotionally and mentally unbalanced.”

Appearing stung by the harsh words, Jelal said, “In case you forgot, I’m still in the room.”

“I wasn’t saying it to offend,” Hakon said unconvincingly, “but I must be honest. All of us on the quest will depend on each other for our lives. Mouse, the others don’t know you the way Colonel Kaldor, Gilamond, and I do, so they must be made aware of the facts.”

“The facts as *you* see them,” Jelal said angrily, “but my record speaks otherwise. I’ve successfully completed dozens of secret missions behind enemy lines. How many have *you* been on?”

Hakon fired back, “But how many times have you been asked to take psychiatric leave? Oh yes, I know of *that* part of your record too, and our companions deserve to know as well. Many who know Mouse fear that he is mentally ill. I don’t trust his judgment, so don’t put our lives in his hands by making him leader of the expedition.”

Jelal sat frozen, speechless. For a moment, he looked on the verge of bursting out into tears, like a little boy who’d been yelled at by a strict father. To Pran’s relief, the moment passed, and Jelal hid his thoughts behind an emotionless mask.

Pran’s father came to the little spy’s defense. “I still believe Mouse is the best man—or rather, best person—for the job. There’s probably no other Magician in Eldor with as much experience behind enemy lines. And because of his undercover work, Mouse is accustomed to defending himself without magic, something that may prove necessary on this mission. Yes, his youthful spirit makes him immature and at times unstable, but one could say the same about *any* child, including these two teenagers,” he said, gesturing at Pran and Vitina. “And Mouse’s young spirit, the same trait that makes him less stable than other adults, also makes him more suitable for this particular mission.”

Loxmaster Lokor nodded. "Yes, the Truthseekers and I agree that only a young mind, like a child's or a teenager's, can handle the culture shock of going to Earth for the first time. No other Magician is as young as Mouse, both physically and emotionally, so he's the only Magician who can lead this mission."

Kaldor said, "Let's move on to other nominations. Lieutenant Hakon, since you objected to Mater Gilamond's choice, can we assume you're nominating yourself as leader?"

Hakon snorted. "Not if we're putting it to a vote! I'm not stupid; I know I won't win any popularity contests here. Besides, I don't want a mutiny, especially when leading a group of civilians."

"Why?" Jelal demanded. "Because you can't *hang* mutineers if they're civilian?"

"Exactly," Hakon said with a wry smile. "I nominate Pran for quest leader."

Pran couldn't believe his ears. He hadn't known the Lieutenant long, but already disliked him, and had thought the feeling was mutual.

Hakon explained, "Pran is both brave and gallant, as he demonstrated tonight when he stood up to my sword to protect a fair maiden. Or perhaps I should say a *dusky* maiden," he observed, looking at Vitina's brown skin with evident distaste, "but regardless, it was very chivalrous of him."

Vitina protested, her voice a mixture of anger and confusion, "He just called me 'dusky'! What does it mean, 'dusky'?"

Pran said, "It just means you have dark skin. That's all."

"Oh. The way he said it, I thought it meant something bad."

"Perhaps in his mind, but it sure isn't to me," Pran avowed. Although he wasn't bold enough to say it, he hoped she understood that he found her brown skin beautiful.

Pran's father cleared his throat and said, "I second the nomination. Yes, my son is brave. He's also intelligent, serious, a good judge of character, and does not leap hastily to decisions. These traits should serve him well when leading others in a strange, new, and dangerous environment."

The Colonel's eyes studied Pran, "I don't argue with your opinion of your son, but in life or death situations, sometimes quick decisions

are necessary, and Mouse and Lieutenant Hakon are better at making decisions fast under pressure. Are there any other nominations? Very well, let's vote. I cast my ballot for Mouse. Mohinder?"

The Truthseeker said, "I vote for Pran."

Pran's father said, "I abstain. I've already spoken in favor of both candidates, and I believe either one would be a fine choice. However, I must recuse myself from voting, since I'm Pran's father, and Mouse's—" he hesitated, then finished, "—teacher." Pran thought he knew what word his father had almost let slip, as he'd begun to suspect his father was Jelal's spymaster, or "handler." That would explain the secret meetings his father had been having before school, why Jelal was spying for him at the Circle of Sorcery, and Jelal's refusal to take Colonel Kaldor's side when his father drew his sword on the Chief Magician.

Foremaster Lokor said, "I vote for Mouse."

Jelal grinned. "I vote for myself."

"I support Pran," Lieutenant Hakon said.

"And I vote for Pran," Vitina said.

Pran's heart leapt. Maybe she did like him!

Vitina dashed his hopes by explaining, "Although Pran I have not known long, this boy you call 'Mouse' I do not know at all."

Colonel Kaldor said, "That's three votes for Mouse, and three for Pran, but seeing as the only one who hasn't voted yet is Pran, it looks like he'll be the quest leader."

"Wait," Pran said, his mind suddenly made up. "I vote for Mouse." He explained to the surprised faces around him, "He has the skills and experience we'll need on Earth. He's a trained spy, martial artist, Magician, and so forth. Besides, I never asked to be leader."

Kaldor appeared pleased, and said, "Very well, Mouse, you will lead the quest. You should choose someone to be second in command, ready to take over leadership of the mission if you're killed, disabled, or driven insane by the strangeness of Earth."

"What cheery thoughts," Jelal quipped. "Well, since Pran got the next most votes—"

Lieutenant Hakon interrupted, “Colonel, surely I should at least be second in command. I’m an *officer*; it would be disrespectful of the officer class to put me in the rank and file! Besides, when I nominated Pran, it was my understanding that we were casting our votes only for the leader.”

Pran didn’t want to be the cause of so much dissension. He said, “It’s okay with me if Lieutenant Hakon is second in command.”

Jelal shrugged. “I don’t plan on getting killed or disabled, anyway, so Hakon can be my backup, if it’s so important to him. Pran, you’ll be third in line for leadership, in case something happens to both me and Hakon.”

Kaldor clapped his hands together and said, “Okay, now that the issue of leadership is settled, Mouse can take charge of the remainder of the meeting.”

Jelal stammered, “You want—*me*—to take charge of the meeting?”



22: THE MYTHICAL LAND CALLED EARTH

Colonel Kaldor said, “Yes, if you’re going to be a leader, Mouse, it’s about time you start acting like one. You can call on any of us for advice: me, Loremaster Lokor, Master Gilamond, or the Truthseeker, Mohinder. I suggest you begin by asking our Loremaster to share his knowledge, as he’s the one most familiar with Earth.”

“Okay,” Jelal said. “Um, Lokor, please tell us about any supplies we’ll need for our trip, what to wear, and so forth.”

Lokor said, “I can’t tell you what clothing to wear, because fashions on Earth change quickly, and it’s been many years since I was there. Just wear something comfortable, and replace it with local clothing once you get there. You should not carry weapons,” he warned, “or you’ll be thought of as a lunatic. Earthlings long ago stopped using swords, spears, and bows, moving on to more fearsome weapons, both more compact and more deadly, which are unknown on Rados.”

Lieutenant Hakon said, “Then we must have something to defend ourselves from Earth’s weapons. I, for one, do not plan to travel into such a dangerous world unarmed!”

Colonel Kaldor said, “What our Loremaster means is that you should carry no weapons *openly*. If you wish, you can keep knives or even short swords hidden in your rucksacks, space permitting. I don’t see any problem

carrying hidden weapons to Earth, just like on any other undercover mission. Mouse always has knives hidden up his sleeves or in his boots—”

“And other places as well,” Jelal said cheerfully. His right hand blurred behind him, and a split second later he held a fourteen inch dagger with a ten inch blade.

Pran’s eyes widened. He exclaimed, “Wizards alive! If that knife were any bigger, it would be a sword. Where were you hiding *that*?”

Jelal grinned and said, “Under my shirt, in a quick-release sheath strapped to my back. It’s standard issue for spies, assassins, and undercover agents. Perhaps the Colonel can requisition some for the rest of you before we go—except for Vitina, of course.”

Vitina piped up, “What do you mean, ‘Except for Vitina’?”

“Well, obviously,” Jelal said, “you’re a girl, so...”

Vitina’s eyes blazed. “So you think I cannot handle a knife? You, of all people, should know better than to judge others by appearances!”

“Point taken,” Jelal said, grinning sheepishly. “Please order one for her as well. But given the uncertainties of our voyage, I’m afraid we’ll have to purchase most of our other supplies on Earth. Or steal them—I used to be quite good at that,” he said proudly.

“Until you got caught,” Lieutenant Hakon pointed out.

Jelal shot him a dirty look, then said, “Loremaster, could you repeat what you said in the Magicians’ Council about what happens to Shield spells when passing through the portal to Earth?”

Lokor said, “Unfortunately, you’ll gain no advantage by loading up on Shield spells before the gold disappears. Upon going through the portal, all spells you had active will be stripped away, canceled. You’ll lose everything from Shield spells to Deodorant spells.”

Vitina looked around at her companions with distaste at the prospect.

Jelal laughed and said, “Don’t look at me; I’ve never had to use a Deodorant spell in my life! I still have the body of a twelve-year-old boy.”

Lieutenant Hakon said with a sneer, “And the *mind* of one, too.”

“We’re counting on that,” Mohinder reminded him, “in order to help him survive the shock of going to such a strange world. That’s why the

prophecy called for children or teens to go to Earth, not adults. You'd better hope your own mind can handle the shock."

"I'm more concerned," said Hakon, "with the spells that will be stripped away from me when I travel through the portal. Not just Shields, but also spells to enhance my strength, agility, accuracy, vision, hearing, health, and other qualities needed by a good Army officer."

"You can cast the same spells again on Earth," Lokor said, "after you obtain some gold."

Pran asked, "How're we supposed to 'obtain gold' without magic?"

"The Magicians' Council will give each of us a quantity of silver to use for trade, purchase, and casting minor spells," Jelal answered. "In addition, to help us buy gold for major spells, and purchase supplies that are too expensive to buy with silver, they'll provide us with something Earthlings value even more highly than gold: diamonds."

Pran found this outrageously funny. "Diamonds?" He snickered. "What, don't they have any *coal* on Earth? Transforming coal into diamonds is such a simple spell, even Novices know it!"

Foremaster Lokor said, "You're forgetting that Earthlings cannot do magic."

His voice dripping with sarcasm, Lieutenant Hakon added, "The Magicians' Council planned to supply each of us with a sack of diamonds on the day of our departure, but perhaps Pran wants to make his *own*, since the spell is so *easy* for him. Would you prefer a wagonload of coal instead, Pran?"

"No, thank you; diamonds will be fine, sir."

The Foremaster smiled. "Unfortunately, I can't supply you with maps, as no Eldorean has traveled sufficiently on Earth to map it, and the maps they make on Earth are nearly incomprehensible, just squiggly lines with no landmarks. Even if we did have maps, I don't know what part of that vast world you'll need to visit to find large quantities of gold. You'll have to rely on the native guide mentioned by the prophecy."

The Truthseeker said, "Yes, the Angel of Truth said they'll know whom to trust when they hear a familiar name on the strange world of Earth."

Jelal said, "The Magicians' Council authorized me to tell you they came to a decision about how to use Gilamond's dragon friend, Blue Lightning. Mohinder, you'll be pleased to know they're not planning on using the dragon to fight battles. Instead, when we return from Earth with the gold, we'll ask her to help us transport it to the Wizard Towers and to our troops. One can't Teleport into a Wizard Tower from the outside, but every Wizard Tower has a dragon landing pad on its roof."

Colonel Kaldor added, "While you're away, we'll try to keep Eldor's soldiers and Magicians alive and uncaptured, so we can launch a counterattack as soon as you return with the gold. This plan, of course, depends on your mission being successful, and on having ways to get the gold to our forces quickly, wherever they may be. Gilamond hopes Blue Lightning can persuade other dragons to assist too, but rest assured we will only ask dragons to transport gold, not engage in combat."

Mohinder said, "Well, that's certainly a relief."

Foremaster Lokor asked, "Gilamond, do you really think we can trust that dragon of yours?"

"Not to worry. Blue Lightning is a friend of mine."

Lokor said, "So you told the Magicians' Council, but there's an old saying, 'Fire is the dragon's only friend.' Just because you did a dragon a favor once doesn't change the nature of the beast!"

"Well, I didn't just do Blue Lightning a favor. I saved her life."

Hakon laughed rudely and demanded, "Why would anyone in his right mind save the life of a *dragon*?"

Pran's father's face darkened.

Jelal said, "Don't answer that," finally seeming to take his leadership role to heart. "I don't want another fight between you two Magicians, and besides, we have to move on."

Colonel Kaldor nodded his approval. "Well done, Mouse."

Jelal beamed at the compliment and continued with more confidence, "The day of our departure, we'll stop at the Wizard Tower on the way to the portal to pick up some supplies, including the silver and diamonds mentioned earlier. If and when the prophecy about the gold comes to pass,

soldiers will meet us here at school to escort us safely to the Tower. If it's daytime when the gold disappears, then Pran and I will already be at school. Vitina should come to the Wizard Tower as soon as she hears its alarm bell, and Lieutenant Hakon will join the group of soldiers escorting us to the Tower. I believe our Loremaster has some words to say about how we'll travel to Earth, and something to give each of us to help us get there."

Lokor said, "I'm afraid I cannot yet tell you the location of the portal to Earth, or how to get through it, as it's too secret. I realize the five of you have a 'need to know,' but I can't risk telling you until you're securely inside the Wizard Tower on the day of your departure. However, just in case something happens to me between now and then—at my age, one can never be too careful—I've already shared the secret of the portal with both Lieutenant Hakon and Mouse.

"Today I've brought the amulets you will need to travel through the portal to Earth. Guard them with your lives, as very few of these pendants exist in Eldor—or anywhere else on Rados, for that matter—and we cannot create new ones," Lokor said, reaching into a hidden pocket of his robe.

The looks of eager anticipation on the faces of Pran and Vitina turned to puzzlement as they saw the five items the Loremaster pulled out of the secret pocket of his robe. They appeared to be nothing more than silver chains bearing the same silver hexagram pendants worn by all magic students.

Pran asked, "What's so special about those pendants? They look just like the one I'm wearing now."

Lokor replied, "Ah, they may *look* similar, but they are different. The chain is silver like yours, but the hexagram... Well, look closely, feel it, and judge for yourself," he said, handing each of the questers one of the chains.

Pran hefted the hexagram pendant and examined it carefully. The metal was white like silver, but less shiny, and far lighter in weight. "What is this metal? Platinum?"

"No," said Lokor, "something far rarer, a wondrous metal found only on Earth. It is remarkably resistant to corrosion, meaning it will not rust

or tarnish, and nearly as malleable as gold, so it's easy to shape. It is also marvelously light, one third the weight of steel or copper. On Earth, this metal is common, and is called *aluminum*. We haven't found a source of this wondrous metal on Rados. It only exists in our world in relics from the ancient Wizards.

"When aluminum is shaped into the hexagram pattern used by the Wizards of old, the same pattern that's the symbol of today's Magicians, it serves as a key for traveling through a portal from Rados to Earth and back. You must use the same aluminum pendants to return here from Earth.

"As soon as you return, deliver the aluminum hexagrams to me in the Wizard Tower. I'm giving you four pendants today, so I expect four back, *no less*." The old Loremaster looked around solemnly at the members of the quest. "Just so there's no misunderstanding, this means if any of you dies on Earth or is captured and unable to return, the others must retrieve the aluminum hexagram from the victim's body. If you can't bring back your companion's body, at least bring back their pendant, because they're relics from the ancient Wizards, and we can't make more!"

There was silence for a minute as Pran and the others considered the possibility, or rather the likelihood, that one ore more of them wouldn't survive the perils of the legendary world called Earth.

Finally, Jelal said, "Thanks, Loremaster. Now let's discuss the timing of our journey. Some Magicians thought it would be best for us to go to Earth as soon as possible, but the Council decided we should not leave until the gold disappears, in case the prophecy was wrong. Going to Earth is dangerous, and not just for us. Loremaster Lokor says traveling to Earth could pose risks to our own world, so if it turns out we don't have to travel there, we won't."

Pran asked, "How could going to Earth harm our world, Loremaster?"

"There are so many dangers, I hardly know where to begin," Lokor said, stroking his long, flowing, white beard. "There's a reason travel to Earth is forbidden to all except Loremasters, and basically, it is this: Earthlings have made a mess of their world, and we don't want to bring the problems of Earth back to Rados.

“There are items on Earth that could wreak havoc on Rados if brought back here. Earthlings have a weapon that can flatten an entire city in seconds, killing everyone inside and making the city uninhabitable for years. You may think I exaggerate, but I do not. Earth also has poisons in its air, water, and soil; poisons put there not by enemies, but by the people who live there.”

“What do you mean?” asked Pran. “Why would people poison themselves?”

“A combination of laziness, greed, and stupidity,” Lokor said. “For example, Earthlings are too lazy to step on an ant or swat a fly, so instead they pour poisons on their kitchen floor, or spray them in the air of their own house! Lakes and rivers on Earth are so dirty that they’ve been known to catch fire. Earthlings pay taxes to have toxins removed from their drinking water, then feel the need to filter it again in their homes, just to be safe.

“In order to prevent irreversible damage to our own world, you must bring only gold back from Earth, *nothing else*. The temptation for you to bring back unapproved items from Earth will be great, but remember: even what you may think are harmless souvenirs could have a disastrous effect on our world, if brought to Rados.”

Mohinder nodded his head and said, “He speaks Truth. My father, our prophet, gave the same warning. He said you’ll be tempted to bring Earth weapons to our world in an attempt to give Eldor an edge in the war with Marakna, but you must not. You will also be tempted to bring back objects from Earth for your *own* use, for a variety of reasons: you may think they’ll give you an advantage in your daily life, you might hope to copy them and sell them for profit, or you may just want to keep them as fun souvenirs, but whatever the reasons, you must bring *nothing* back from Earth that does not belong in our world. If you bring back anything other than gold and unleash it in our world, it could prove as catastrophic as the War of the Wizards.”

Jelal shrugged off the warning by rolling his eyes and saying, “Okay, we get the point. Lokor, would you tell us a little about Earth? Briefly please, as it’s getting late.”

The old Loremaster said, “There are plenty of storybooks written about Earth, and although few people realize it, the myths, legends, and fairy tales about that world are based on truth. I brought a book for each member of the quest, but since the final quest member hasn’t been identified, which one of you wants the extra book?”

“I’ll take it,” Pran said.

The elderly Magician handed Pran two volumes of children’s books clad in bright, colorful bindings, also passing one each to Jelal, Vitina, and Lieutenant Hakon. “Since Mouse is leading the quest, I’ll give him my personal journal from my trip to Earth,” Lokor said, handing him a small book. “I don’t have time to talk in detail about the dangers of Earth, or we’d be here all night, so let me just give you a few tips. First and foremost, keep off the roads; beware the horseless carriages!”

“The *what?*” asked Pran.

“Carriages that move on their own, go frighteningly fast, and emit noxious fumes,” Lokor explained. “Earth is infested with *millions* of them! If you want to know what they look like, read some storybooks about Earth,” he advised. “They’ll have drawings.

“Don’t be distracted by what look like giant dragons roaring across the skies of Earth. Although they’re as big as dragons, and they roar just as loudly, they’re really some kind of flying machine made of metal. People actually ride in them, believe it or not! The flying machines usually won’t hurt you, with two exceptions. One is if you find yourself in a war zone, in which case your only chance for survival is to Teleport yourself as far away from the battlefield as possible,” Lokor said with a shudder. “All of Earth’s weapons are fearsome, but those used in wartime are horrendous!

“The other time you have to worry about the flying machines is if Earthlings think you’re dangerous criminals, which they will if they find out what you’re up to, as I see no other way for you obtain sufficient quantities of gold for Eldor except by stealing it. If Earthlings think you’re criminals, they might send their law enforcement or military to hunt you down in their smaller flying machines, which can hover like giant, metal wasps. You’ll know when they’re chasing you with those, because

those metal wasps are very loud and have a distinctive sound, like rapid drumbeats from overhead echoing all around you. You can't possibly outrun those machines, even in one of Earth's horseless carriages, so don't bother trying. If you ever hear one of the giant, metal wasps chasing you, hide immediately in a place where you can't be seen from above!

"Of course, you could use magic to get away from the metal wasps, but it's better to hide first so as not to expose your magic ability. Your best hope for success on Earth is to keep as low a profile as you can for as long as possible; don't draw attention to yourself. When you have to steal gold, your best bet may be to use Invisibility spells, but don't let anyone see you disappearing or reappearing. Never let Earthlings see you casting any spells at all. Having no magic ability themselves, if Earthlings see you casting spells, they will fear you and use their weapons on you.

"Again, Earth weapons are worse than anything we've seen on Rados since the War of the Wizards. The weapons of even the weakest guard on Earth are so deadly that you'll have to cast very powerful Shield spells to protect against them, no matter how far away you are. At the very least, you'll need strong Shields against projectiles—super fast projectiles—as well as poison gas, smoke, flame, and concussion."

Lieutenant Hakon said, "Just leave the Shield spells to me. Nothing can get through *my* Shield spells."

Jelal burst out laughing. "Nothing can get through your Shield spells?! About an hour ago, we all saw you get wounded by Master Gilamond's attack!"

Hakon's face reddened, and he said defensively, "That was a *white* magic spell, and I never expected to be attacked by one of our own—but I don't have to explain myself to you, you little pipsqueak!"

"Oh yes, you do," Jelal said smugly, "seeing as I'm the leader of this expedition."

Hakon turned to face the Chief Magician and said, "Colonel, this is outrageous. You cannot make me serve under this impertinent little boy, who is unfit to command even a herd of sheep!"

Colonel Kaldor said sharply, "Lieutenant, you volunteered for this mission, and the Army frowns on officers who 'un-volunteer.' If I have

to replace you, I will note on your record that you bowed out of a crucial mission at the last minute, jeopardizing its chances of success. It'll take time to bring another officer up to speed."

Jelal begged, "Please replace him, Colonel! I'll brief his replacement *immediately*."

Ignoring Jelal, Hakon said, "Sir, I'm not trying to 'un-volunteer' or asking to be replaced. I'm only asking you to reconsider the choice of leadership for this mission."

Colonel Kaldor said, "That issue is already settled. If you think following orders from Mouse is beneath your status as an officer, Lieutenant, I can take care of that right now! Would you feel more comfortable following him if I demoted you to Sergeant?"

"No, sir!" said Lieutenant Hakon, taken aback. "I will follow Mouse."

"Very well," Kaldor said, "then do so without further complaints. And Mouse, stop goading the Lieutenant and show him the proper respect from now on. Agreed?"

"All right," Jelal said reluctantly.

Kaldor said, "Outstanding. I think we've accomplished a lot in this meeting. And all with no casualties," he mused with a hint of a smile, his eyes flitting between Lieutenant Hakon and the others. "Would it be okay with the quest leader if I end this meeting now?"

After an awkward silence, Pran whispered, "Jelal, he means *you*."

"Oh," Jelal said, and then stammered, "Um, of course, Colonel."

Kaldor said, "Thank you. If and when the Truthseeker prophecy comes to pass, our next meeting will in the base of the Wizard Tower, where you'll be told the location of the portal to Earth. Lieutenant, you're dismissed."

Hakon snapped to attention, saluted smartly, then Teleported out of the classroom.

As soon as he was gone, Colonel Kaldor told the other members of the quest, "I know you don't like Lieutenant Hakon, but try to see beyond his personality for a moment."

Jelal snorted. "That's asking a lot! He's an arrogant, overbearing, sneering, sarcastic, bullying, hotheaded, pompous—"

Colonel Kaldor cut him off in mid-diatrube, saying, “Be that as it may, Mouse, he’s a good soldier and a skilled Magician: intelligent, adaptable, and proficient with a broad range of magic. Hakon’s personality may be a bit abrasive—”

“*That’s* an understatement,” Jelal grumbled.

“—but he’s no fool,” Kaldor finished. “He made the Commandant’s List at the Eldorean Military Academy, finishing in the top ten percent of his class. Before that, he graduated with honors from the Royal Academy of Magic.”

Mohinder spoke up. “The prophecy said nothing about bringing a soldier along. In fact, my father, the prophet Sehotra, warned of ‘dire consequences’ if anyone other than the four people alluded to in the prophecy goes to Earth. Do not try to cheat destiny.”

Kaldor said, “We appreciate you Truthseekers alerting us to your prophecy, but this is a military mission now, not a religious quest.”

“It’s also an EIA mission,” Jelal pointed out.

“The EIA Director and the Magician General both agree with me about the need to include an Army Magician. But look on the bright side: the Magician General wanted me to put Lieutenant Hakon in charge of the mission, but I convinced him to let us put it to a vote.”

“I didn’t know that,” Jelal said, brightening. “Thank you, Colonel. Okay, if we have to take Hakon with us, we’ll make the best of it and try to get along.”

“I’m relieved to hear that,” Kaldor said. “If we don’t meet again before you leave, best of luck to you, and don’t linger on Earth; hurry back to Rados with the gold.” He Teleported out of the classroom.

Before Teleporting out of the classroom as well, Loremaster Lokor said, “On the day the gold disappears, I’ll see you three boys and Vitina in the base of the Wizard Tower to tell you how to get to Earth. Until then, goodbye.”

Pran’s father said, “We can all Teleport home, if the gold is going to disappear soon anyway. Vitina, do you know how?”

“Yes.”

"Great. This should help you get home," he said, flipping her a small gold coin.

"Thank you, Master Gilamond, and thank you for defending me when that Lieutenant drew his sword on me."

"It's the least I could do for the girl who saved my son's life."

Vitina walked over to Pran and said, "I also thank *you*, for speaking up for me, and for putting yourself between me and Lieutenant Hakon's sword. It was very brave and gallant of you, Pran," she said, looking at him with her big, black eyes.

Pran's heart beat faster, and he felt his face turn red. He tried to say something gallant, but his mind didn't seem to function while gazing into Vitina's sparkling obsidian eyes, set like jewels in her beautiful, brown face. He found himself stammering, "Er, you're welcome." Vitina's smile changed to one of amusement at his discomfiture, then before he could think of anything better to say, she Teleported out of the classroom.

The Truthseeker said to Pran and Jelal, "I probably won't see you boys again before you depart, so let me give you this blessing now: may the Spirit of Truth be with you on your quest."

Pran replied, "And also with you. Goodbye, Mohinder."

"Farewell," Mohinder said, then walked out the door toward the hitching rail where his horse stood waiting.

Pran's father said, "Pran, tomorrow I'll teach you and the other Conjurers how to Teleport, but tonight, you'll have to tag along with me or Jelal.

"I'll Teleport your son home," Jelal volunteered. "Pran, hold my hand."

Pran was glad that Jelal had chosen to Teleport him, and smiled down at him, feeling as if he finally had the little brother he'd always wanted. As he reached down and clasped the little boy's hand in his own, he had to remind himself again that Jelal was actually older than him, "A very experienced boy," as Jelal called himself.



Pran said goodnight to his parents, Nako, and Jelal, then sat down on the edge of his bed by lamplight to read the books Lokor had given him. He opened the first book, titled *1,001 American Nights*, and found

it contained lighthearted, fanciful tales with such titles as “Alan and the Electric Lamp,” “Goldilocks and the Three Cars,” and “Little Red Riding Mower.” Some of the words were unfamiliar to Pran, but flipping through the stories, he saw illustrations of bizarre, fanciful objects that possessed seemingly magical properties of illumination or locomotion. “So *that’s* what a horseless carriage is,” he mused.

Pran set aside *1,001 American Nights* for the moment and picked up the second book. Titled *Really Grim Fairy Tales*, the titles in its table of contents sounded far more ominous, although again, some of the words were foreign to him. Those stories and nursery rhymes included “The Little Old Lady Who Lived in a Homeless Shelter,” “Mary Had a Little Gun,” “The Boy Who Cried ‘Bomb!’,” “The Little Engine That Crashed,” and “Twinkle, Twinkle, Gunfire Afar.”

Since those stories were short, Pran read several of them, growing more and more disturbed at the contents until he finally put the book down, shuddering in horror. Why would parents read such scary stories to young children at bedtime? They were enough to give any child nightmares! Knowing there was some truth in the tales, that they were not just myths and fables, didn’t make him feel any better about going to Earth.

Thankfully, Pran thought, he was too old for nightmares—or at least that’s what he tried to convince himself, over and over again, as he tried to get to sleep. His wishful thinking didn’t work, however. When he finally drifted off into an uneasy sleep, Pran dreamed about a terrifying world where grandmothers were forced to live among strangers, fearsome weapons killed from afar with loud noises, and smoke-belching machines transported people at reckless speeds into deadly crashes.



23: PREPARING FOR THE WORST

“Good morning, friend,” Pran heard a small voice say. “Time to wake up.” He opened his eyes to see Jelal sitting on a chair across the room, swinging his legs. The little blond boy had already washed his face, combed his hair, and dressed for school, and Pran wondered how long he’d been sitting there. He saw that Jelal had moved the desk chair so he could sit with his back to the wall, where he could easily observe both the door and the window. The little spy’s habit of always sitting with his back to the wall used to strike Pran as eccentric, but now it made him feel safer. Perhaps Jelal was indeed the right person to lead the expedition to Earth.

“Okay,” Pran said, sitting up in bed. Judging by the sun, it was a little earlier than he usually woke up. As he sat up, bare-chested, he noticed Jelal looking appraisingly at his upper body. “Why are you staring at me that way?”

“Trying to judge how useful you might be to have beside me in a fight.”

“What do you think?” asked Pran hopefully.

“You look strong enough, and have a nice physique, so with some training, I think you’d be great. But obviously you lack fighting skills, or you would have been able to defend yourself from your classmates last weekend.”

“But there were three of them,” Pran protested, “and the biggest one, Pathik, had my arms pinned behind my back!”

“Then you should have used your *legs*. If you were within reach of their arms, then they were easily within reach of your legs,” Jelal pointed out. He stood up, moved to the center of the bedroom, and demonstrated in quick succession a front snap kick, back kick, roundhouse kick, high kick, axe kick, and side kick, naming each one as he demonstrated it. His little legs moved almost too fast for Pran’s eyes to follow.

“See what I mean?” asked Jelal, without even breathing hard. “No hands required. And if someone has a hold on your arms from behind, that gives you yet another option: kicking out with both legs at once, disabling the two attackers in front of you in one stroke. After that, you can simply do *this* to the guy holding you from behind,” he said, demonstrating another back kick. “If you aim right, you can break his kneecap, and he’ll instantly let go of you, giving you the chance to turn and finish him off.”

Pran asked suspiciously, “What do you mean, ‘Finish him off’?”

“It depends on who your opponents are. If they’re Maraknese soldiers—well, you can guess what to do in that case! But with classmates, I just mean you can win the fight, make them leave you alone. And after you win a fight where the odds are against you, everyone will leave you alone, trust me.”

Pran was impressed. “Can you show me how to fight like that?”

“Yes, but it takes time to learn all the moves correctly, Pran.”

“I don’t care if my moves look fancy, as long as they get results.”

“The martial art of *uyr-nishi*, meaning ‘The way of foot and fist,’ does get results, but it works best if you use correct forms and techniques. With a little training every day, I can at least teach you the basics so you can defend yourself if you’re in a similar situation again. Now hurry up and get dressed, because I’m hungry. Your parents planned a big breakfast this morning, and they’re waiting for us in the kitchen so we can all eat together.”

Pran asked, surprised, “*Both* my parents?” His father usually ate first and was already saddling his horse by the time Pran got downstairs. He’d assumed this was just because his father tutored his apprentices before school, but perhaps it was also for morning meetings with the spy

he controlled, Jelal. His father obviously had no need to travel to town anymore to meet with his spy!

"Yep, both of them. Why are you still sitting there in bed, Pran?"

Pran chuckled. "Because under these sheets I'm not wearing any clothes."

Jelal shrugged. "So? Do you have some kind of hideous scar down there?" He widened his eyes in mock horror.

Pran laughed. "If I did, my father could easily Heal it. I just want to be alone to get dressed."

"Why? We're both boys."

"Are we, Jelal?" asked Pran, referring to the little spy's real age. Seeing the hurt look on Jelal's face, he added apologetically, "Sorry. It's just that growing up in this big house, I've always had my own room, so I'm used to having privacy,"

"Okay," Jelal conceded, "I'll wait for you out in the hall. Don't be long."

As he dressed, Pran remembered what Hakon and his father had said about Jelal and began to wonder, like them, whether the boy was emotionally stable enough to lead their quest. Even if technically he was older than Pran's grandfather, he sure acted young.

When Pran opened the door to his room, he almost bumped into Jelal, who was standing right by the threshold. The little spy smiled up at him and said, "Thanks for dressing quickly. Come on," he urged, leading him down the stairs. From the mouthwatering aroma of breakfast rising up from the kitchen, Pran now knew why Jelal had been so eager to get downstairs to eat.

Pran found both his parents seated at the kitchen table, as promised, and his eyes went wide to see the table overflowing with sausages, eggs, ham, bacon, pancakes, cinnamon rolls, waffles, juice, coffee, and other goodies. Nako sat in one corner of the room, wagging his tail happily as he wolfed down a link of sausages from his bowl.

Pran's mother smiled at him and explained, "Seeing as you and Jelal will be going away soon, and there's no more need to conserve gold, your father conjured up a nice, big breakfast for us all."

"I can see that," said Pran, impressed. Of course, magic couldn't create food from nothing, so he knew his mother must have provided the raw ingredients for the feast.

His father said, "I also decided I'd Teleport to school again today so we can have time to sit together for breakfast. I can Teleport you to school today too, if you'd like. Tomorrow, after I've taught you, you can try doing it yourself."

Pran knew his father would be arriving at school early to tutor his apprentices. He decided he'd rather walk to school with his friends than sit around an empty classroom waiting for school to start. Answering tactfully, but also truthfully enough to get past his father's Lie Detector spell, he said, "Thanks for the offer, but Kimbar beat me to school yesterday, and I want to challenge him to a rematch."

His father shrugged. "Okay, but if you change your mind, let me know. I tried my crystal ball again this morning, and it still won't predict anything after Wednesday afternoon, so we still expect the gold to disappear tomorrow."

Putting down her fork, his mother said, "Pran, after that happens you'll be leaving on your quest to Earth, so your father and I won't have much chance to talk with you. Now that we have a few minutes of calm before the storm, is there anything you want to talk about?"

Pran thought for a moment, then asked in between bites, "Father, how did you end up saving a dragon's life?"

His father smiled. "Many years ago, when I was young and single, a friend dared me to enter the White Mountain Elf Reservation and Dragon Sanctuary, then climb a mountain where a dragon kept its lair. I accepted his challenge, but it was foolish of me to do so, I admit."

"Very foolish," his mother agreed. "Pran, I hope you never do something that stupid and dangerous on a dare!"

"I won't," Pran promised.

His father continued, "A strong quake occurred as I was climbing, and I barely avoided being hit by falling rocks. Upon nearing the dragon's lair, I found the quake had collapsed the cave roof on top of the dragon. She'd managed to poke her head out of the cave before it collapsed, but the rest of her long body was buried under tons of rock. The dragon, who told me her name was Blue Lightning, promised me eternal friendship if I would

rescue her. It was clear to me that the great beast would die if I didn't do something, and she looked so helpless that I took pity on her.

"All I'd really expected in return was that she would refrain from eating me, but after I rescued her, Blue Lightning swore to keep her vow of eternal friendship. Over the years, I've tested her promise by asking a few small favors, which she fulfilled gladly. Up until now, I've never taken advantage of her friendship by asking for anything major. However, she has assured me that if I call on her in need, she'll help me, even if she has to risk her own life in order to repay her debt to me."

"That's a good story," Pran said.

"And all *true*," his father insisted.

"Yes, I know," said Pran, as once again he felt what Mohinder called his Truthsense confirm the truth of what he'd heard. "I wasn't doubting you; I was just surprised I'd never heard it before."

His mother said, "That's because we didn't want you to get any crazy ideas about copying your father and trespassing in a dragon sanctuary, much less climbing up to a dragon's lair yourself. It could have ended a lot worse for him than it did, you know."

His father asked, "Did you remember to wear your belt knife today, the silver dagger I gave you for your birthday?"

"Yes," Pran said.

"Good. If those boys who attacked you on the bridge try it again, you have my permission to use that knife on them."

Pran's mother gasped, then covered her mouth with her hand.

"Hopefully the dagger won't be necessary," Pran said. "Jelal's going to teach me martial arts so I can defend myself without weapons."

"Excellent," his father said, nodding his approval. "But that'll take time, so meanwhile, keep that knife close. I would give you a sword, too, except Loremaster Lokor says that would not be appropriate on Earth. Besides, Colonel Kaldor is going to requisition you a knife like Jelal's, nearly as big as a short sword but easier to conceal."

They heard a knock on the side door. "That must be Kimbar and Garwin," Pran said, rising to answer it after taking one more bite. He

opened the door on another bright, clear fall day to find his best friend alone, the morning sun shining off his blond hair.

Kimbar motioned for Pran to go outside, and explained, “Garwin won’t be walking with us this morning. He says he’s angry with you for hiding secrets from him. I think he’s also jealous of you and Jelal, afraid your new friend will replace him.” He shrugged. “But don’t worry, Pran, I’m not the jealous type myself. I know you met someone special last week, so I won’t be your best friend much longer, but that’s okay.”

“Kimbar, you and I’ve been best friends for years, and I only just met Jelal, so what makes you think—”

Kimbar laughed. “Not *him*; I’m talking about *Vitina*! I’ve heard the way your voice gets when talking about her. Garwin isn’t your best friend, so perhaps he’s right to worry about being replaced by Jelal, but a *best* friend can only be replaced by a girlfriend.”

“Oh,” Pran said, feeling himself blush. To change the subject, he said, “Come on in and have something to eat.”

“No thanks, I ate already,” Kimbar said. But when he saw the kitchen table groaning with heaps of food, his eyes widened, and he exclaimed, “Wow, is your brother’s whole platoon visiting?”

Pran smiled. “No, just Jelal. My father whipped up a big breakfast with magic. He’s, um, in a generous mood,” Pran explained, unable to disclose that it was due to the fact that the gold would all disappear the following day.

His father added, “And the reason I haven’t left for school yet is that I’m planning to Teleport there today. Are you sure you don’t want something to eat, Kimbar? It’s your last chance, before I clean up.”

“Well, I will take one of those cinnamon rolls with me, if you don’t mind.”

“Take as many as you want.”

After Kimbar helped himself, Pran’s father raised his hands, gestured, and the dirty dishes and silverware suddenly became sparkling clean. Pran’s mother said, “Thank you for doing the dishes, dear. Don’t bother putting things away, though; I’ll do that myself.”

Pran smiled. His mother never did trust men to put things away correctly in the kitchen.

His father said, "I'll see you three in school," and Teleported out of the house.

As the three boys left the house, Pran had an idea of how to get a head start on Kimbar today. Noticing that Kimbar was wearing a sword, he asked, "Kimbar, can I see your blade?"

"Show me your new knife, first."

"This is the dagger my father gave me for my birthday," Pran said, unsheathing it to show Kimbar and Jelal. "The hilt's sterling silver for casting spells in emergencies, and the blade's enchanted to be rustproof and perpetually sharp."

"Very nice, but mine's bigger," Kimbar said, grinning mischievously.

"Assuming you're referring to your *sword*," Pran chuckled, "show me."

Kimbar drew his saber out of its metal scabbard. It looked like a shorter version of the cavalry saber Colonel Kaldor carried, with a heavy, slightly curved blade, brass knuckle guard, and leather-wrapped grip. But Pran didn't waste time admiring the sword. As soon as it was fully out of its scabbard, he took off at a run, saying, "Last one to the bridge is a rotten egg!"

Kimbar swore as he first struggled to sheathe the saber on the move without poking himself with the point, then finally stood still to put his sword away. By that time, Pran and Jelal were well ahead of him, with Pran in the lead. Even after Kimbar's sword was sheathed, it banged against his leg while he ran, slowing him down. Pran laughed to see his plan working even better than expected.

As he came in sight of the Flat Rock Bridge, still in the lead, Pran saw an unusually large number of soldiers gathered around the near side of the bridge, and decided it best to slow down. Good thing he did, too, because moments later, a sentry wearing Eldorean Army battle blues spotted the boys approaching and bellowed, "Runners, stand and be recognized!"

Pran skidded to a halt, panting to catch his breath. Looking behind him, he saw Jelal stop too, but Kimbar kept running, still trying to win the race.

“Halt and identify yourselves!” the sentry yelled. He drew his sword, and two archers standing behind him knocked arrows to their bows to show they meant business.

Pran yelled, “Kimbar, you’d better do what he says!” To the archers with bows trained on him and his friends, he pleaded, “Don’t shoot! We’re just trying to get to school. All three of us are magic students in the school run by my father, Gilamond the Magician.”

“Gilamond is your father?” asked the sentry.

“That’s right. I’m Pran, and these are my friends Kimbar and Jelal.”

The sentry sheathed his sword and yelled, “Lower your bows; it’s Lieutenant Kavik’s brother!”

“Did you serve with him?” asked Pran.

“Several of us were in the same battalion as him, our last time at the front. I wasn’t in his platoon, but he Healed my wounds just the same—mighty fine guy, for an *officer*. I’m Corporal Ennis. Sorry for my men pointing bows at you, but we’re all a bit on edge. Been lots of rumors flying around ever since the bells in the Tower rang a few days ago. You boys are free to pass, but walk, don’t run, okay?”

“Thanks,” Pran said, and began walking.

Kimbar proposed, “How about we call this race a tie?”

“No way,” said Pran. “I would have won by a mile! And before you say I cheated, what about that time you tied my shoelaces together with a spell just before you called a race?”

Kimbar grinned. “Fine, you win this time.”

As they approached the western abutment, Pran saw the bridge and guardhouse bustling with soldiers. On the guardhouse roof, sharp-eyed archers stood watch with bows bent, while heavily armed soldiers stood guard along the near edge of the bridge, most wielding halberds or spears in addition to sheathed swords.

Just outside the guardhouse, a pudgy, ruddy-faced quartermaster was loudly directing soldiers unloading barrels from a wagon. “Careful now, men, don’t let the barrels slip off the edge of the ramp; we can’t afford a spill here. That ain’t just ale in those barrels,

you know! On second thought, pretend it *is* ale—then I know you won't spill a drop."

Kimbar said, "Let me find out what's going on." Approaching the quartermaster, he said, "Excuse me, sir—"

The quartermaster barked, "Don't 'sir' me, boy! See these stripes? I'm a Sergeant, not an officer; I *work* for a living."

Pran thought it funny for him to say this while he was ordering others to do the work for him, but had sense enough not to point that out. "Excuse me, *Sergeant*. I'm Pran, and perhaps you know my brother, Lieutenant Kavik. Could you tell us what's going on?"

The Sergeant looked down at him said, "Kavik's brother, eh? Yeah, you look like him, and you're a magic student too; I can tell by your jewelry. Bein' that you're an Infantry officer's brother, you ought to be smart enough to figger out fer yourself what's going on! It ain't secret to anyone with eyes, not if they know basic defense tactics. Got orders to move them barrels of rock oil to the middle of the bridge. Seems there might be an attack on the town any day now, so we're makin' preparations to burn the bridge, just in case there ain't enough troops to hold it. Though if you ask me, I don't see why one of our Magicians can't just cast a fireball at it, if it comes down to that. All this messy business with rock oil, wicks, and fuses seems a tad unnecessary, with the Wizard Tower well within range, plus our own Army Magicians."

He turned to his men, who were rolling the barrels onto the bridge now, and bellowed, "Hey, watch out for that railing! Roll the barrels slowly; this ain't no race. If one of them cracks open, horses will be a-slippin' and a-slidin' all over this bridge. And if any *horsehides* end up on the rocks below, I'll take it out of *your* hides," he said, chuckling as if he'd made a clever play on words.

The Sergeant said to the boys, "You three had better hope you're on the right side of the bridge when the Maraknese attack. If we burn the bridges, nobody's gettin' in or out of town that way, or my name ain't Sergeant Brin."



24: TENSION AMONG FRIENDS

As they continued past the bridge on the road toward magic school, Jelal said, “Sergeant Brin’s right. Anyone with eyes will soon figure out what those soldiers are doing with those oil barrels on the bridge.”

Sure enough, when they entered the classroom, the other boys were standing around talking heatedly about the preparations to burn the town’s bridges. Apparently the Flat Rock Bridge wasn’t the only bridge in town being stocked with barrels of rock oil.

“What are we going to do if we’re stuck here in magic school when they burn all the bridges?” asked Yuli, looking scared. “How are we going to get home to our parents?”

Fipin said, “If that happens, I think we won’t be going home. If the war goes so badly that they have to burn the town’s bridges, the Army will want us to stay and fight with the local garrison. They might even draft us.”

Pathik, who at seventeen was the biggest and oldest boy in school, looked down at the little brown Initiate and snorted. “Most of ya boys ain’t strong enough to even lift a sword. *I’m* the only one the Army would want, ’cept maybe Balkar,” he said, cocking his thumb at the blacksmith’s son, whose broad shoulders stood out among the other Charmers. “But they won’t hafta draft me if our town gets attacked, because I’ll *enlist*,” he vowed, slamming a ham-sized fist down on the desk so hard that Pran

feared it would break—the desk, that is, as he doubted Pathik's fist would break on anything softer than a castle wall!

Fipin, whose father was a Captain in the Eldorean Army Magic Corps, said knowingly, "The Army won't draft us as *swordsmen*. They'll draft us as apprentice Magicians."

Samir scoffed. "What would the Army do with Novices, Initiates, or Charmers? They might take us Conjurers, though. I wouldn't mind that. Apprentice Army Magicians get the rank of cadet, right Pran?" Everyone knew Pran's brother, Kavik, was also an Army Magician.

Pran chuckled. "Yes, but my brother says cadet's not really a rank, and if it were, it would be even lower than Private! Everyone orders cadets around, 'cause they don't outrank anyone except younger cadets."

"Samir's right," Garwin said scornfully, "the Army won't want underclassmen. It'd just slow them down if they had to babysit helpless little boys like Jelal, here," he sneered, pointing at the little undercover agent.

Pran's blood boiled to hear his new friend teased so unfairly by his old friend, perhaps out of jealousy. If Garwin only knew how far from the truth his remark was about Jelal being helpless! He took a step forward, intending to speak up for his little friend, but Jelal grabbed his arm, pulling him back with surprising strength for such a small boy.

"It's okay," Jelal whispered in his ear. "Let him think I'm helpless; let them *all* think that. It's what I *want*!"

The conversation stopped as Pran's father came out of the office with his apprentices. After taking roll, he asked, "How many of you noticed the military preparations on the bridges today?"

A dozen hands shot up instantly.

Pran's father motioned them to put their hands down again, saying, "It would be inappropriate for me to comment about defense preparations, so don't bother asking. That said, it should be obvious that the war might deteriorate to a point where you won't be able to use the town's bridges to get to and from school. Then what will you do?"

Kimbar said jokingly, "Swim to school."

Some students laughed, but Pran's father responded as if Kimbar were serious. "The river's too cold, and its current's too strong. There's a better way, which I'm going to teach all of you today, even the Novices: Teleportation."

Oren raised his hand and asked nervously, "All of us? But Master Gilamond, I thought that spell was only taught to Enchanters during their apprenticeship, because it's too dangerous to teach in magic school. What if we miscast it?"

Kimbar gave Pran a knowing look, and Pran bit his lip to stifle a grin. Despite being only in his second year of magic school, Oren already had earned a reputation as a miscaster.

Pran's father smiled wryly at the Initiate and assured him, "Don't worry; we'll take precautions to keep you safe. This afternoon, I'll let those who are ready do the entire spell, but this morning, I want you to practice each gesture separately, without gold, until you get it *perfect*. I don't want any accidents today! When done right, the spell is completely safe, but if done wrong—"

There was no need for him to finish the sentence. Everyone had heard tales of students who'd tried learning the Teleportation spell on their own, only to die by Teleporting themselves inside a solid object or high up into the clouds. There was nothing any Healer could do to save a boy who Teleported himself inside a boulder, even if the miscaster's body was found. So nobody complained when Pran's father drilled the class all morning in the various parts of the hand gestures used for the Teleportation spell, without allowing them to hold any gold while practicing. Not only did he not *give* them any gold, but he made everyone remove any speck of gold they had on them and store it in their desk. The apprentices helped with Anti-Theft spells to secure students' gold in their desks, because nobody wanted to be the only boy without an Anti-Theft spell on his gold!

At noon, as the boys carried their lunch bags outside to eat, Pran said, "Jelal, come eat with me, Kimbar, and Garwin."

"Why?" demanded Garwin. "Let him go with the other Novices, where he belongs!"

"He's our friend," Pran said.

"He may be *yours*, but he's not mine," Garwin grumbled. "I don't know why you'd want to be friends with an inexperienced little Novice, anyway. If you let him eat with you, I'll eat with, uh—Samir and Pathik!"

Kimbar laughed at what was obviously an idle threat, but Pran bristled and said, "Garwin, I'd like a few words with you about your attitude toward my new friend." Pointing to a tree in the back corner of the schoolyard, near the fence, he said, "Let's eat over there so we can talk more privately."

Garwin hesitated, but then shrugged and followed Pran, Kimbar, and Jelal.

Jelal sat facing the schoolhouse, his back to the tree, and warned, "Pran, be careful you don't reveal too much."

Kimbar looked intrigued, but Garwin eyed the little spy with a strange mixture of hostility and curiosity. Then he took a bite of his sandwich, chewed thoughtfully, swallowed, and asked, "Okay, Pran, what was it you wanted to say to me?"

Pran took a deep breath to calm himself. "Just that I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't talk about my friend Jelal the way you did in class today."

"What way?"

"You know," Pran said impatiently, "putting him down, making fun of him for being a Novice and for being small. I don't know why you're acting this way today, Garwin. Are you jealous of Jelal's friendship with me?"

"Don't be silly," Garwin said. "I'm not jealous!"

Pran's Truthsense told him that Garwin was lying. Seeing Pran's expression of disbelief, Garwin confessed, "Okay, perhaps I am. But it's mostly because you're keeping secrets and not letting me in on them. I can't understand why you'd trust a boy you only met a few days ago more than you'd trust your oldest and best friends! It's just wrong," he said, shaking his head.

"You're right, Garwin," Pran admitted.

"No he's not," Jelal argued. "They have no *need to know*."

"Unfortunately, Jelal's right too," Pran sighed. "I can't tell you what's going on."

"Jelal," Kimbar asked, "does this have anything to do with your father's job in the—"

“Yes,” Jelal said, cutting him off before he could say Royal Bureau of Investigation, “and also with the war effort.” He took another bite of his sandwich.

Garwin rolled his eyes. “Is that all you’re going to tell us? I’d guessed that much already! Pran, there are plenty of kids whose parents are helping with the war effort. Are you going to make friends with every Novice whose father is in the Army, Navy, EIA, or RBI, and share secrets with them that you refuse to share with me?”

Pran said, “It’s more than that, Garwin. You don’t understand.”

“No, I do understand! I understand that you and I used to be as close as brothers, but now you’d rather befriend Novices than me, just because of who their parents are. Pran, there was a time when you were impressed by what *my* father did, but until now I never imagined that you’d befriended me just because of that,” Garwin said bitterly. He stood up to leave.

“Garwin, wait!” Pran blurted out without thinking. “After tomorrow, you won’t see me again for a long time, maybe *forever* if Jelal and I don’t return alive. We need to part as friends.”

Garwin turned around slowly and sat back down. Both he and Kimbar were staring wide-eyed at Pran. Finally, Garwin asked, “Are you going to tell us where you’re going, and why?”

Pran bit his lip. “I’d like to, but I can’t. It would jeopardize national security.”

“If this is one of your practical jokes,” Garwin said, lowering his voice, “it’s not very funny. With the Maraknese about to attack our town any day now, it’d be a pretty sick joke to pretend you’re going on some secret mission with Jelal to save the kingdom!”

“It’s no joke,” Pran whispered, “and we’re not pretending. We really do have to go save the kingdom, but we can’t tell you where, why, how, or even why we were chosen.”

Garwin tried to stare him down, as if expecting him to burst into laughter and admit he was joking. Finally, he seemed convinced it wasn’t a joke and said, “Then take me with you. I’m the best magic student here.”

“And I’m your best friend,” Kimbar pointed out. “You can’t go without *me*.”

"I wish we could, but we can't take anyone else unless they're related to me. You're not by any chance, um, secretly related to me, are you?" Pran asked hopefully.

Kimbar laughed. "You're kidding, right? We were born six days apart, so we can't be twins. No, we might have a lot in common, but we're not brothers, just best friends."

Garwin said, "I look more like you than Kimbar does, but I'm not related either. So, while you're off saving the kingdom, are we just supposed to just sit here doing nothing?"

"No," said Jelal. "I happen to know Fipin's guess this morning hit close to the truth."

Kimbar's eyes widened. "You mean they're going to draft us into the Army?"



25: LIKE LEARNING TO SWIM

“Well, the Army won’t *draft* students,” Jelal said, “but they will ask for volunteers, especially among the upperclassmen.”

Kimbar nodded. “I see. Okay, although I’d rather go with you two, I’ll stay and do my part to protect White River Junction.”

“Me too,” Garwin said. “And when you leave tomorrow, Pran, rest assured that we’ll part as friends.”

“Thanks,” Pran said gratefully, just as the school bell rang to signal the end of lunch break.

In the afternoon, as soon as he and his apprentices judged them ready, Pran’s father began taking boys out of the classroom one by one to do Teleportation spells. “There will be fewer distractions for you outside,” he explained, “where you won’t have to worry about your classmates watching.” As Garwin was the first boy to master the spell in the classroom, he was first to be called outside to do the spell for real.

When Garwin came back in, Pran didn’t bother asking him how difficult it was to Teleport, because to Garwin, all magic seemed easy. But Kimbar was next to be tested, so after congratulating him on his success, Pran asked his best friend, “Is it hard?”

Kimbar quipped, “That’s a rather personal question, isn’t it?”

“You know what I mean!”

"The Teleportation spell? That was easy, after practicing all morning without gold. I know you're worried, but there's really nothing to fear. You'll see."

To Pran's relief, Samir volunteered to go next. When he came back in, the redheaded boy was all smiles. As if that weren't proof enough that he'd been successful, Samir gave a big thumbs-up to Kimbar, Pran, and Pathik.

Pran's father came to him next and asked him to demonstrate the spell's gestures without gold, then said "Excellent. Are you ready to try Teleporting now?"

His mouth dry, Pran murmured, "Yes," hoping he didn't sound as nervous as he felt.

"Good, then let's go outside."

As he followed his father out of the schoolhouse, Pran was more than a little scared about Teleporting for the first time by himself. He imagined himself failing so badly that for generations, students would tell whispered tales of *Pran the Miscaster, who Teleported himself inside a stone wall!* Or perhaps inside a boulder, tree trunk, or bridge...

His father must have sensed his nervousness, for he said reassuringly, "Don't worry, son; there's little to fear. You'll only be Teleporting from one side of the schoolyard to the other, then back again."

Not wanting to give voice to his worst fear, he asked, "What if I end up a thousand miles away by mistake?"

His father laughed. "Remember what I said this morning. You can't Teleport to someplace you've never been to before, unless it's within sight."

"But Garwin says some Magicians can Teleport to a place just by concentrating on a painting of it."

"That is a specialized skill taught only to violet Magicians—those who specialize in the magic of time and place—and it takes them months to master."

Pran tried to think of what else could go wrong. "What if I accidentally Teleport to someplace faraway that I *have* visited before?"

His father said, "I'll give you enough gold for a round trip journey. Besides, I'm making it easy for you and your classmates today. For your first spell, I'll stand on the other side of the schoolyard, and you'll Teleport

to me with your eyes open. Don't worry, despite any rumors you may have heard, it's impossible to Teleport inside the body of a person.

"Here are two gold coins: one to travel to my location, and the other to return. I'll Teleport myself into position first, so watch closely as a final reminder of how to do the spell." He waved his hands in the air in the elaborate gestures he'd demonstrated this morning and vanished, reappearing instantly near the front gate of the schoolyard.

Pran saw with alarm that the school's flagpole stood between him and his father, Eldor's blue, gold, and red colors flapping in the breeze. He protested, "But the school's flagpole—"

"Will not be any obstacle at all. As I explained to the class, when Teleporting you don't travel *through* objects; you go *to* a destination, so flagpoles, walls, or even mountains won't hinder you whatsoever."

Despite his father's reassurance, Pran imagined making it only halfway there and rematerializing with the flagpole through his head, like a butterfly pinned to a mounting board.

"Don't be afraid, Pran," his father said. "Teleport to me."

Pran took a deep breath, feeling very much like he had when learning to swim as a young boy, at Red Pine Lake. He remembered clinging fearfully to the dock after lowering himself into the cool water, his feet unable to touch the bottom. His father had stood only five feet away with arms outstretched, saying, "Don't be afraid, Pran. Swim to me." Despite being scared to let go of the dock, Pran had swum to his father, and had eventually come to love the water.

Clasping one gold coin firmly between thumb and forefinger, Pran took another deep breath, stared unblinkingly at his father's location to memorize its every detail, then cast the Teleportation spell. A split second later, he found himself face to face with his father, just two feet away. He felt dizzy and off balance, because his brain told him he must be moving incredibly fast to arrive so quickly, so he stumbled forward and almost fell.

His father, beaming, reached out a hand to Pran's shoulder to steady him, then spoke the very same words he'd said after Pran's first swim so many years ago: "See, you did it, son! I knew you could!"

Realizing he'd been holding his breath, just as he had when learning to swim, Pran exhaled and then smiled, pleased with himself.

"Next you'll Teleport yourself back to the porch of our school," his father said. "Normally you'll be traveling to someplace too far to see, so for the return trip, I'm not letting students look at their destination while Teleporting. Take a good look at the school's porch now if you wish, then turn around and face me again."

Pran stared hard at the school, trying to burn the image into his brain. His eyes scanned the front of the school from top to bottom: the cupola with its school bell, the gable beneath it with louvered vent, and then the slate-tiled porch roof, trimmed underneath with scalloped white wood. The porch itself had no railings, just four white columns, but steps leading up to the porch had wooden railings, anchored to the porch's center columns. Centered beneath the porch, wide double doors led into the school. Above the doors, a sign read, "WRJ West School of Magic," the town's name abbreviated to make it easier to carve into the sign. When Pran was confident he'd memorized the details, he faced his father again.

"Since you're not looking at your destination this time, it's best to Teleport with your eyes closed. You have to picture your goal clearly in your head when Teleporting, which can be hard for beginners if they're looking somewhere else. Whenever you're ready, Pran, close your eyes, then cast the spell."

Pran screwed his eyes shut tightly, held the second gold coin firmly between thumb and forefinger of his left hand, and made the gestures he'd memorized that morning, all the while holding the image of the school's front porch firmly in his mind. He felt no sense of movement, but the ground seemed to shift under his feet, suddenly becoming firmer. Pran kept his eyes shut for a few more seconds, hoping to avoid the dizziness, disorientation, and loss of balance he'd felt in his first Teleportation, and it did help. This time he also told his brain what to expect, so when he opened his eyes he wasn't disoriented to find himself on the schoolhouse porch.

But was it the right schoolhouse? Pran looked up at the sign just to make sure, and then smiled with satisfaction and relief. When his father

walked toward him saying, “Well done, son,” Pran was so pleased with himself that he took a bow, grinning from ear to ear.

Once back in the classroom, Kimbar and Garwin barely had time to congratulate him on his success before the class was interrupted by the sound of two riders approaching, followed by heavy knocks on the schoolhouse door.



26: A VISIT FROM THE ARMY

Pran's father opened the door to reveal two men in Army uniforms on the school porch. Without asking the purpose of their visit, he invited them in, as if it were an everyday occurrence to welcome soldiers into magic school.

A nervous silence permeated the classroom at the unannounced visit by the Army, coming as it did on the same day the boys had witnessed preparations for burning the town's bridges. Noticing that the soldiers wore dress blue uniforms rather than battle blues, Pran feared the worst: they were there to announce that his brother, Kavik, had been killed in action.

Both men wore the gold hexagram insignia of officers in the Eldorean Army Magic Corps. The older of the two, a Captain, was one of the Company Magic Officers Pran remembered having seen at the Magicians' Council. He was about thirty, tall, broad-shouldered, and had a well-trimmed black beard and an intelligent, almost scholarly face. The younger man, a tall man in his early twenties with a mistletoe moustache and a wiry build, Pran recognized as Bugati, one of his older brother's classmates from magic school. Bugati proudly wore the rank of Second Lieutenant, looking quite handsome in his dress blue uniform with a bright, shiny sword strapped to his hip. Except for the leather dispatch case slung across his right shoulder, he looked like he'd stepped out of a recruiting poster.

“Master Gilamond, sorry to interrupt your lab,” Lieutenant Bugati told his former teacher, although he sounded more excited than sorry. “We’d planned to come this morning, but had to wait until the orders were cut and other plans set into motion.”

“Now is as good a time as any,” Pran’s father said.

Pran realized with relief that the news couldn’t be the death announcement that he’d feared, as Bugati appeared rather eager to be here today. He also sensed his father had been *expecting* a visit from the military.

Fipin whispered, “See, I told you the Army would draft us if the war turned bad.”

A flurry of other whispers followed, and then Yuli stammered, “Sir—I mean sirs—are we being drafted into the Army?”

With a chuckle, the Captain replied, “No, you boys are all too young to be drafted—”

“That’s a relief,” smiled the blond Novice.

“—but you’re not too young to *volunteer*,” the officer finished with a wry smile. “But first, some introductions. I’m Captain Umbar, and this is Lieutenant Bugati. We’ve come here to handle an item of military business that, strange as it may sound, affects this school. Master Gilamond, I’ll need a couple hours of time with your class.”

Although it was framed as a demand rather than a question, Pran’s father said agreeably, “Certainly; you can have the rest of the afternoon.” Looking at his students, he explained pointedly, “We *all* do our part for the defense of Eldor.”

“Thank you. Before I proceed any further, I’m going to ask each of you to take an oath of secrecy. I’m sorry to have to do this, but it’s come to the attention of the Magicians’ Council that some of you have associated with black magic users.” Holding up a hand as if to deflect protest, Captain Umbar said, “I’m not suggesting any of you would *personally* spy for Marakna, but you may have unwittingly associated with enemy spies, Sorcerers, or their young apprentices.” He took a large gold coin out of his pocket, displayed it to the class, and said formally, “The oath I am about

to swear you to will be enforced by magic. If any of you feel you cannot keep quiet about military information vital to the defense of Eldor, you should leave *now*." He placed the coin on the teacher's desk, where it made a resounding ring, and looked around to see if anyone would decide to leave.

Pran's father said, "Just a minute, Captain. My older son, Lieutenant Kavik, told me about military Oath spells. Were you planning to make my students swear 'on pain of death'?"

Umbar shrugged. "That *is* how Oath of Secrecy spells are done in the military."

"These are children, not soldiers! You can't make them swear a military oath." Ticking off each unacceptable item on a finger, Pran's father said resolutely, "I'll allow *no* Oath spells in my schoolhouse that involve death, dismemberment, disfigurement, injury, or pain."

Umbar threw up his hands with a frustrated laugh and asked sarcastically, "What would you suggest, a *pinky* swear?"

"Sir," Lieutenant Bugati offered, "there are alternatives. When I went to school here, my buddies and I used to cast Oath spells together—*outside* of class," he emphasized with a grin that reminded Pran of Kimbar. "Our spells were quite effective at keeping secrets without causing physical harm. I bet if we discuss them, we can find a spell we can all agree on."

Captain Umbar nodded, and the three adults huddled together. At Bugati's first whispered suggestion, Pran's father shook his head, saying, "No, too harsh a punishment."

Pran's father seemed amenable with the next suggestion, but this time Umbar shook his head, saying, "No, not enough of a deterrent."

As Bugati whispered a third time, they all burst out laughing. Umbar said, "Yes, that's perfect! It may even help prevent harm to Eldor if someone betrays the secret."

Pran's father nodded, and said with a smile, "Agreed, but a lifetime is too long for the penalty to last, especially for boys this young. Make it a year."

"Ten years," said Umbar, bargaining like a hawker in the town market.

"Two," said Pran's father.

“Make it two years *after* the war ends and you’ve got a deal.”

“Done. You may begin the spell anytime you’re ready,” Pran’s father said, returning to his seat.

Captain Umbar addressed the class, with Lieutenant Bugati at his side, “If anyone here feels they cannot keep a secret, you can leave either now or after hearing the penalty for oath breakers, as long as you leave before you seal the oath.” He looked around to see if anyone would take him up on his offer, but nobody moved.

Umbar smiled and said, “Very well.” He removed an envelope from Bugati’s dispatch case and removed the paper inside. Then picking up the gold coin from the table, he made a symbol in the air with it, and began reading, “Oath of Secrecy, part one. The information that must be kept secret includes the briefing and letters that you will receive from Captain Umbar and Lieutenant Bugati today after you are sworn to this oath.”

Umbar made another symbol in the air and then continued, “Oath of Secrecy, part two: who is authorized to know the secret, and who it must be kept from. The information you’re about to receive is on a need-to-know basis. You may discuss it with the following people: your immediate family, your classmates and apprentices in this room who *also* swear to this oath, Lieutenant Bugati, Captain Umbar, Colonel Steele, Colonel Kaldor, and any other Eldorean Army officers or soldiers who have a need to know.” Looking up from the prepared letter, he added, “You may use your own judgment about which Army personnel have a need to know, but please don’t go bragging about it to every soldier you meet!” He resumed reading, “You must keep the information secret from the following people: everyone else not mentioned above.”

Umbar made a third symbol in the air with his hand, and then read, “Oath of Secrecy, part three: You must continue to keep the information secret until the following time: after Eldor wins the war with Marakna. If Eldor *loses* the war,” he read, pausing to frown with disbelief at the words on the paper before him. “If Eldor loses the war,” he repeated, “then the secret must be kept during any period of enemy occupation, until Eldor throws off the reins of the enemy and becomes a free and independent

nation again. If it takes more than a lifetime for Eldor to win the war,” he read with another frown of disbelief, “then the secret must be kept for your entire lifetime.”

Captain Umbar made a fourth symbol in the air, then continued, “If you break this Oath of Secrecy, you will be subject to—” He stopped short, for apparently the prepared text he was reading listed the *death* penalty, then shook his head and turned the paper facedown on the desk. Looking up at the class, Umbar departed from the script and said with a twinkle in his eye, “From the time you break the oath until two years after the war ends, you will be forced to finish every conversation by saying, ‘But I’m an idiot and a liar, so you shouldn’t believe anything I say.’”

Several students broke out in laughter. Captain Umbar smiled with barely suppressed laughter himself and looked approvingly over at Bugati, who grinned with satisfaction at the cleverness of the penalty he had devised.

When the laughter had died down, Umbar continued, “You will say this phrase loudly, clearly, and straight faced, without any attempt at sarcasm or humor. You will not be able to defeat this penalty by communicating in writing, because all of your written statements will end with the same declaration.

“Does anyone have any questions about the oath, or the penalty?” asked Umbar, pausing to look around the room. When nobody spoke up, he said, “Very well; I will now ask you each to seal the oath. Master Gilamond, if you’d be so kind as to guide me to the two boys you mentioned earlier, we’ll start with them.”

Pran wondered what he meant, but realized soon enough when his father led the Captain to Pathik and Samir. Obviously the Magicians’ Council was suspicious of the two boys who were known to have practiced black magic, so if they refused to swear the oath, they would not be allowed to stick around to see which boys *did*.

Umbar said, “If you do not agree to the oath, this is your last chance to leave. Otherwise, reply to my next question by saying, ‘I do.’ Pathik and Samir, do you swear to abide by this oath of secrecy?”

"I do," the big butcher's son said, and Samir echoed, "I do."

Kimbar joked, "You may now kiss the bride!"

As laughter broke out among the rest of the class, Samir's face turned red, and Pathik's hands balled into fists. Captain Umbar turned and gave Kimbar a stern look.

"Sorry, sir," Kimbar said, "just trying to lighten the mood."

"This is not the time for jokes," Umbar admonished him, but behind him, Lieutenant Bugati appeared to be biting his lip to avoid laughing.

Umbar turned to administer the oath to the other boys, starting with the Novices, who, after Samir and Pathik, were perhaps judged *next* most likely to refuse. When all of the boys, from the youngest Novice to Prentice Joran, had been sworn to secrecy, Umbar smiled and said, "Outstanding! This means the whole class can stay for the secret briefing. But one final warning," he said, looking at Pathik and Samir. "Your schoolmaster talked me out of using the death penalty for breaking the oath, so if you accidentally let a secret slip to a neighbor, you won't drop dead from the Oath spell. However, I remind you that the punishment for treason is still death, so if you tell secrets to the *enemy*—the Maraknese or any of their agents—you *will* be hanged."

Pran looked at his father, half expecting him to protest or intervene again, but this time his father nodded his agreement.

"Okay," Umbar said, clapping his hands, "that about does it for the dire threats and grim warnings! Now it's time to explain to the class why we're here. Lieutenant Bugati, tell them about Operation Groundhog."



27: OPERATION GROUNDHOG

Lieutenant Bugati faced the class, smiling proudly, while his brown eyes looked appraisingly at the students seated in front of him. The look on the young officer's face was what Pran would expect of a newly minted Lieutenant being introduced to his first command—which he thought strange, since there was no *way* they'd put an Army Magician in charge of a magic class, especially when there were two perfectly good apprentices ready to take over in case of need!

Bugati said, "Captain Umbar was right; you boys are too young to be drafted, but the Army can recruit *volunteers* as young as you. The tides of war are likely to change rapidly, and if worse comes to worst, I expect each and every one of you to volunteer."

There were murmurs from the class, and several hands shot up. Mathur asked, "What about our magic school training? Do you expect us all to drop out of school and enlist? I'm only thirteen," the Novice pointed out, "too young to join the Army except as drummer boy."

Bugati answered, "No, we don't expect you to drop out of school or enlist, but if events we fear come to pass, Eldor will have to close all its magic schools, anyway. Then you'll have to either switch to a grammar school, or volunteer to do what the Army is about to ask of you."

Fipin said, “Sir, my father is an Army Magician too, but he never told me anything to make me think we’re losing the war. Why would Eldor close all its magic schools, unless we totally lose the war?”

Bugati hesitated and glanced over at Captain Umbar.

The Captain shook his head. “Sorry, but even with your oath of secrecy, we can’t tell you. This is a *Secret* briefing, but those details are classified *Top Secret* to keep the enemy from suspecting we know their plans.

“Although I can’t reveal the larger strategic threat, I can tell you the threat to our town. Enemy troops have been sighted moving toward White River Junction. It’s not an overwhelmingly large force, so under normal circumstances we could successfully defend against it, but I fear circumstances are not likely to stay normal. In addition, this enemy force has cavalry, so it’s capable of rapid movement if they choose to send their Cav’ units ahead, with their accompanying Sorcerers. That’s one reason—the only one we’re at liberty to disclose—that we’re planning for the worst, including the preparations you’ve seen at the bridges. Lieutenant Bugati will explain how your class fits into our plans for the town’s defense.”

Lieutenant Bugati said, “Thank you, Captain. Boys, I brought each of you a letter from our Battalion Commander, Colonel Steele, to take home to your parents. It’s about a special mission the Army will have for you if worse comes to worst. Since you’re underage, the Army can’t accept you, even as volunteers, without asking your parents’ permission. These letters are on an ‘opt-out’ basis, so unless your parents tell us they forbid you from taking part, or simply keep you home, we will assume they’re giving their permission.

“You are not to open the letters until after sunset tonight. They must be opened only by the boy named on the envelope, in the presence of his family, and no others. Each envelope has spells on it so that it will instantly burn up if the seal is broken under any other circumstances, so don’t even try. Jelal, I’ve been told that you’re an orphan currently living with Pran, so you’ll be allowed to open yours in the presence of *Pran’s* family.

“Prentice Joran and Prentice Nahshon,” the young Lieutenant asked, “would you please pass out the letters while I discuss their contents?”

As the letters were being passed out, Bugati said gravely, “If the event that we fear comes to pass, then our town’s civilian Magicians will retreat to the Wizard Tower, where they can withstand a lengthy enemy siege while awaiting—” He paused, as if considering his words carefully, then finished, “—certain reinforcements.”

Pran knew exactly which reinforcements Bugati meant: the gold that he and his friends were supposed to bring back from Earth.

Bugati continued, “Under my command, this class will become part of a new Resistance movement that will covertly fight the occupation through sabotage and other means. We will have a special role in the Resistance, called Operation Groundhog, so if someone tells you tomorrow, ‘Operation Groundhog is being activated,’ you’ll know what we mean.”

Fipin, always the curious one, asked, “Why is it called Operation Groundhog?”

Jelal, codenamed Mouse, whispered to Pran, “Probably because all the *good* animal names were taken,” and Pran had to stifle a laugh.

Bugati told Fipin, “I’m glad someone asked, because I researched the name, and groundhogs are the perfect symbol for a Resistance cell. They’re excellent burrowers, going underground to escape enemies, and Resistance members work ‘underground,’ figuratively at least. Groundhog burrows have multiple entrances, giving them many routes to escape predators, just as we will plan several escape routes when we harass the Maraknese.

“Groundhogs may not look like good climbers or swimmers, but appearances are deceiving, as they’re adept at both. They climb trees to conduct surveillance or escape predators, although they prefer to retreat to their burrows for escape. We will be just as resourceful and multitalented, while deceiving the enemy with our innocent appearance.

“Groundhogs are territorial animals, willing to fight others of their species to defend their territory. The Resistance will fight to defend our city, and Eldor, from the Maraknese. If their burrow is invaded, groundhogs tenaciously defend themselves with their sharp teeth and claws. We’ll fight just as fiercely if our hideouts are discovered.

“Outside of their burrows, groundhogs are alert, and it’s common to see one of them up on its hind feet standing lookout. When alarmed, they warn the rest of their colony of the danger using a high-pitched whistle, and we will devise similar warning signals. Groundhogs rarely venture far from a burrow entrance, and likewise we will arrange to always be near a means of escape. Finally, groundhogs have thick skulls, so they can survive direct blows to the head that would cripple other animals their size—though I hope you boys will rely more on *Shield* spells than thick skulls! Master Gilamond and his apprentices will load you all up with *Shield* spells tomorrow, don’t worry.”

Garwin raised his hand. “What exactly will we do in the Resistance?”

Bugati said somberly, “When Operation Groundhog is activated, our first task will be to shut down this magic school.” He looked around as if expecting an argument, but the class sat in stunned silence at this pronouncement. “This is partly for your own protection, because we expect the occupying army to hunt down magic students. There’s also another reason which I can’t discuss, but I fear it will become obvious soon enough.

“Your main task in closing this school will be to remove any personally identifiable items so that when the enemy searches here, they won’t find anything to help them track you down. We’ll also remove all valuables, including spellbooks, so they can be used by us, and *not* by the enemy.

“Two students in your class will not take part in Operation Groundhog, because they’re going away on a separate, Top Secret mission. One of them is Master Gilamond’s son Pran, and the other is your new Novice, Jelal.”

“Why *those* two, and where’re they going?” asked Samir.

Captain Umbar said brusquely, “Did you not hear Lieutenant Bugati say their mission is *Top Secret*? All we can tell you is that they’ll be leaving town, and you won’t see them again until their mission is complete.”

If you ever see us alive again, Pran thought, but he kept such feelings to himself.

Bugati said, “Thank you, Captain. After we remove any valuables from this school, and anything that could identify you as students here, the next step in Operation Groundhog will be for you boys—those of you who

choose to accept this mission—to become a covert Resistance cell against the Maraknese occupation, under my command. Magicians aren't allowed to command combat units, so I volunteered for this unique opportunity, and I hope you will as well. If any of you choose not to join the Resistance, you'll be transferred to grammar schools, but you'll still be bound by today's Oath of Secrecy spell.

"For those of you who join me in the Resistance, all of your magic skills will be needed to resist the enemy, since our town's Magicians will be otherwise occupied. You'll cast your spells covertly, while undercover as ordinary children. Our mission will not be to engage the enemy in combat, but to harass and annoy them. I know magic students like playing practical jokes," Bugati said with a smile, "and in your new role, we'll *encourage* that, as long as your targets are Maraknese. You'll be able to play as many tricks on the occupiers as you want. We Groundhogs will make life difficult for the enemy in a thousand different ways, using our magic skills to make them think they're losing their minds!

"We'll also conduct some missions typically done by Army commandos, such as interfering with enemy supply lines and sabotaging their equipment. We'll steal their horseshoes, cut the straps on their saddles, break wheels and axles on their wagons, poke holes in their water barrels and sacks of grain, and so forth. If we do kill some Maraknese soldiers, it won't be through direct combat, but rather by covert tactics such as poisoning their food supply or causing fatal 'accidents' to happen.

"Of course, our job will be dangerous at times. The enemy," Bugati said with a sneer, "will no doubt call us 'saboteurs,' 'insurgents,' and 'terrorists.' They'll try to hunt us down and kill us, but rest assured, boys, I won't let that happen. I consider you my new command—my first command—and I'll do my best to ensure that all of you return safely from any mission I send you on.

"Our perils will be great, but so will the rewards," Bugati assured the class. "Although we won't wear uniforms, any student who joins me in the Resistance will be given the rank of Cadet Fourth class, with the opportunity for promotions. If the war lasts long enough, some of you

may even receive battlefield commissions as Lieutenants in His Majesty's Army. After we win the war, qualified Groundhogs will be offered appointments to the Eldorean Military Academy, retaining whatever rank you earned in the Resistance."

Perhaps anticipating a question, Bugati added, "Those of you who don't want a career in the military will be rewarded too. The Magicians' Council has assured me that after the war, members of the Resistance will be given top priority for acceptance to the Royal Academy of Magic or apprenticeships with the best Magicians in the land. But for all of us, our highest reward will be knowing we helped our country drive out the invaders. Young men," Lieutenant Bugati said in a rousing tone of voice, "together we will fill a crucial role in the defense of our kingdom. After Eldor wins the war, generations of minstrels will sing about us Groundhogs as heroes, freedom fighters, and brave members of the glorious Resistance! Now, boys, who's with me? Who will join Operation Groundhog?"

All hands shot up enthusiastically.

Bugati grinned broadly. "Excellent, outstanding! I'm glad to have everyone on board! Jelal, I appreciate you raising your hand to try to make it unanimous, but you didn't have to, since you'll be going away on your *own* mission."

Jelal said, "No, I've changed my mind about that. I'll stay here with the other boys in the class and join the Groundhogs in the Resistance."

Pran's eyes widened in shock. Of all the potential problems he'd been worrying about, this was one he'd never anticipated!

Pran's father shook his head. "Sorry, Jelal, you already have orders to go elsewhere."

"I don't have orders, I *volunteered*. So now I'm *un*-volunteering for that mission and volunteering for this one instead. I'd be perfect for the Resistance; you know I would! Going undercover behind enemy lines, sneaking around, doing magic covertly, playing tricks on enemy soldiers—it's what I was *born* for!"

Pran's father said firmly, "You can't stay here, Jelal. You have to go with my son on his mission—*your* mission."

Jelal yelled, with tears of rage in his eyes, “Stop telling me what to do! You’re not my father! Everyone treats me like a little boy, always telling me what to do. I’m *not* a little boy,” he insisted, although the tears rolling down his twelve-year-old cheeks seemed to indicate otherwise. “I’m *not*! I’m really—”

Pran saw his father quickly cast a Lockjaw spell on Jelal before the little spy could blurt out his true identity. He justified his use of such an insulting spell by saying, “I will not tolerate such disrespect from *any* student, orphan or not. Jelal, my office, *right* now! Pran, you too. Lieutenant, I trust you can finish your talk without us?”

“Certainly,” said Lieutenant Bugati, looking a bit bewildered by all the attention focused on Jelal, who he’d apparently thought was just another Novice. “I’m almost done, anyway.”

As soon as the three of them were inside the office, protected by its Anti-Eavesdropping spells, Pran asked his father, “What are we going to do about Jelal? We need him with us on Earth. He’s supposed to be the leader of our quest.”

His father said, still sounding angry, “Now you understand why he usually works alone. He almost blew his own cover, and look at him now; he’s still crying! Do you still want him with you, after the scene you just witnessed?”

“Yes,” Pran said without hesitation, “I do.”

“Fine,” Pran’s father said. “Jelal, pull yourself together.”

Jelal continued sobbing silently, tears rolling down his face, his eyes downcast.

“*Agent Mouse*, I order you to pull yourself together and stop that crying,” Pran’s father said.

Jelal’s head snapped up at the sound of his code name, and he finally composed himself, wiping his eyes with his sleeve and giving one last sniffle.

With a twitch of his fingers, Pran’s father removed the Lockjaw spell.

“*I hate* you, Gil,” were the first words out of Jelal’s mouth when he was released.

Pran observed, “See, it isn’t fun having a Lockjaw spell cast on you, eh? I thought you’d be shielded against that.”

"No, because when I'm undercover as a Novice and someone casts a spell on me, they expect it to take effect. If it didn't, it might blow my cover."

"You mean like you almost blew your own cover today?" asked Pran's father. "What were you *thinking* in there?"

Jelal said, "I'm not going to Earth with Lieutenant Hakon—that arrogant, sneering, sword-happy jackass—if I can stay here and be in the Resistance! The Groundhogs could use a Magician and spy with my experience at sneaking around behind enemy lines."

"We'll need your skills on Earth, too," Pran pointed out.

"Okay, so you both need me—then why can't I choose what *I* want to do? I'm not in the Army, and even if I were, both missions are on a volunteer basis." The little spy folded his arms resolutely and said, "I've made my choice. I'm staying here with the Resistance."

"Well, maybe the Resistance won't *want* you, after that scene you made in the classroom," Pran's father said.

Looking stung by his remark, Jelal shot back, "And maybe I won't want to stay in the Eldorean Intelligence Agency, with the way my handler treats me! Maybe I'll just quit the EIA. I have more than enough years of service to retire right now."

Pran feared the situation was rapidly spiraling downward.

His father said, "You're his friend, Pran. Maybe *you* can talk some sense into him."

That gave Pran an idea. If they couldn't convince Jelal by appealing to his sense of duty, perhaps an appeal based on friendship would work. He asked, "Can I speak with him alone?"

His father shrugged and said, "Good luck," unable to keep the sarcasm from his voice. He got up from his chair and left the office.

As soon as the two boys were alone, Jelal's face regained its normal composure. "I'm sorry, Pran," he said sincerely. "I know you wanted me to go with you to Earth"

"To *lead* our expedition to Earth," Pran corrected. "That's what we agreed on."

"Yes, but that was before I learned your class would get to be part of the Resistance. That's something I really want to do, Pran. I'll finally get to work with other children, and I'll be able to use all my skills to help them fight the enemy," the little spy said with a smile.

Before going any further, Pran needed an answer to something that was bothering him. He asked, "What happened to you back there in the classroom?"

Jelal's smile faded, and he refused to meet Pran's eyes. "Why, did you think I was about to reveal my identity, blow my own cover?"

"Well, yes, but that's not what bothers me most. You broke down in tears in front of our whole class, Jelal. It's rare enough for magic students to cry, but you're one hundred thirty-nine! Can you explain yourself?"

Jelal's small shoulders slumped, and he looked away. Finally, he looked Pran in the eyes and confessed, "I'm afraid Lieutenant Hakon's right about me. I *am* unstable, emotionally and perhaps mentally too. And sometimes I act as immature as I look, like today. But in my defense, what else would you expect, with the life I've had to lead?" Pran saw Jelal's blue-gray eyes mist with tears again. "I can never grow up, never have a girlfriend, never get married, and never have kids. My family died years ago, and nobody in the world understands how I feel, because there *is* nobody else with my condition! On top of all that, because I'm a spy I'm always moving from place to place, constantly changing my name, never able to confide in anyone, never able to form friendships. Most days, I cope with my situation well enough, but sometimes I have bad days, and today is one of them." The tears started rolling down Jelal's cheeks, as he said, "I have *nobody*—no family, no relationships, and no friends."

Pran reached out and put his arm around Jelal to comfort him, just as he had with Vitina when she'd been crying. "You have at least one friend," he pointed out. "Me." He looked into the little spy's blue-gray eyes, and said, "Jelal, on the day we met, I promised to be your friend. I liked you from the moment I met you, and still do. I've been happy to call you 'friend' these past couple weeks. You've shared your secrets with me, so I'm also your confidant, and sometimes I feel like you're the little brother I never had.

"Jelal, I promise to always be your friend. I could even pretend to be your big brother, if you want—I mean if it would help your cover as a spy," he added quickly, feeling slightly embarrassed. "So that should take a load off your mind, Jelal. You can stop worrying about not having any relatives, confidants, or friends."

"Thank you," Jelal whispered, his small face glowing with gratitude.

Pran said, "If you go with us to Earth, you'll have me there as your friend, but if you stay here at school, who'll befriend you? The upperclassmen look down on Novices, and the *real* Novices resent you for being friends with me." He felt guilty about playing the friendship card so hard, but thought it necessary to get Jelal to go with him to Earth.

Jelal hesitated. "Thanks, Pran, but I don't know. My country will need me here to help magic students mount a Resistance to the occupation."

"Where your country needs you to go is *Earth*, with Vitina and me," Pran pointed out. "Remember, the Truthseeker prophecy mentioned you—not by name, but it's pretty clear it was about you! When we go to Earth, we'll be in a strange world where we'll need your skills as a Magician, spy, and someone accustomed to working behind enemy lines. Well," he mused, "we don't know if Earth's an enemy yet, but if we're going to steal their gold, that'll probably make them our enemy. Don't force us to have Lieutenant Hakon as the only Magician on our quest, and worse yet, as our leader."

"After the way I burst out crying in class, aren't you worried about whether I'm emotionally stable enough to lead?"

"A little," Pran admitted, "but I'm going with my gut feelings about you." He remembered Chitra, daughter-in-law of the Truthseeker prophet, advising her husband to trust his feelings. Mohinder had told Pran that the Spirit of Truth was in *him*, too. "I believe that you're *meant* to go with us to Earth, Jelal, and that without you, our quest will not succeed." As he said it, Pran felt sure in his heart that it was true—perhaps that was the "Truthsense" that Mohinder spoke of. He reached out and took one of Jelal's small hands in his own, saying, "You have to come with us, Jelal. Do it for Eldor, or do it for me as a friend, but come lead our quest to Earth."

Jelal looked at Pran for a minute as if considering, and then smiled. "Okay, I'll go. My superiors at the EIA take me for granted, so I've grown tired of volunteering for *them*, but it's different when a *friend* asks me."

Pran smiled back. "Great! Now let's go tell my father the good news." At least, he hoped his father would take it as good news.

As soon as they left the office, his father asked, "So, Jelal, are you still going on the mission with Pran?" His tone was neutral, perhaps trying to hide his true feelings until hearing the reply.

"Yes," the little spy said, "your son managed to convince me."

"That's great!" Pran's father said. "Glad to hear it."

Pran was relieved his father still thought it a good idea for Jelal to join them. It seemed to confirm that he'd made the right decision in convincing his little friend to come along. Pran said, "Yes, it *is* great."

Captain Umbar said, "Well, I'm glad that's cleared up. Lieutenant Bugati finished his briefing while you were in the office, and he already left. I just stayed to see whether Jelal was still going away on Operation Bird Dog, as planned." In response to Pran's questioning look, he said with a smile, "Yes, in case you haven't heard, your mission now has its own code name, too."

As Pran and Jelal turned to walk back to their seats, Captain Umbar stopped them, saying, "Stand fast a minute; there's something I want to say to you. The road ahead will be dangerous, both for you two boys and for those of us staying here to fight the enemy invaders. Since we may never meet again alive, I just want to tell you how grateful I am for what you've volunteered to do. Your quest is vital to the survival of Eldor. Pran and Jelal, I thank you for volunteering to go on such a dangerous mission, and I salute you."

As he said the last words, Captain Umbar rendered a crisp, military salute to the two boys. Having a brother in the Army, Pran knew enough to return the salute, and Jelal did likewise. Then Umbar said, "Fare thee well, brave youths, and pass my message to your companions who are not with us today." Without waiting for a reply, he left.

The other students sat looking with awe at Pran and Jelal.

Pran's father told the class, "Remember, everything these officers said here today, including the words Captain Umbar just spoke, is covered by the Oath of Secrecy that binds you all, and we will not discuss his parting words further. I'm afraid the Army has used up all our lab time. I remind everyone to open your letter from the Army this evening in the presence of your parents, but not before sunset. There will be no homework tonight, as you'll be busy discussing the Army's letter with your parents, while Jelal and my son Pran will be packing for Operation Bird Dog.

"Allow yourselves extra time to get to and from school from now on. Security on the bridges is going to be very tight, with half the troops in our town's garrison moving into defensive positions there today and tomorrow, plus any reinforcements that arrive from out of town. I suggest those of you who learned how to Teleport today—Garwin, Kimbar, Samir, and Pran—use your new knowledge to get home more quickly. I'll even give you the gold to Teleport home tonight and back tomorrow morning—just this once," he added, smiling for reasons Pran understood, but few of his classmates would. He handed out two gold coins each to Garwin, Kimbar, Samir, and Pran, then said, "Class dismissed. Jelal, stay here; I'll Teleport you home with me."

Despite all their efforts to protect Jelal's cover as an inexperienced Novice, it seemed his classmates were beginning to suspect the little blond boy was special in some way. As they neared the door, the other Novices stared at Jelal with a mixture of awe and wonder, whispering about why a mere Novice would be selected to go away on a Top Secret mission. Jelal seemed to relish the attention, smiling at his young classmates as if he'd forgotten his disappointment about not being able to stay and join the Resistance.

Pran noticed with surprise that everyone was looking at him with the same expressions of awe and wonder on their faces that the Novices had for Jelal. When Pran heard his own name being whispered too, he couldn't help smiling like Jelal, beaming with pride and self-importance at being part of a secret mission.

He didn't have long to enjoy the moment before his father reminded them, "Boys, once you leave this building, all whispering about secret missions should cease, lest anyone overhear. I don't want any of you to suffer the consequences of the Oath of Secrecy spell, and I'm sure you don't either."

The whispering stopped.

"I'll Teleport first," Kimbar said as they walked out onto the porch. "Don't wait for me tomorrow morning, 'cause I'll Teleport straight to school." He held up one of the two gold coins that Pran's father had given him, stood for a minute with a look of deep concentration on his face, then made the gestures of the Teleportation spell and disappeared.

Pran said, "I'll go next," proud of his new ability. "See you in school tomorrow, Garwin." He decided to Teleport outside his front gate rather than inside the house, so as not to startle his mother and Nako by appearing out of nowhere, or embarrass himself if he landed badly and fell.

The decision almost cost him his life.



28: OPERATION BIRD DOG

As Pran materialized outside his gate, dizzy and disoriented from his Teleportation spell, a voice behind him yelled, “Sorcerer by the farmhouse! It’s an ambush!” A volley of arrows whizzed toward him, thwacking into the gate and fence. Pran threw himself to the ground, hitting the dirt so hard that the wind was knocked out of him. Struggling to regain his breath, he could only listen helplessly as his attackers discussed his fate.

“We got him! Is he dead?”

“Let’s put a few more arrows in him, just to make sure.”

“*Archers, cease fire, cease fire!*” yelled a commanding voice as hoofbeats approached. “It’s just a local boy.”

“But sir, he appeared out of nowhere, just like one of them Sorcerers!”

“Corporal, have you forgotten that our Magicians can Teleport too? That chain around his neck is *silver*, not bone, meaning you shot a young Enchanter, so you’d better hope he’s not dead. Magic Officer, see if you can Heal him.”

Pran rolled over and wheezed, “That—won’t—be—necessary. Not shot. Just had the—wind knocked out of me.” Raising his head, he saw an Eldorean Army Captain peering down at him from his horse, his uniform bearing the crossed broadswords insignia of the Infantry. Behind him stood a company of foot soldiers in full battle array, their shields notched from combat.

The Captain turned to his men and yelled, “Archers, you all missed! How could you miss at this range? I ought to demote the lot of you twice—first for getting the wrong target, and second for missing!”

“Well, *I’m* certainly glad they missed,” Pran pointed out as he stood up and dusted himself off.

The Captain laughed. “Yes, I imagine you would be! So under the circumstances, men, I won’t demote anyone today, because this time you’re *lucky* you all missed. Go retrieve your arrows before the neighbors see that you shot up a local farmhouse.”

As the archers scurried about pulling arrows out of fence posts, pickets, and stringers, their commander introduced himself, “I’m Captain Bover, Eldorean Infantry.”

“Hello, I’m Pran, and I live here.”

“You’re a Magician’s apprentice, an Enchanter, eh?”

“Actually I’m still just a magic student, a Conjuror.”

“And you already know how to Teleport?” Captain Bover sounded impressed. “You must be very advanced at magic for your age! Listen, Pran,” he said invitingly. “My company could use a new Platoon Magic Officer right now. In our last battle, one of mine was k— Well, let’s just say I’m one short right now, and I’m looking for a replacement before our next battle. Brigade has none to spare, and obviously there’s no time to wait for the next Academy class to graduate. You seem to know advanced magic, and are pretty good at dodging arrows, too. Come with us,” he proposed, “and I’ll give you a direct commission to Lieutenant—after you prove yourself in your first battle.”

If I survive the battle, he means! “Sorry,” Pran said, “but I can’t go with you.”

The Captain’s voice hardened. “You won’t volunteer for King and country during our hour of need? Well, in that case, you look *draft* age to me. Isn’t that right, Recruiting Sergeant?”

A burly looking soldier answered, “Yes sir, definitely draft age,” as he pulled a cudgel from his belt and slapped it menacingly against his left hand.

Pran realized with dismay that the Recruiting Sergeant's job included forcibly conscripting young men who refused to enlist! "I'm only sixteen," he protested, despite the fact that the company's drummer boy looked even younger. Then in a flash of inspiration, he added, "And I meant I can't join you because I'm already under orders from the Army."

The Captain snapped skeptically, "Orders from whom, and for what?"

Pran reached into his rucksack and removed the letter he'd received today. "Orders from Colonel Steele, sir, for Operation Bird Dog."

"Never heard of it! Show me that envelope," the Captain demanded.

Pran handed it over reluctantly, saying, "It has a spell on it so it can't be opened until after sundown, and not by anyone except me."

"A likely story!" the Captain scoffed, but nevertheless refrained from opening it. Instead, he examined the envelope closely, turning it over to scrutinize the seal. Finally, he admitted, "That *is* Colonel Steele's seal, so I guess you told the truth. Sorry about wanting to draft you," he said with a shrug, motioning his "Recruiting Sergeant" to put away his cudgel. "It's just that we're desperately in need of a new Magician to get our company up to full strength before our next battle. Pran, tell your family and neighbors to stay inside and lock their doors, because the Maraknese are only a day's march behind us. And don't cast any more spells near the road that might get you mistaken for a Sorcerer, because the rest of our battalion is coming along close on our heels. You didn't expect your local garrison to be left to defend White River Junction all by itself, did you?"

Pran smiled in relief. "They'll be happy to have your support. My brother, Lieutenant Kavik, is a Platoon Magic Officer in the 4th Brigade. Do you know him?"

"Sorry, I don't," Captain Bovert said brusquely, looking impatient to be moving again. Wheeling his horse around, he addressed his men in a loud voice, "Archers, if you see any more Eldorean young men who know magic, remember: we want to *recruit* them; not *shoot* them! First Sergeant, get these troops moving again."

"Company!" bellowed the First Sergeant.

"Platoon!" each of the Platoon Sergeants yelled back to their men.

“Forward, march!” the First Sergeant barked, echoed by his Platoon Sergeants.

Pran watched, impressed, as the column of soldiers filed by in step to the drumbeat, nearly two hundred grim faced, battle-scarred veterans wielding swords, pikes, spears, battleaxes, and longbows, plus one fair haired drummer boy barely into his teens. The company traveled by foot except for the officers, who rode horseback, and supply wagons in the rear, pulled by sturdy draft horses. Their uniforms were not only dusty from the long road march, but some were also stained with the blood of battle, although Magicians had apparently Healed the men’s wounds.

This column of heavily armed fighting men was quite a contrast to the last caravan Pran had seen along this road, the group of unarmed, peaceful pilgrims who called themselves Truthseekers. Although his brother, Kavik, would have been disappointed to hear it, Pran found that he preferred the peaceful Truthseekers. Of course, the fact that these soldiers had shot at him and tried to forcibly draft him had something to do with his preference, as those weren’t actions he could easily overlook!

Pran dusted his clothing off again and headed into the house. His mother greeted him in the kitchen, where a large pot of stew sat simmering on the stove, and told him with a laugh, “Nako has been cowering under the table, afraid of those soldiers outside. Some guard dog, eh? But I have to admit, I’ve been hiding in here too, ever since I heard the soldiers say there was a Sorcerer outside. Do you know if they captured or killed him?”

“It was a false alarm,” Pran said, not wanting to cause his mother any undue worry. “They thought they saw a Sorcerer, but they didn’t.”

His mother looked him in the eyes and said, “You’re hiding something. What really happened?”

Pran raised his eyebrows. “Have you joined the Truthseekers, or did father give you a spell to see when someone’s not telling the whole truth?”

“No,” his mother said with a smile, “but sometimes a mother can just tell.”

“Okay,” Pran said, “what happened was I Teleported home—”

“Congratulations! Your father told me he’d teach you the spell today.”

"Thanks. Anyway, when I Teleported home, the soldiers saw me reappear and thought I was a Sorcerer."

"And then what did they do?" his mother asked suspiciously.

Pran shrugged as if it were no big deal. "Oh, they shot a few arrows in my direction, but don't worry, they all missed."

His mother scolded him, "Pran, this is the second time in a week that I've almost lost you! Please be more careful, for *my* sake if not for your own."

Pran began instinctively, "It wasn't my fault," then sighed and agreed, "Okay, mother, I'll be more careful."

"You'd better be, because where you're going, your father won't be around to Heal you when you get hurt."

"But Vitina will," Pran pointed out, feeling a warmth deep inside as he said her name. "She already saved my life once."

"Well, don't make her save your life every other day. There are easier ways to get a girl's attention, you know," his mother said with a smile. Pran felt embarrassed, but to his relief, his mother changed the topic, asking, "So, why did the soldiers stop so long outside our house? Did it take you that long to convince them that you're not a Sorcerer?"

Pran laughed. "No, they were trying to recruit me into the Army. I told them I already have other plans." Before his mother could pry out of him the fact that he'd almost been forcibly drafted, they were interrupted by his father and Jelal, who Teleported directly into the kitchen, eliciting startled barks from Nako.

Pran's parents embraced, then his mother said, "Dinner's ready, if you'd like to eat early. I know you have a lot to do to prepare for tomorrow."

Pran's father said, "Certainly. Pran, we can do our chores after dinner using magic, since there's no more need to conserve gold."

As they sat down to eat, Pran asked, "Jelal, what took you so long?"

"I was receiving last minute orders."

"From who?" asked Pran, glancing suspiciously at his father.

"EIA Headquarters in Eldorado, who did you think?" the little spy asked.

"I thought maybe my *father*," Pran said, feeling bold. "Isn't he your handler?"

"Pran," his mother chastised him, "remember what I told you! In wartime, some questions are best left unasked."

Jelal said, "She's right. What you don't know, the Maraknese can't torture out of you."

"There won't be any Maraknese where we're going," Pran pointed out. "Before I go away to some strange, godforsaken world, I'd like to know the truth about my father's connection to the companion I'll be trusting with my life. I'd already guessed he's your handler, and what you and my mother just said now confirms it. Why didn't you tell me, father? Didn't you trust me?"

His father sighed. "Pran, it was for your own protection, as well as mine. If the enemy found out you knew who Mouse's handler was, they'd torture you to discover my identity, and then come after me and Jelal. Do you know what happened to his previous handler?"

Pran shook his head.

"He was murdered two months ago. Killed by sorcery, right here in White River Junction!"

Pran gasped.

"That's how I ended up becoming his handler, or rather, *one* of his handlers. Jelal has local ones in different cities, in addition to his primary handler in Eldorado."

Jelal complained, "Yeah, Headquarters won't let me go anywhere without 'adult supervision!' Mostly it's to preserve my cover, as it would look suspicious for a twelve-year-old to live by himself. I always have to stay with a family and pretend to be their son, grandson, or nephew. But now Eldorado also seems to think I need a babysitter, a shoulder to cry on, or something like that," he said with a snort. "Maybe Hakon gave them that idea."

"Why was your previous handler killed?" Pran asked, worried his father would be killed next. "Did the enemy discover his connection to you?"

"No, if they had, then I'd be dead too, unless I killed the Sorcerer first. My handler was an EIA agent, so in addition to controlling me, he was

doing his own investigation, searching for enemy Sorcerers in White River Junction. We worked separately so if he got caught, nobody would suspect I was anything more than an innocent son, ignorant of his father's profession. One day this summer, my handler apparently got a little too close to the enemy he was trailing. We never found the Sorcerer who killed him, but now I'm on the case, or *was* until I got tapped for Operation Bird Dog.

"Since my previous handler's death, I've been living with his widow. She knew of her husband's profession, and mine, but she's a civilian herself. She was terrified the Sorcerer who killed her husband would come hunting for me at her house, so you can imagine her relief when I moved in with your family last weekend."

Pran wasn't happy about his parents being put at risk of meeting the same fate as Jelal's previous handler! "Why did the EIA choose my father? He's a civilian too."

His father took a deep breath. "I wasn't always, Pran. I never told you, but I was in the EIA myself when I was young. After a few years, I decided it wasn't for me, so I resigned and went into teaching, but as they say, 'Once an EIA agent, always an EIA agent.' When Jelal's handler was killed, I was the only other EIA asset in White River Junction available to handle him. As for why I accepted the position, we all do our part for the defense of Eldor, like I told your class. It also pays well, as much as my teaching job, and I thought we could use the extra gold." He smiled wryly. "But unfortunately, it seems that any gold I haven't used or spent will be gone tomorrow, unless the EIA finds a way to prevent the prophecy from coming true."

Jelal said, "EIA Magicians are working on the prevention angle, but if they don't succeed, it's up to us to restore the gold. Our mission to Earth has now been approved at the highest level, by the EIA Director himself. On the military side, the Magician General was skeptical of the prophecy, but agreed to support the mission. After all, the only asset he'll be risking is one Lieutenant, and a worthless one at that."

Pran put down his spoon. "He actually called Lieutenant Hakon 'worthless'?"

"No, those are *my* words for him. The Army is suffering from the delusion that Hakon is an 'Outstanding young officer with great potential,' if you can believe that," Jelal chortled.

After taking a few more bites of stew, Pran asked, "Why is our quest called Operation Bird Dog?"

Jelal grinned. "That name was my idea. We're going to Earth to retrieve gold, which makes us *gold retrievers*, and a Golden Retriever is a bird dog! Pretty clever, eh?"

Pran's father said, "It may be too clever for your own good if the Maraknese are smart enough to figure out the double meaning."

Jelal shook his head. "They're not! Even if their spies hear about the mission name, the joke doesn't translate into their language. Anyway, we'll be long gone from this world before they can even begin to figure it out."

"Still," Pran's father said, "I think it adds an unnecessary risk. *You* may be on Earth, far from the Maraknese, but the rest of us Magicians will be here covering your back until you return. If the enemy suspects that you'll be bringing back wagonloads of gold, they'll deploy all their forces around our Wizard Tower."

Pran's mother said, "Less talking and more eating. Your stew is getting cold."

After dinner, Pran's father used more gold to wash and dry the dishes with magic, then said, "Jelal, come outside and help me cast spells for the chores while Pran packs for the quest. We'll attempt to do a month's worth of chores with magic, since we don't know how long you and Pran will be gone, and I'll be holed up in the Tower waiting for your return."

Pran's mother said, "Thank you. I'll help Pran pack while you're outside working."

Pran followed his mother upstairs to his room. He didn't think he needed help packing, but knew this would be his last night at home with his mother for a long time.

While Pran searched for a good spellbook that wouldn't be too big and heavy to pack, his mother said, "Pran, when you said the Army tried to recruit you today, it reminded me of something I've been meaning to

discuss. Lieutenant Hakon will have plenty of time to try to recruit you into the Army during your journey. I know your brother seems to like being an Army Magician, but I hope you don't try to follow in Kavik's footsteps. *One son in the Army is enough for me, especially during wartime.*"

Pran said, "Don't worry, mother, after my experience with those soldiers outside our house today, I don't want to join the Army. Especially if Hakon's the one trying to recruit me. I already hate him."

"Your father told me you and Lieutenant Hakon had an argument yesterday about your girlfriend."

Pran blushed. "She's not my—" he began, then shrugged and decided to let the comment stand. "Anyway, it's too bad Colonel Kaldor insisted this arrogant hothead, Hakon, has to come with us."

"That's *Lieutenant* Hakon," his mother corrected him. "You don't have to like him, but whatever your differences with that young officer, you are to show him the proper respect. Do you understand?"

"Yes, mother."

"When you address him, call him 'Lieutenant' or 'sir.' If you respect him, he'll respect you too. But if he tries to convince you to be an Army Magician, even if he offers you a direct commission or appointment to the Eldorean Military Academy, I want you to politely tell him that you have other career plans. Speaking of which, have you decided yet what type of magic you plan to practice?"

Pran said, "I'm not sure, but recently I've been thinking about becoming a Healer."

"Ah," his mother said knowingly. "It's because of that girl who Healed you, Vitina, isn't it?"

"Well, partly," Pran admitted. "But also, I've always enjoyed doing Healings, and I think I'm good at it, too."

"That's great, Pran. I'd love to have a Healer in the family, our very own Magical Doctor! That reminds me; we got a letter from your Aunt Abra today. Your uncle Javid is about to be given command of his own ship."

"Wow, my uncle a sea Captain; that's fantastic! His company must be doing well despite the war, if they're adding another merchant ship to their fleet."

His mother sighed. "Pran, I'm afraid he's not getting a *merchant* ship. Uncle Javid's been offered his own command on the condition that he accepts a commission in the Eldorean Navy. He doesn't know yet what kind of warship he'll be commanding."

"Probably a rowboat," Pran quipped with a sly grin.

"Oh, Pran," his mother said, laughing and tousling his hair. "I'll certainly miss your sense of humor when you're gone."

"Thanks. I must have gotten it from hanging around with Kimbar so much." He saw his mother wipe a tear from her eyes and asked, "What's wrong?"

"I'm just worried this could be the last night I ever see you alive, Pran. What if you don't return from Earth?"

He looked her in the eyes and said, "Oh, I'm coming *back*, mother. I promise you that."

"Then I'll be here waiting for you," she said, giving him a hug.

Pran looked at the pile of clothing and sundries on his bed and said, "I think that's all I have room for. I'd like to add a spellbook, but they're too big and heavy."

His mother packed the items in his rucksack and said, "You still have room for magic books."

Pran shook his head. "No, they're going to give us some supplies tomorrow at the Wizard Tower. Mostly silver and useless rocks that will weigh down my rucksack."

"Useless rocks?"

"Diamonds. Apparently Earthlings consider them highly valuable, if you can believe that," Pran said with a laugh.

His mother smiled. "I believe it; diamonds are pretty. I've always liked that diamond paperweight you made for me in your Novice year, Pran. And with no Magicians on Earth, they have nobody to make diamonds out of coal. If all your spellbooks are too big and heavy to bring, then let's go downstairs and find a magic book in your father's study that's a better size. Take your pack down with you."

On his father's bookshelves, Pran found a spellbook small enough to

take with him, leaving room for the useless rocks that Earthlings apparently valued so highly! He put it in his bag and carried it to the side door just as his father and Jelal came back in.

“Good, I see you’re all packed,” his father observed. “We got a lot done too. The woodshed now has a month’s worth of split wood, the chicken coop and stables are both clean as a whistle, there’s fresh hay in the stalls, and the horses are brushed down.”

Pran asked, “Did you really use *magic* to brush down the horses?”

Jelal laughed. “We tried, but it seemed to spook them, so we did it the normal way. That’s what took us so long. We finished the chores just before sunset.”

“That means we’ll be able to open our secret envelopes,” Pran said, excited.

His father explained, “Ilandra, the Army gave everyone envelopes in class today that can’t be opened until after sundown. It’s a common practice in the military so if a letter gets stolen or there’s a turncoat in the ranks, the enemy has less time to react to the secret plans.”

Pran lit the whale oil lamp on the kitchen table, retrieved his envelope from his rucksack, and placed it on the table, careful to avoid touching the seal. Then he put his hands facedown on either side of the envelope to avoid accidentally triggering the spell that protected it from being opened before sunset.

Jelal looked amused by his caution. “It’s okay; the envelope won’t bite you! And there’s probably nothing in there you don’t already know. I think they just didn’t want us to be the only ones *not* getting envelopes.”

Finally Pran’s mother, who was looking out the window, said, “The sun has fully set now, even on the hills. Go ahead and open your letters, boys.”

Pran opened his and read aloud:

To Pran: You and your parents already know where you are going and why, so there is no need to repeat it. As for when, your father will know when it is time to activate Operation Bird Dog, probably tomorrow afternoon.

When Operation Bird Dog is activated, you are to await your

military guard, who will escort you to the Wizard Tower. Do not move from the school until your military escort arrives.

Upon arrival at the Tower, you will receive directions as to how to get to your ultimate destination, as well as some supplies to help you when you arrive there. For this reason, you should pack light and leave plenty of room in your bag.

“See, mother, I told you,” Pran said, and then continued reading.

Eldor will be deeply in your debt for volunteering to go on this vital mission. A representative of the Crown has assured me that you will be well compensated upon completing your quest. For obvious reasons, you will not be paid in gold, so please start thinking about what other type of reward you would like to receive.

Best of luck to you on your mission.

Colonel Steele, Commanding Officer, White River Junction Battalion

Pran asked, “Jelal, what does your letter say?”

“Exactly the same as yours.”

As Pran leaned over to see, the little spy flicked his wrist, and his letter vanished in a flash of flame and a puff of white smoke—but not before Pran noticed the seal on its envelope was different!

“If it was the same as mine,” Pran asked suspiciously, “then why’d you destroy it before I could read it?”

“Force of habit,” Jelal said with a disarming grin.

Pran frowned, suddenly distrustful of his new friend. Could Jelal have received orders from the EIA that were different than Pran’s? Did the little spy have his own secret mission on Earth, besides recovering gold?

His mother changed the subject by asking, “Pran, what are you going to request as compensation for your mission?”

“I’m thinking of asking for a tuition-free slot at the Royal Academy of Magic. They’ll owe me more than that, if we succeed.”

"But then you'd have to leave home and go to Eldorado," his mother pointed out.

"We could *all* move to Eldorado," Pran said. "If our mission's successful, we can ask for a house in the capital. A big house."

"Just concentrate on your mission for now," his father said. There will be plenty of time to think about rewards later. Don't make them rush you into a decision tomorrow."

Jelal said, "I need to go pack my stuff for the trip."

Pran asked, "Can I go upstairs and help him?" He was hoping Jelal would start teaching him martial arts tonight as he'd promised.

"Sure," his father said.

When they got upstairs to Jelal's room, which used to be Pran's brother's, the little spy said, "It shouldn't take me long to pack, because I didn't bring much to your house."

"Good—then can you start teaching me martial arts tonight?"

"Eager to learn, eh?" Jelal observed, as he stuffed his small rucksack with clothing, a variety of knives, and an assortment of items wrapped in black leather that Pran suspected were other weapons. "Okay," he said shortly, "I'm done packing. Ready for your first lesson?"

"Yes," Pran said, nodding enthusiastically.

"Okay, I'll start teaching you the art of *uyr-nishi*, 'The way of foot and fist.' Martial arts are strenuous, so don't wear tight clothes when practicing, or you'll tear them. It's best to remove your shirt and wear loose fitting pants, a robe, or pajamas." Jelal stripped off his shirt and said, "I don't have my *uyr-nishi* robe with me, but my pants are loose enough."

"Mine too," Pran said, not wanting to change into pajamas or a bathrobe right now. He removed his shirt, though, and threw it on Jelal's bed.

Jelal had him start with stretching exercises and calisthenics, saying, "You should do push-ups, chin-ups, sit-ups, and other muscle building exercises every day on your own. Chopping wood is also excellent for strengthening the arms, shoulders, and back. I can see being the woodchopper in the family has already helped your physique."

Pran regarded Jelal's narrow shoulders and slender frame and quipped, "What about building up *your* muscles some more?"

Jelal looked hurt. "Unfortunately, I have the body of a twelve-year-old, so no matter how much I exercise, I'll never get big, bulging, blacksmith muscles. But I'm stronger than I look, and in martial arts, speed, balance, flexibility, and agility are more important than strength. You can't judge those traits by someone's size, so never underestimate a small opponent. Consider that part of tonight's lesson," he said.

Pran said, "All right, now teach me some punches and kicks!"

"Sorry," Jelal said, "but I'm afraid you have to start with the basics. Tonight, I'll teach you how to stand, balance, and move like a martial artist. An *uyr-nishi* master's every movement should display grace and coiled power, like a panther ready to spring."

Jelal taught Pran the defensive stance and how to move by sliding his feet in a crescent pattern. Next, he demonstrated how to combine the crescent step with hand rotations, which not only positioned the fists ready to strike or block, but also had the advantage of distracting and unnerving opponents unskilled in martial arts. After an hour, Jelal said, "You learn fast, Pran; I'm impressed. That's enough for tonight, as tomorrow will be a big day."

Pran said as he put his shirt back on, "Since I did well, can you start teaching me punches and kicks tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow we might be a *bit* too busy, remember? In your next lesson, I'll teach you blocks. After that, if your balance is good enough, we might start on kicks or punches in the third or fourth lesson. Kicks are more effective, but they require nearly perfect balance, so punches are easier. But it will be slow going, because each time we'll begin by reviewing what you learned in previous lessons."

There was a knock on the door, and then a soft Mage-Light came into the room, followed by Pran's father. "Boys, it's getting late, and you have a big day ahead of you tomorrow. Pran needs to go to his own room and get ready for bed. Jelal, it's time for you to blow out the lamp and go to sleep, too."

Jelal snickered and said, "Yes, *father*." Although his words were

sarcastic, Pran saw an expression in the little blond boy's blue eyes as if he wished it were so.

The expression apparently didn't escape Pran's father's notice. He looked down at the little spy pensively, almost wistfully, and said, "Jelal, in case you don't make it back from Earth, or I don't survive the invasion, there's something I'd like you to know. In the short time that I've been your handler, you've been almost like another son to me. When you return, in addition to being your handler, I'd be happy to also pose as your uncle or adoptive father. I discussed it with Ilandra, and she agrees it's worth the risk, because she'd enjoy having you around too."

Jelal smiled at Pran's father and said warmly, "You could be my favorite uncle."

Pran's father nodded. "Let's try it out to see how it sounds. Good night, my nephew Jelal," he said with a smile.

"Good night, Uncle Gilamond," Jelal said quietly, slipping into bed and blowing out the lamp.

"Pran," his father said, the Mage-Light hovering by his side, "I'll be back up in ten minutes, and I'll expect you ready for bed."

Ten minutes later, Pran was surprised to have both his mother and father come to wish him goodnight, but then again, this *was* his last night on Rados. If he'd thought his father had been unusually emotional with Jelal tonight, that was nothing compared to the words of praise, affection, and pride that both Pran's parents lavished on him. He went to sleep with a smile on his face, knowing his parents loved him, were proud of him, and would always feel that way about him, no matter what happened in the dark and dangerous days ahead.



29: DAY OF RECKONING

Wednesday morning dawned cold, rainy, and blustery. Pran was glad he would be Teleporting to school today rather than walking. Realizing that Teleporting would also give him an extra half hour's rest, he took one look at the rain battering the window and rolled over and went back to sleep.

Barely five minutes had passed, however, before he was awakened by Jelal's hand on his shoulder. "Get up, Pran," the little spy urged. "We have a big day ahead of us."

Pran groaned. "Can't it wait another half hour? What's the point of being able to Teleport if you can't use it to get some extra sleep?"

Jelal jumped onto the bed's footboard and stood balanced there like an elf, arms akimbo. "In case you've forgotten," he said flippantly, "today is our big day, the day the prophecy will be fulfilled and we head off to a mythical world in order to save our own."

"As leader of this noble expedition," Jelal said, giving an exaggerated bow while still balancing himself skillfully on the footboard, "I need to make sure you are properly prepared for it. So get up, get dressed, and prepare for inspection." That said, Jelal jumped up and did a back flip off the bed, landing perfectly on the floor.

Pran sat up and clapped. "Very impressive. Are you part elf, or did you grow up as a circus acrobat?"

“When your body has been the same size for decades, you learn how to use it. And no, I’m not part elf, but in the right disguise I can pass as one—among humans, anyway. Elves are rarely fooled into thinking I’m one of their own.”

Pran got out of bed and walked to the dresser to put on some clothes. Jelal made no move to leave, but Pran didn’t bother kicking him out of the room this time, deciding it was silly to be shy. After all, most boys shared a bedroom with their brothers, so he pretended for now that Jelal really was his little brother.

After getting dressed, Pran packed a few last minute items, including his toothbrush, then offered his rucksack to Jelal for inspection. The little spy examined the items in it approvingly, then said, “Time for a weapons check. Where’s your belt knife?”

“Loremaster Lokor said we weren’t supposed to wear weapons to Earth.”

“He meant no swords,” Jelal declared. “A sword can make you look dangerous, and having *two* knives on your belt can make you look threatening, but wearing one knife simply says, ‘Don’t mess with me, because I can defend myself.’ *Not* wearing a knife invites trouble because it presents the appearance of weakness. No matter how many hidden knives you carry, you should also wear one openly when going into an unknown and potentially dangerous situation, as we will today.”

Today, Pran thought, the magnitude of the word sinking in.

Jelal said, “Your belt knife should be long enough to deter attackers but not so long that it looks threatening. The length should be proportional to your size, so although mine has a four inch blade, yours can be five inches. If it’s balanced for throwing, that’s a plus, but most of your *hidden* knives will be throwing knives, anyway.”

“How many hidden knives do you carry?” Pran asked, curious.

Jelal said proudly, “I have six on me now, including my ‘EIA Toothpick.’”

“What’s that?”

“This,” Jelal said, reaching behind his back to draw the fourteen inch dagger he’d shown Pran on Monday. Then he rolled up his sleeves to show a small throwing knife strapped to each slim forearm, pulled up his pant

legs to show a dagger sheathed on each smooth calf, and revealed a small push dagger hidden in his belt buckle. "I'm not saying you need to carry as many knives as me, Pran, but you should always have at least one worn openly, plus one hidden. When we get to the Wizard Tower, they'll issue EIA Toothpicks to you and Vitina."

"What about Lieutenant Hakon?"

Jelal said with distaste, "Being the sword-happy hothead that he is, I won't be surprised if he insists on going to Earth in uniform carrying a sword, bow, and quiver of arrows! Now, I don't know about you, Pran, but I'm hungry. I believe Mother has breakfast ready for us downstairs."

"My mother, not yours," Pran pointed out.

"I know," Jelal said quietly. "My mother's dead."

"Sorry, Jelal. I shouldn't have said that."

"Don't worry. I got over her death many years ago," Jelal said unconvincingly. Then with a deep sigh, he confessed, "Oh, who am I kidding, Pran? I think about her every day. No matter how long you live, you never get over your mother's death—never! *I* should have been the one who died, not *her*," he said, tears running down his small face. "If only the Eternal Youth spell I'd cast on her hadn't backfired on me!" After a minute, Jelal's tears ended as quickly as they had come, and he smiled at Pran, saying, "Let's go downstairs and eat what your mother cooked us for breakfast."

Pran wondered if he should be concerned about Jelal's rapid mood swings, but decided he had more than enough to worry about already, so he just shrugged it off.

At breakfast, Nako seemed to sense something exciting was happening today. He was even more hyper than usual, barking and acting like an overgrown puppy, until Pran's father finally sent him out on the front porch with a juicy hambone to keep him quiet. Meanwhile, Pran had to keep reassuring his mother that he'd packed everything he needed, saying, "Yes, Mother, I packed my toothbrush this morning," and, "Yes my comb is in my pocket," and, "Yes, we packed the soap last night," and "Yes, I'm bringing my canteen, and I'll fill it up at school so the water will be fresh."

"But you have no food for the journey," she pointed out. "Let me pack you some now." She stuffed apples, cheese, bread, and goodies into both Pran's and Jelal's rucksacks, filling them nearly to the top.

"Mother—" Pran began, about to protest that she was weighing his bag down too much.

Jelal kicked him under the table and whispered, "Remember what I said upstairs about mothers? Be thankful you still *have* one to fuss over you!"

"Yes, Pran," his mother said, "what is it, dear?"

Pran paused, then said, "Thanks for the food. I really appreciate it." The smile his mother gave, at hearing his words, more than made up for any extra weight he'd have to carry.

His father finished breakfast, stood up from the table, and said, "It's time for me to Teleport to school. You two can follow when you're ready."

Jelal said, "But I'm supposed to be a Novice who doesn't know how to Teleport."

"So Pran can Teleport you, or you Teleport him—as long as people assume that he did it, it makes little difference who Teleports whom."

"I'll do it for both of us," Pran said, trying to sound more confident than he felt.

His father said, "Ilandra, I don't know how long I'll be holed up in the Wizard Tower with all the town's Magicians. Are you sure you don't want to stay with one of our neighbors while Pran and I are both away?"

She shook her head. "I'll be fine here at home with Nako to keep me company. After all, you have spells on the house so nobody can enter unless I invite them in."

"That's right, and I've strengthened them enough to keep out even Sorcerers. Just be careful, and even if someone you know is at the door, don't open it until you've made sure there isn't a Maraknese soldier with a sword to their back. Goodbye, Ilandra," Pran's father said, kissing her. "I won't be able to communicate by Telepathy spell when I'm gone, but I'll write you. Even when the Tower is sealed, I can send you letters by carrier pigeon."

Ruffling Pran's hair, his father said, "See you in school, son. Let me go outside and say goodbye to Nako before Teleporting to school." He put

on his waxed jacket for the rain, shouldered his pack full of clothing and supplies he'd need for a siege in the Tower, and walked out the door.

When Pran finished breakfast, he declared, "Well, it's time to be off. Goodbye, Mother."

She said, "Pran, I know you'll make us proud—you already *have*—but be careful out there on Earth, so you come home safe and sound. Don't worry about me while you're gone. Nako and I will be here waiting for you and your father." She hugged him tightly for a long time, then finally let go and turned to Jelal, saying, "Take good care of my son, will you?"

"I thought he was supposed to take care of *me*," Jelal said, grinning up at her mischievously. "He's bigger."

She gave Jelal a hug too, ruffled his blond hair, and said, "You both take care of each other, okay? Jelal, you come home safely too, and when you return, you're welcome to stay with us again, next time as my nephew or adopted son."

"Thank you," the little spy breathed, a mixture of emotions playing across his young face. He must have known that any stay would have to be short term, considering his inability to age like a normal boy.

"Pran, Nako's barking for you," his mother said, "so I guess you'd better go outside and say goodbye to him too."

Even though they were Teleporting to school, they still needed to dress for the rain, so the two boys put on their waxed jackets, as well as wide-brimmed, oilcloth hats to keep their heads warm and dry.

They went out the front door onto the porch so Pran could say goodbye to his dog before leaving. Besides Kimbar, Nako had been Pran's other best friend, and for about the same number of years, too.

As he followed Pran onto the porch, Jelal asked "You weren't actually considering bringing Nako with you, were you, Pran?"

Not willing to confess that he had, Pran said evasively, "I know we can't take him with us." Bending down, he said, "Nako, stay here and guard Mother; keep her safe, okay?"

Nako barked his agreement, or so it seemed to Pran.

“Make sure you stay out of the way of any Maraknese arrows, Nako. And *Eldorean* arrows too, since some of our soldiers have their fingers a little too loose on their bowstrings.” At the thought of losing his beloved pet, tears came to his eyes.

Nako sniffed at Pran as if trying to figure out what was wrong, then licked his face.

Pran laughed through his tears and said, “Don’t worry about me, Nako, I’ll be fine. And I’ll be back here again before you know it. Be a good dog while I’m gone, and don’t give Mother any trouble, okay?”

Nako seemed to bark his agreement again.

Jelal complained, “You spend more time saying goodbye to your *dog* than to your *mother*! That’s just wrong. I suppose next you’ll want to say goodbye to your favorite *hen*?”

“Well, now that you mention it—” Pran began. He was especially fond of two of his family’s chickens, Hawk and Eagle, which he’d raised from eggs as a class assignment. Three times a day for twenty-one days, he’d gently turned those eggs, while his Incubation spell kept them at the precise temperature needed to hatch. He’d rejoiced to see both chicks finally struggle out of their shells, and had fed “his girls” by hand so often that they still followed him around the yard whenever they saw him, expecting treats. But seeing Jelal’s disapproving look, he sighed and said, “Okay, let’s go.”

“If you want me to Teleport us both, I will.”

“Thanks, but I need the practice,” Pran said. He held Jelal’s hand, and with the other hand, made the gestures to complete the spell while taking one last, long look at his house, as he had a feeling it would be a long time before he’d ever see it again.

A second later, the two boys found themselves back in Pran’s bedroom, while outside, Nako barked frantically at the sudden disappearance of his master.

“Uh, Pran,” Jelal reminded him, “you’re supposed to focus your mind on our destination, which is the school, not your bedroom.”

“Right,” Pran said sheepishly. “Good thing my father gave me some extra gold. I’ll get it right this time.” And so he did.



Throughout the morning, as promised, Pran’s father loaded his students up on Shield spells, with the help of his two apprentices and, to Pran’s surprise, Lieutenant Bugati. Bugati, who was dressed in civilian clothes but wearing a sword, explained, “Why should I sit around headquarters waiting to see if the prophecy will take effect, when I can be here helping my Groundhogs prepare for it? If the prophecy is wrong, no problem—you’ll end up with some extra spells that could help you survive, and I’ll go back to the garrison tomorrow.”

Pran’s father split the class in two, with he and Joran casting Shield spells on the Novices and Initiates, while Nahshon and Lieutenant Bugati worked with the Charmers and Conjurers. Even though Pran and Jelal were going to be passing through a portal that would strip off any magical protections, he insisted that they take full advantage of the Shield spells being cast today. Taking them aside, he explained, “You never know what you’ll encounter between here and the Wizard Tower. If the enemy arrives earlier than expected, you and your Army escort might have to fight your way there.”

The Magicians and apprentices worked at a feverish pace, using more gold that morning than the school normally used in a month. They spent most of the morning casting spells to defend against every infantry, archery, or cavalry weapon imaginable. There were spells to protect the boys from arrows, swords, knives, spears, axes, clubs, catapult shot, fire, smoke, attack dogs, and ballista bolts.

After a brief break, they switched to defenses against sorcerous spells. By lunchtime, Pran had lost count of how many protective spells he’d had cast on him, and was beginning to feel invulnerable. Judging from the comments of his classmates, as they ate lunch on the porch to avoid the rain, most of them were feeling pretty much the same.

Pathik said, "If the Maraknese wanna attack us now, I say, 'Bring it on!' We're ready for 'em now. We'll make 'em sorry they ever crossed our border."

Garwin warned, "Don't be overconfident. Enemy Sorcerers cast protective spells on their troops, too, and they're always coming up with new attack spells that we have no defense against. Besides, our job won't be to fight the Maraknese openly."

"He's right," said Lieutenant Bugati from behind them, standing in the doorway. "There's no way to defend against all attack spells, because there's no limit to the variety of spells other than the spellcaster's imagination. We've only protected you against the most common ones, and only for single attacks, not multiple strikes. As for conventional attacks, you may think you're invulnerable now because you're even protected against catapult hits, but do you know what will happen to you if you're hit by *two* catapult strikes?"

Pathik asked dumbly, "No, what?"

"You'll *die*, that's what. And your spells may protect you against getting struck by one or two arrows, but trust me; you *don't* want to find out what happens if you get hit by a whole volley of arrows from an Archery platoon. So rid yourself of your overconfidence right now, if you want to live longer," Bugati said grimly, then spun on his heel and walked back into the classroom.

The boys ate the rest of their lunch in silence, their feeling of invulnerability gone.

After lunch, Pran's father, his apprentices, and Lieutenant Bugati resumed casting defensive spells on the students to protect against attacks by Sorcerers. After an hour and a half of furiously fast spell casting, Pran's father announced that they had finished with the most common black magic spells. He gave the class a five minute break while he gathered his apprentices and Bugati around his desk to decide which defensive spells to cast next.

The instructors were still gathered around the teacher's desk when it happened...



30: THE PROPHECY FULFILLED

Bright flashes of light suddenly emanated from all around the magic school, including, to Pran's horror, the hands and throat of his father. Pran's father and Lieutenant Bugati ran to the fire barrel in the corner of the room. There, both Magicians dunked their hands into the water, then tore the gold chains from their necks and threw them on the floor violently, as if they'd turned into poisonous snakes. The two young apprentices, screaming in pain, quickly followed their example.

Pran stared in dismay at the chains the four men had thrown onto the floor. All of them were now the dull, gray color of lead.

His father turned to his apprentices and Lieutenant Bugati and asked, "Were any of you seriously burned?" After examining the other three and looking at his own hands, he said, "I don't see any burn marks, so I guess it wasn't as bad as it felt. But nobody touch any of the gold in the classroom," he warned.

"*What gold?*" asked Pathik, a puzzled expression on his fat face. "I don't see any."

"Exactly. It's all been turned into lead, and it's hot."

Prentice Nahshon filled a bucket from the fire barrel, but Pran's father said, "Don't throw water on anything yet. I want to see if the metal is hot enough to start any fires in town." He took the bucket from his apprentice and walked over to a desk in the front row, saying, "Yuli, your gold was

sitting on top of an open textbook, so if anything here is going to catch fire, your book will be first.”

Jumping up from his chair as if afraid his whole desk would burst into flames, Yuli said, “Sorry, Master Gilamond.”

“There’s nothing for which to apologize,” Pran’s father told the Novice gently. After a minute with no sign of smoke or fire, he put down the bucket with a sigh, saying, “It’s not hot enough to burn paper, so that’s one less thing to worry about.”

Nahshon asked, “*Wizards alive*, what happened? How could one of our spells have misfired badly enough to cause—*this*?” He waved his arm to indicate all the tables now covered with lead.

“It wasn’t one of *our* spells,” Pran’s father said. “The enemy did this.”

Fipin asked, “Master Gilamond, what did you mean you wanted to find out if it would start fires in town? Is this happening all over town?”

“Worse—all over Eldor, I’m afraid, and all over Rados.”

Lieutenant Bugati added, “Remember that event we feared, which we couldn’t tell you about because it’s Top Secret? This is it: a sorcerous attack to rid the world of its gold so nobody can cast white magic spells of any potency. We suspect the Maraknese are behind it.”

As if to confirm his words, the alarm bell atop the Wizard Tower began to peal, and moments later, a bugle blared.

“That’s the call to arms!” exclaimed Lieutenant Bugati. “The enemy must have been sighted.” His hand strayed instinctively to the hilt of his sword, but then he declared, “I will stay with the class, as this is now my post. I’m activating Operation Groundhog.”

The class sat in shocked silence, wide-eyed, listening in disbelief to the tolling of the Tower bell and bugle calls from Army outposts throughout the city repeating the call to arms.

Pran’s father finally cleared his throat and said grimly, “That bell means all civilian Magicians need to report to the Wizard Tower, myself included. Class,” he said, bowing slightly, “it’s been a pleasure teaching you. Prentice Joran and Prentice Nahshon, you’ve been terrific assistants. While I’m gone, I want everyone to obey Lieutenant

Bugati's instructions. As long as you do what he says, I'm sure I will see all of you again, alive and whole.

"Pran and Jelal, it's time to launch Operation Bird Dog, but wait here for your military escort. I'll see you two in the Tower, so we'll say our goodbyes there." Since Teleporting was no longer possible, Pran's father put on his hat, coat, and pack, then walked outside into the drizzling rain.

Lieutenant Bugati let out a deep sigh. "Class, I know I said your first task for Operation Groundhog would be to close down this magic school, but there's something else you should do first: say goodbye to Pran and Jelal, because you may not see them again for a long time."

If ever, Pran thought gloomily.

The Novices, Initiates, and Charmers said their goodbyes with just a few words, but Pran's fellow Conjurers had more to say. Garwin embraced Pran, saying, "Take care of yourself, Pran. When you get back, I want to hear your whole story, including why they picked you for this mission and not me." To Jelal, he gave a long, hard look and finally said, "Jelal, you take care too, but don't cause Pran any trouble."

Kimbar gave Pran a warm hug and said, "Pran, you're my best friend; remember that. Come back soon, or I'll go searching for you to *bring* you back!"

Pran asked, "While I'm gone, can you look in on my mother and Nako from time to time, make sure they're okay? And also check on my chickens for me; don't let Hawk and Eagle get broody or they'll stop laying."

"Sure, no problem," Kimbar said. Then he put his hand on Jelal's shoulder and looked him in the eye. "I don't know how you got to go with Pran instead of me, but take care of him for me, Jelal. Make sure you both come back safely."

Pathik came next. When the big son of a butcher extended a ham-sized paw to him, Pran hesitated, unable to forget who'd thrown him off the bridge. Pathik lowered his arm and said, "I understand if ya don't wanna shake my hand, Pran, but we're all on the same side now, fightin' the Maraknese and all. Samir and I feel awful about what happened at the bridge. We didn't plan to hurt ya so bad, eh? He told me yesterday ya weren't even the one who snitched on us, so I'm real sorry."

When Pran didn't respond, Pathik drew a long knife from his belt. Pran backed away instinctively, but Pathik reversed the blade and offered him the hilt, saying, "Here, take this. Maybe it'll help keep ya safe where you're goin'."

Pran smiled, realizing the knife was a token of apology. "Thanks, but you keep it. You'll need it for Operation Groundhog. Besides," he added, repeating what Jelal had taught him that morning, "if I wear two belt knives, or even one as big as *yours*, I might attract unwanted attention. Thanks anyway, though, and I'm glad we're on the same side now."

"Me too," Pathik said, clapping Pran on the back so hard it almost knocked him over.

The last student to say his farewells was Samir, who turned out to have more in mind than just saying goodbye. "Pran, what can I say to a friend like you? After we almost killed you, you forgave me and protected me from your father!" He gave Pran a hug, then stepped back and said, "I owe you big time, and you've got to let me pay you back. Take me with you, and I'll guard your life with my own."

Pran said, "Thanks for the offer, but you don't even know where we're going."

"I'd go with you to the gates of hell, if necessary," Samir avowed, "but I do know where you're going, and what your mission is, and I'm willing to take the risk with you."

"*Dragonfire!*" Jelal exclaimed. "Our mission's supposed to be Top Secret! Pran, we need to bring Samir into your father's office right now, find out how much he knows, and who leaked it to him."

After they entered the office and shut the door, protected by the room's Anti-Eavesdropping spell, Pran asked Samir, "Did you find out our mission from—"

"Don't say names!" warned Jelal. "You'll reveal even more secrets to him."

"Okay then, Samir, what's our mission?"

"To recover Eldor's gold."

Pran sighed. "How'd you know?"

Instead of answering, Samir said, "Now that I know your secret, you'll have to take me with you, eh?"

"Or we could just kill you," Jelal said casually, maneuvering behind him.

Samir laughed, unaware that Jelal was someone who'd killed for his country before.

"Very funny, Jelal," Pran said pointedly, "but we don't kill our friends." The irony of this statement struck him as he said it, for Samir had almost killed *him*. "Besides, maybe he's supposed to go with us; have you forgotten the prophecy?" Turning back to Samir, he demanded, "Who told you our mission?"

"I figured it out myself," Samir said proudly. "I wasn't sure I'd guessed right until a minute ago, when you asked me how I knew."

Pran groaned and smacked himself in the forehead.

Jelal complained, "Pran, at this rate, you'll reveal all of Eldor's secrets to him within the hour! Can I ask the questions now?"

Pran said, "Go right ahead," glad to turn the questioning over to a trained spy. No doubt Jelal had been itching to interrogate Samir all along, and had only let Pran go first because it wouldn't have looked right to have an apparent Novice take charge.

"Thanks," Jelal said with evident relief. "Samir, how'd you guess our mission?"

"It's starting right after the gold changed to lead, and your mission and the attack on the gold supply were both classified Top Secret. Then there's its name, Operation Bird Dog."

"What *about* it?" asked Jelal testily. He'd made up the codename.

"My dog's a good bird dog, and he's a Golden Retriever. So when the gold disappeared, I put two and two together and realized 'Operation Bird Dog' means you're gold retrievers!"

Pran said, "See, my father was right about the mission name being too obvious."

Jelal glared at him. "I told you not to say names, and now you mention your *father*?" He sighed. "Samir, you said you also know our destination. Where're we going?"

"Marakna," Samir answered.

Shooting a warning glance at Pran to keep his mouth shut this time, the little spy asked, "How'd you figure it out?"

Samir gave a self-satisfied smile, obviously convinced he'd gotten that right, too. "Simple! When Nahshon asked how the gold had turned to lead, Master Gilamond said, 'The enemy did this.' But the Maraknese would never transform their *own* gold into lead—they may be evil, but they're not stupid! Either they kept the spell confined to Eldor, or they had protective spells on their own gold to keep it from being transformed.

"So if you're gold retrievers, obviously you're going to Marakna, either to spy out where they've hidden their gold, or to steal it yourselves. I have no idea how you plan to do this, and it sounds like certain death, but I'm willing to go with you; I owe it to Pran. Now that I know your secret, can I come with you?"

Pran said, "If you're just feeling guilty about attacking me at the bridge, that won't be enough to make you stay with us when things get tough."

"It's not just guilt; it's friendship, too. Pran, we've been close friends most of our lives; you know that. I realize now it's my fault we drifted apart since last year, so I want to make up for lost time. Going with you isn't a spur of the moment decision, either. I've been thinking about it ever since those Army guys showed up yesterday. When I came home, I discussed it with my folks. They agreed I could go, seeing how the alternative was joining the Resistance and probably getting killed anyway. When I told my parents I wanted to go with you, Pran, I confessed that I'd attacked you at the bridge and you'd almost died. You'll never guess what my mother told me next!"

Pran recalled the Truthseeker's words. "That you're my long-lost relative?"

Samir's eyes widened. "You *knew* I was your cousin? I just found out myself last night!"

Pran shook his head. "I had no idea until now."

"Then how'd you guess—some sort of Telepathy spell?"

"No, a prophecy, the same one that said the gold would disappear. Part of it was about you, but I didn't realize it until just now. The prophecy told me, 'Your third companion will be the teenage relative you never knew you had,' and that they'd seek me out if I exercised 'mercy, forgiveness,

and trust.' Now that I think about it, I *did* forgive you for attacking me at the bridge, agreed to trust you afterwards, and made my father show you mercy. But how can you be my cousin if my parents didn't know anything about it? You must mean you're a second or third cousin, right?"

"No," Samir said sheepishly, "we're first cousins. Your Uncle Javid's my real father. When I told my parents about attacking you at the bridge, my mother said I'd almost killed my own cousin, and she cried. I think you remind her of him."

"Yes, I do look like Uncle Javid, but you don't look anything like him!"

"I *would*, except my mother arranged to have a Magician Doctor handle my birth. She had him cast a spell to change my eyes blue and my hair red to match her husband's, so nobody would suspect she'd cheated on him."

"Oh," Pran said. After an awkward silence, he said, "I'm afraid that spell might wear off when we go through the portal."

"Go through the *what*?"

Pran quickly explained the true destination of the quest, adding, "I hope this doesn't change your mind about coming with us."

Samir grinned. "Are you kidding? It's a relief, because like I said, entering Marakna would be certain death! Going to the mythical world of Earth will be an adventure."

Pran shook his head. "Earth's pretty dangerous too, if the fairy tales are true, and we've been advised that they are."

Jelal cleared his throat. "Um, I hate to interrupt a touching family reunion, Pran, but we have a mission to go on, and we can't be late. So, is it settled then, Samir's coming with us?"

Pran said, "Yes, he's the one from the prophecy, so we *have* to take him." Samir's smile dimmed, until Pran added, "And he's also my friend."

When the three boys emerged from the office, Lieutenant Bugati asked, "Did you straighten everything out?"

"Yes, sir," Pran answered. "Samir's going with us."

"He is? Well I guess that's *one* way to be sure he keeps your secret—keep him with you where you can keep an eye on him!" Bugati laughed and clapped Samir on the back.

Hearing the sound of hobnailed boots on cobblestones and the jangling of weapons and shields outside, Pran ran to the window to see a large group of soldiers approaching the schoolhouse. Lieutenant Bugati explained, "The Army must consider your mission very important; they sent an entire company of soldiers to escort you to the Tower."



31: THE MIGHTY ARCHERY

The whole class followed Pran, Samir, and Jelal onto the schoolhouse porch, eager to see the approaching soldiers. Although it was still cold, the rain had finally stopped, so Pran could see all the way down the street to view the entire column. This company was the same size as the one he'd seen on the road yesterday, about two hundred men in four platoons, but looked fresher, not battle worn. Their blue uniforms were clean and pressed, helmets and breastplates gleamed as the sun broke through the clouds, swords and shields were unnotched by combat, and quivers were fully stocked with arrows.

In the vanguard marched a platoon of swordsmen and pikemen wearing helmets and breastplates, with round shields strapped to their backs. Behind them marched three platoons of archers, unencumbered by armor, although no doubt they'd had Shield spells cast on them by their Magic Officers.

The Company Commander called a halt just outside the schoolyard gate, and one officer left his side and approached the school. Pran saw that it was Lieutenant Hakon, wearing the same uniform as the other Archery officers, including a bicorne hat. As a Magic Officer, he carried no bow, only a sword strapped to his hip.

When the Lieutenant strode up to the schoolhouse porch, Jelal quipped, "Is this your idea of being undercover, Hakon? I thought we agreed you'd wear civilian clothes on our mission."

Hakon gave him a dark look and said, "For your information, I stored a set of civilian clothes in the Tower to change into when we arrive there. Until then," he said haughtily, "I intend to wear the uniform that is my right and privilege as a Lieutenant in His Majesty's Army."

Jelal asked, "Okay, but did you have to bring the whole army here with you too? An escort that size will draw too much attention to us."

"Take it up with Colonel Steele," Hakon said. "And who's this redheaded boy?"

Pran replied. "That's Samir, our final companion. He asked to come with me, and he fits the prophecy. I just found out he's my cousin."

"The 'teenage relative you never knew you had,' eh? It's about time you found him, Pran; you really ought to keep better track of your relatives! Samir, I'm Lieutenant Hakon, Magic Officer, Eldorean Archery. Are you packed for the trip?"

"Uh, no. I didn't know I was going with Pran until a few minutes ago."

"Well, what are you waiting for? Go inside, grab whatever you'll need, and pack it in your rucksack, on the double."

"I'll help him," Jelal volunteered, probably eager to get away from the Lieutenant.

Pran remembered his mother's advice to speak respectfully and said, "Sir, I'm all packed and ready."

Lieutenant Hakon nodded approvingly, and for the first time, Pran thought he saw the hint of a smile. "Very good, Pran. Maybe we'll make you into an officer someday. Have you considered a career as an Army Magician?"

"My mother warned me you might try to recruit me," Pran said with a smile, "but I didn't expect you to start so soon!"

Hakon chuckled. "I'm sure that like most mothers, she wants you to have nothing to do with the Army, but what counts is what *you* think, not her. What are your personal feelings about the Army?"

"They've gone down a few notches after an experience I had yesterday, sir," Pran said. He told the Lieutenant about his encounter with the company of soldiers outside his own house, pointing out, "First they almost filled me full of arrows, then they tried to draft me!"

Hakon said deprecatingly, "That was an *Infantry* company. An *Archery* company would never make such a foolish mistake as to shoot friendly civilians. Do you know what an Infantry 'archer' really is?"

Pran shook his head.

"He's a simple swordsman who's had a bow thrust into his hands and told, 'Today, you're an archer.' I call them 'bowmen,' not archers, because they don't get the training real archers get, and it shows. As your own experience testifies, they shoot anything that moves, and more often than not, they miss! An Archery company would've recognized you as friendly, and if they'd met a real Sorcerer, they wouldn't have missed."

Pran asked, "What about this company? If it's an Archery unit, are the swordsmen out in front just archers who've been told, 'Today you're a swordsman'?"

Hakon smiled. "Very perceptive. But trust me, my Archery company's soldiers are all cross-trained with infantry weapons and tactics. Anyway," he scoffed, "it takes skill and practice to shoot a longbow accurately, but anyone can swing a sword!"

Samir and Jelal emerged with their packs and coats, and Jelal announced, "We're ready now."

Lieutenant Hakon snapped sarcastically, "Good for you; do you want a medal?" He led the three boys down the steps to the front gate, then talked briefly with the Company Commander. That officer, a Captain, directed them to fall in step between the second and third platoons so they'd have plenty of protection from both front and rear.

As they started marching, Lieutenant Hakon asked the Sergeant to their left, "First Sergeant, how about a cadence song to lift everyone's spirits? This young man was asking me about Archery units, so I suggest we sing 'The Mighty Archery.'"

The Sergeant nodded, saying, "Yes sir, that's one of my favorites. Boys, feel free to join in." He proceeded to lead the marching song in call and response fashion, belting out each line and then waiting for the men to repeat it:

A longbow in your left hand,
An arrow in your right;
Oh, what a way to spend the night!

Archery-ee-ee-ee-ee!
The mighty Archery-ee-ee-ee-ee!
We will fight from the wall
So the castle will not fall,
Archery-ee-ee-ee-ee,
The mighty Archery!

Ballistae on your left flank,
Sorcerers on your right,
You're wondering if you'll make it through the night!

Archery-ee-ee-ee-ee!
The mighty Archery-ee-ee-ee-ee!
Our arrows rain from the sky
So the enemy will die,
Archery-ee-ee-ee-ee,
The mighty Archery!

Black magic strikes around you;
Catapults ahead;
You turn around and see your buddy's dead!

Archery-ee-ee-ee-ee!
The mighty Archery-ee-ee-ee-ee!
We will shoot from the wall
So the Tower will not fall,
Archery-ee-ee-ee-ee,
The mighty Archery!

It was a rousing song, and Pran couldn't help singing along too. Samir joined in as well, although Jelal remained silent, a sullen look on his face.

Many of the town's citizens emerged from shops and houses onto the sidewalks to listen, watch, or cheer the soldiers on. Just as the last verse died away, Pran heard new bugle notes from the direction of the Flat Rock Bridge. "What does *that* bugle call mean?" he asked.

Hakon answered curtly, "Enemy contact. The battle has begun."

As if to prove him right, a loud boom came from behind them, followed by a deafening thunderclap that rattled the windows in the buildings they were passing.

"*Please* tell me that was just thunder," Samir said wishfully, looking up at the sky.

Hakon shook his head and said grimly, "No, that's sorcery, cast by a powerful Sorcerer, too." He shook his head gravely. "I don't know how long our troops can hold the bridge without gold to help Magic Officers defend it."

The Archery company was disciplined enough to continue their march without missing a step, although Pran saw some heads swivel to look toward the sounds of the battle. Pran looked too, and gasped as he saw a plume of black smoke drifting up toward the sky. "I see dark smoke, like burning oil!" he exclaimed. "Someone's trying to set fire to the bridge!"

"That would be our boys," Lieutenant Hakon said, "and not a moment too soon, from the sound of it. But after that soaking rain, I doubt if the bridge timbers are dry enough to hold a flame, especially with Maraknese Sorcerers to douse it. Don't worry," he reassured his fellow Bird Dogs, "we have two fully armed platoons ahead of us, and two behind, so we're completely safe—*overprotected*, I'd say."

Pran supposed that he should feel safe, but he'd felt vulnerable ever since the gold had disappeared, and the sounds of battle from the bridge added to his unease. His friends must have felt the same way, because Pran saw Samir and Jelal scanning buildings and rooftops as if expecting to see the red helmeted heads of Maraknese invaders poking out from every window.

Hakon asked, "Are you scared, Pran?"

"Yes, sir," Pran admitted.

"Fear's nothing to be ashamed of," Lieutenant Hakon said, "as long as you don't let it control you. We have a saying in the Eldorean Army: *a coward surrenders to fear, a soldier hides his fear, a scout uses fear to sharpen his senses, a hero ignores his fear, but only a fool feels no fear.*

"Fools don't live long in battle, Pran. Well, I guess heroes don't either," he mused, "since I've noticed the Medal of Valor is often awarded posthumously."

Pran kept his eyes peeled for anything unusual as they marched. As they neared the bank, he said with alarm, "Lieutenant Hakon, I see bowmen on the roof. Are those Eldorean Army archers?"

Hakon squinted up at the building. Most of the roof was sloped at a forty degree angle, but there was a lip around the edge, wide enough for people to stand, on that was nearly flat. "No, private security guards—bank security. You can't blame a bank for putting men on the rooftop after hearing the call to arms, can you?"

"But they're looking in our direction, not toward the battle," Pran pointed out.

Hakon said, "Just like the rest of the townspeople, eh? You have to admit it's a pretty impressive sight to watch an Archery company march by."

As they neared the building, Pran pointed out, "There are a half dozen more guards in front of the bank, heavily armed. All the gold's gone. Why have so many guards on an empty bank?"

Hakon shrugged. "They probably made the decision to triple the guard yesterday, knowing the Maraknese were approaching the city. Besides, the bank isn't empty. It's still filled with silver."

"And lead, too," Samir joked. "Don't forget all that valuable lead!"

Pran still wasn't convinced. As they passed the bank, where a sign on the door said, "CLOSED," he looked closely at the guards standing on its porch. They were armed with swords and halberds, wore helmets and breastplates, and stood behind large rectangular shields, emblazoned with the bank crest, that rested on the ground near their feet.

In contrast to the townspeople, who cheered as the Eldorean soldiers marched by, the bank guards looked nervous, eyes darting left and right as the company passed. When Pran saw one of the guards tighten his grip on his halberd and another raise his shield, he knew something was amiss. "Jelal," he asked, certain the little spy would have noticed too, "what do you think's going on at the bank?"

"From the way those guards are sweating, maybe the bank auditors are inside. It'd be a really bad day for an audit, with all the gold gone," Jelal said with a grin. "Or else it's a robbery, and the 'guards' are robbers in disguise. But even if the bank is being robbed, it's none of our business, since there's no gold in it, anyway."

"Or *is* there?" Pran asked, as a sudden thought struck him. "Sekar's father owns the bank. If Sekar or his Sorcerer friends were the ones who cast the spell turning gold to lead, you can bet they'd put a counterspell on his father's gold first, to keep it safe! Lieutenant Hakon—"

"I heard you," Hakon said, understanding instantly. "You think the bank owner's son was responsible for the attack on Eldor's gold supply, and the bank still has gold in it. I'll ask Captain Argon to turn the company around and investigate. Follow me, boys."

The four of them double-timed up to the Company Commander's position, where Lieutenant Hakon said, "Captain, we need to turn the company around and go back to the bank."

"Lieutenant, I don't care if the bank is being robbed right now," Captain Argon replied. "I have my orders, and they don't involve domestic law enforcement."

"Sir, we have reason to believe the bank is hiding gold and harboring enemies of Eldor."

"COMPANY, HALT!" the Captain bellowed. Then he said to Lieutenant Hakon, "Please explain."

"This young man named Pran is the one who knows the details, sir."

Pran said, "Captain, my friends and I know the bank owner's son, Sekar, has been practicing sorcery in the fashion of enemy sorcerers. We've seen him do it and heard him chanting in Maraknese."

The Captain asked critically, “And you didn’t report it?”

“One of us did, sir,” Pran said, not wanting to give any clues about Jelal’s identity, “so my father expelled Sekar from magic school. Of course he’s angry about being expelled, and I know for a fact he wants revenge.” Indeed, Pran had almost *died* from one part of Sekar’s revenge! “Did you notice the bank guards acting suspiciously? Well if Sekar’s the one who cast the spell destroying Eldor’s gold, he would’ve made sure his father, the bank owner, had his own gold protected. That explains why there’re so many heavily armed guards outside the bank, and why they’re sweating at the sight of Eldorean soldiers. They’re hiding gold!”

Captain Argon nodded. “I agree; we should investigate. My Magicians could use some gold right now, so let’s hope you’re right.”

The Company Commander called his Platoon Leaders over and issued orders. “Lieutenants, we believe the bank may be hiding gold and harboring an enemy Sorcerer. We’re going back there to demand they let us in for an inspection. If they refuse, First Platoon’s swordsmen will break down the door. Second and Third Platoon archers will provide cover for First Platoon from flanking positions across the street from the bank. Fourth Platoon will form a rearguard to make sure the enemy doesn’t sneak up on us from behind.

“Those guards were acting suspiciously, so we don’t know if they’re *real* bank guards, lookouts for a gang that’s robbing the bank, or mercenaries working for a Maraknese Sorcerer. Rules of engagement are as follows: If any of the bank guards knock arrows at us or draw swords, I want Second and Third Platoon archers to shoot them, and then First Platoon to attack and force their way into the bank.”

The company did an about face, and First Platoon marched their swordsmen around to the new front of the column. Hakon remarked to Pran, “Now I wish we had an Infantry unit with us. Normally it’s the job of the Infantry to break down doors, enter buildings, and have boiling oil poured on them from above. Archers are too smart to volunteer for something that dangerous, but Infantry are not only dumb; they’re also expendable.”

“So what’s usually the job of the Archery in situations like this?” Pran asked.

“Why, to avenge the deaths of the Infantry, naturally, by shooting arrows at the ones pouring the boiling oil on them,” Hakon said with a laugh. “All from a safe distance, of course.”

“Of course,” Pran said, chuckling. He was beginning to realize Lieutenant Hakon did have a sense of humor after all, although his dark jokes took some getting used to.

When the company reached the bank, the lead platoon of swordsmen came to a halt and turned to face the building. Second Platoon’s archers continued past them and took up positions on their left flank, while Third Platoon’s archers formed a flanking position on the right. Pran and his fellow Bird Dogs ended up directly across the street from the bank, behind the swordsmen, where they were able to see and hear what followed.

A portly man in a stylish black suit came out of the bank and called out, “I’m the bank manager. Have you soldiers lost your way?”

The Company Commander replied, “I’m Captain Argon, Eldorean Archery. We need to search your bank. We have information that it may be harboring enemy agents, as well as—material vital to the war effort.”

Pran smiled, glad the Captain was wise enough not to say the word “gold,” or it would’ve sounded like the soldiers were there to rob the bank!

“Do you have a search warrant?” the bank manager asked. “This isn’t Marakna—we have *rights* in this country. I’m not opening the door without a warrant.”

Hakon whispered to Pran, “You were right; he’s definitely hiding something.”

“Open up, or we’ll break the door down,” said the Captain.

The bank manager yelled to anyone within earshot, “Someone fetch the sheriff and tell him there’s a bunch of soldiers here trying to rob the bank!”

Captain Argon said, loudly but calmly, “I’m sure the sheriff and I could sort things out eventually, but with the town under attack, we don’t have time to wait.” Turning to the First Platoon Leader, he ordered, “Lieutenant, send a squad to break down that door.”

32: TREASON



As the squad of soldiers approached the bank, its guards seemed uncertain what to do. One drew a sword, provoking a flurry of arrows from the Archery platoons on both flanks. The sword-happy guard and two of his comrades died instantly with arrows in the throat, and the bank manager also crumpled, pincushioned by arrows. The surviving three guards retreated inside the bank behind their shields, then slammed the heavy door shut.

From the roof of the bank, an answering volley of arrows flew toward the soldiers. There were only a handful of bowmen perched on the roof, but the height advantage made their shots deadly, and a half dozen Eldorean soldiers fell beneath their arrows.

“Target the bowmen on the roof!” the Captain yelled unnecessarily, as his archers were already returning fire. The bank’s bowmen were vastly outnumbered by the soldiers below, so in less than a minute, the last of them fell dead beneath the skilled bows of the Army archers.

Just as Pran thought the battle was over, he saw something that made his blood run cold: two black-robed, hooded figures materializing on the rooftop of the bank. Each bore a grisly staff that looked like a human spinal column topped by a skull.

Captain Argon yelled, “Sorcerers on the roof! Magic Officers, use—” His order was cut short as a bolt of red lightning lanced into

him, lifted him off the ground, and smashed him into the building behind him, killing him instantly.

Hakon yelled to the boys, "Bird Dogs, run for your lives!"

Samir and Jelal took off toward a nearby alley, not needing to be told twice. Pran hesitated, asking, "What about you, sir?"

"This is my fight. I'll meet you in the Tower, if I survive. Now go!" He drew his sword and pointed it at the Sorcerers, then swore as his spell wouldn't work without gold.

Pran ran for the alley his friends had entered, but upon reaching it, turned and peered back around the corner to watch the battle. The taller of the two Sorcerers raised his staff, and a fiery blast struck the lead squad of swordsmen who had been about to storm the bank. When the smoke cleared, none of the men in the squad were moving. He raised his staff again, and another lightning bolt shot toward the archers below with a horrific boom, felling a dozen of them at once.

The surviving soldiers scattered, dispersing to make themselves more difficult targets. Archers fired volley after volley up at the two black-robed figures, but their arrows had no more effect than a swarm of gnats would have on a charging elephant. Some tried flaming arrows, but these only drew the Sorcerers' attention, evoking a devastating counterattack. The taller of the two Sorcerers seemed to be the more powerful one, as he was casting nearly all of the spells.

Lieutenant Hakon pointed his sword again and a net appeared over the taller Sorcerer, but as it dropped, the net, weakly cast using only silver, hit an invisible shield and disintegrated. The Sorcerer aimed his staff at Lieutenant Hakon, and a streak of dark red smashed into the three story building behind him, which collapsed, burying him under a ton of bricks.

Pran stepped out of the alley and yelled, "Hakon!" He felt a hand grab him from behind and spun to defend himself, dropping into the *uyr-nishi* stance that Jelal had taught him, hoping his attacker wouldn't know this was the extent of his martial arts knowledge!

Samir said, "Easy Pran, It's just me. What're you doing out here? Get back where you can't be seen or blasted!"

Pran followed Samir back into the alley, where Jelal was waiting. He told his friends, "Lieutenant Hakon's been killed."

Jelal shrugged. "Good riddance."

"Don't talk about him like that! He died trying to save our lives, made us run away while he stayed and fought."

Jelal looked taken aback. "Sorry. I didn't know you cared."

"Until recently, I didn't," Pran admitted, "but I think we misjudged him. I believe he would've been a good leader for our mission."

"You mean, better than *me*?"

Pran tried to think of a way to respond that wouldn't hurt Jelal's feelings. He was saved from having to answer by the sound of a bugle, desperately blowing either a retreat or a call for reinforcements. A loud boom followed, and the bugle went silent.

From the rooftop, a Maraknese accent yelled, "You Eldoreans are such pitiful fools! Go ahead; call for help. It will do you no good. Without gold, you are weak and helpless."

A familiar teenage voice added, "And you soldiers got what you deserved for trying to rob my father's bank!"

Samir's eyes went wide with disbelief. "*Sekar* is one of the Sorcerers?"

Pran said bitterly, "I'm not surprised he's a traitor, but I think he's just a Sorcerer *wannabe*. Sekar wasn't the one casting those powerful attack spells."

The Sorcerer's voice drifted down again, "Do you want to know why your Magicians have no gold now? You were outwitted by a mere apprentice, my protégé here! Go ahead, tell them, Prentice Sekar."

"Yes," Sekar boasted, "I'm the one who cast the spell to destroy all your gold! Only someone like me, adept at both sorcery and white magic, could cast such a powerful spell. Changing one piece of gold to lead is simple sorcery, a Reverse Alchemy spell, but it took *white* magic to channel the energy released from the gold into a chain reaction, locating and destroying all gold everywhere! My master discovered the spell, then we tested it underground in a specially shielded chamber so it wouldn't take effect until all Maraknese units were in position. Once the Maraknese

High Command gave the order, I unleashed the spell on the world! From now on, the only magic in Eldor will be sorcery. Soon all of Eldor will bow down to Sorcerers *and* their apprentices.”

Jelal told Pran, “You were right about Sekar. *Goblinspawn*,” he swore, “if only I’d followed him like I’d planned instead of getting distracted by that Truthseeker prophecy, I could’ve stopped him, and then there would’ve been no need to go on the quest. The Truthseekers made their own prophecy come true, a self-fulfilling prophecy!”

“Maybe,” said Pran, “but we’ll never know. This means my other guess must be right, too—there’s still gold in that bank. Too bad there’s no way to go in and get it.”

“Or is there?” Jelal asked. “Samir, you know some sorcery, right?”

Pran looked hopefully at his redheaded sometimes-friend. At the same time, he wondered if they could really trust Samir to attack his buddy Sekar.

Samir shrank back into the alley, fear evident in his eyes. “Don’t look at me like *that*, you two. I know I said I’d defend Pran, but that’s suicide—I wouldn’t last five seconds against that Sorcerer! I only know the spells Sekar taught me. He’s already shielded against all those spells, and his master’s much stronger than him. Even if I brought bones for sorcery—which I didn’t—I only know minor tricks, not Invisibility, Tunneling, or attack spells. Sekar did teach me Transmogrification, but I’m not very good at it, and besides, that’s the first thing Sorcerers learn to protect themselves against.”

Jelal sighed. “There might still be another way we can get into the bank.”

Pran asked, “How?” He ticked off arguments against it on his fingers, “Most of the soldiers are dead, there’s no hope for reinforcements with the bridge under attack, a powerful Sorcerer and his apprentice are blasting anyone who comes near the bank, and they’re protected by impenetrable shields!”

Jelal smiled. “No, not impenetrable. Sorcerers use an all-purpose shield against physical attacks, crude but powerful. When wearing it, they’re nearly immune from attack by any hard object, whether metal, stone, or wood—”

Samir interrupted, "How would *you* know that? You're just a Novice!"

Pran said, "There's no time to explain, but Jelal's a lot more than he appears to be, trust me. He's actually leader of this quest, and you should listen to him, because he has the most experience." Ignoring Samir's bewildered look, he said, "Go on, Jelal."

"As I was saying, Sorcerers' shields are nearly immune from attacks by metal, stone, or wood, but it *is* possible for a barehanded or barefoot attack to penetrate it."

Samir said, "An unarmed attack would be suicide! Who'd be crazy enough to try that?"

"*Me*," Jelal said, smiling wryly. "As Pran knows, I'm a martial arts expert." Taking off his shoes and socks, he said, "Give me a minute to get across the street, then talk to Sekar and his master to distract them."

Pran asked, "What can we say to distract them?"

"After what Sekar did to you at the bridge, and what he's done today, I'd think there's plenty that you're dying to tell him! Now's your chance. Just keep their attention focused this way while I sneak up behind them." Without any further explanation, the little spy ran off, barefoot, to the entrance of the alley, then disappeared into the street.

Nervously, Pran edged closer to the entrance of the alley and yelled, hoping his voice didn't betray his fear, "Sekar, what are you doing up there?"

Sekar said, "Master Merlow, leave this boy to me." Then disarmingly, as if talking to an old friend, he asked, "Pran, is that you? Come out where I can see you. Don't worry; I wouldn't blast an old schoolmate."

"No," Pran retorted, anger overcoming his fear as he stepped out of the alley and into the street, "you'd just throw him off the bridge onto the rocks!"

Sekar threw his hood back, revealing his long, sandalwood hair and handsome, aristocratic features. "So, you survived that fall, Pran. I'd *heard* that you did," he said, his tone indicating disappointment.

Out of the corner of his eye, Pran saw Jelal in an alley along the left wall of the bank, looking for a place to climb. "Yes, I did survive, no thanks to *you*! Why are you doing this, Sekar?"

"Those soldiers tried to rob my father's bank. They killed his bank manager! What'd you expect me to do; open the door and let them in?"

Jelal was starting to climb up a drain spout now on the far left corner of the bank. Pran asked, "No, I mean why'd you turn all Eldor's gold into lead?"

"Your father kicked me out of magic school. If I can't be a Magician, then I'll make it so *nobody* can be one."

Jelal was nearing the top of the drain spout and about to emerge onto the roof where it sloped away from the street, on the opposite side from Sekar and the Sorcerer. Pran said, "But Sekar, your actions are helping our enemy, the Maraknese! Can't you see that's wrong?"

"Can't you see that ratting out your schoolmates was wrong? Pran, I want you to know that when you betrayed me to your father, you made up my mind to help the Maraknese. It wasn't just anger at your father that made me make a deal with the enemy; it was the fact that my own *classmate* was the one who snitched on me. *You* did it, you betrayed my trust, ratted me out, probably *told* your father to expel me. Now scurry away like the rat that you are," Sekar yelled, pointing his skull-headed staff in Pran's direction and uttering a word in Maraknese.

Pran felt a tingle as the spell hit him, but nothing happened.

Sekar swore, "Goblinspawn! You were supposed to turn into a rat. So you're shielded against Transmogrification spells, eh? Well, stick around until I find another fun spell that you're not shielded against." He raised his bony staff again and spoke a word in Maraknese.

Pran felt a wave of force hit him. He tried to run away, but found his feet rooted to the ground by sorcery, just like in childhood nightmares. Now he could see Jelal on the roof. The little spy had crested the ridge and was descending, barefoot, toward Sekar and the Sorcerer, who were perched on the level lip of the roof, oblivious of the threat sneaking down toward them from behind. Pran knew he must keep talking, both to distract the two black robed figures and to save his own life. "Sekar, I wasn't the one who told my father about the circle of sorcery!"

"Then who *was* it? Tell me, and I might let you live."

As if in answer, Jelal slid silently behind Merlow the Sorcerer and dealt him a lightning-fast jab to the back of his neck, simultaneously breaking it and knocking him off the roof. Sekar turned at the sound, but before he could defend himself, the little spy swiveled and dealt him a side kick in the stomach. The blow made Sekar double over, bringing his head into position for Jelal to nail him a quick uppercut to the chin that toppled him over backwards off the roof. As the teen's body neared the ground, it slowed slightly from a Gravity Shield spell.

Pran found himself released from Sekar's spell and able to move again. Drawing his knife, he walked cautiously to where Sekar and his master had fallen, but two Eldorean soldiers reached the Sorcerer's body first. One of them said, "He looks dead, eh?"

"He could be just faking it with a spell," said the other soldier. "With Sorcerers, it's better to be safe than sorry," he opined, thrusting his sword into the Sorcerer's heart and then giving it a strong twist. "He's dead *now*."

Pran grimaced at the bloody scene and turned his attention to Sekar, who looked alive but unconscious. His skull-tipped staff had fallen some distance away and shattered, but Pran still feared what other weapons he might use when he awoke. Bending down, Pran disarmed him of his knife, then used it to cut the bone necklace from his throat.

Sekar moaned.

The soldier who'd stabbed the Sorcerer's body, a Corporal, said, "Hey, that one's still alive! Can I fix that for you, lad, or are you going to kill him yourself?"

Jelal slid down a drainpipe and ran up, yelling, "Don't kill him! We need him alive for questioning." Breathlessly, the little spy explained, "He's the one who destroyed the gold, so we need to find out how he did it and whether there's any gold left."

Pran looked down at the knife he still held at Sekar's throat, thinking how easy it would be to kill the traitor. He'd wanted revenge for being ambushed at the bridge, and this was the perfect moment, with soldiers actually *wanting* him to kill Sekar for his attack on their unit. He could literally get away with murder and never have to stand trial! But looking

down at Sekar lying helpless at his feet, Pran felt his desire for vengeance cool. What sealed his decision was the thought that if Vitina found out he'd killed an unconscious boy, she'd never love him.

Pran stood up and told the Corporal, "Jelal's right. This kid has valuable information, so he should be taken prisoner, not killed. His name's Sekar, son of Toxomin the bank owner, and I warn you that he knows both sorcery and white magic. Don't let him around either silver or bone, and I suggest you tie his hands and gag him until he's safely locked up."

"Don't worry, lad, we'll guard the little traitor. And our interrogators will find out what he knows, *one way or the other*," the Corporal said ominously, then spat on the Sorcerer's apprentice. Taking a rope from his pack, he tied Sekar's hands together, none too gently, then used his bandanna to gag him.

Pran felt some measure of satisfaction in knowing that Sekar wouldn't be let off easily for his crimes.

They heard a whistle blow, and turned to see a Lieutenant standing in the middle of the street in front of the bank. The sleeve was burned off his left arm, and he was obviously in pain, but there was a fire in his eyes, a desire to make someone pay for his wounds and the deaths of his troops.

The Lieutenant shouted, "Men, with the Captain and his XO both dead, I'm taking command of this company as ranking Platoon Leader. I, Lieutenant Dima, hereby declare this bank to be enemy territory, as it is manned by *traitors* who attacked our troops! It may also contain gold, which our Magic Officers need to Heal our wounded and defend our fair city." With his good arm, the Lieutenant drew his sword and said, "All surviving soldiers who are fit to fight, fall in on me. We're taking the bank for Eldor!"

There were ragged cheers as soldiers emerged from the rubble and alleyways, some of them fit, but many others wounded, limping, or with serious burns. Pran saw a few soldiers struggle to stand but find themselves unable to do so. Lieutenant Dima took pity on them, saying, "Those of you who are wounded, I appreciate your motivation, but stay and rest. We'll send Magic Officers around to treat you as soon as we capture the bank for Eldor."

Meanwhile, Sekar had opened his eyes and was looking around, obviously frightened. The Corporal dragged him to his feet and said, "Sir, what should I do with our prisoner while we're attacking the bank? We can't just kill the little traitor, 'cause he knows enemy secrets, but he's dangerous and needs to be guarded."

The Lieutenant said, "I see you've tied his hands and gagged him; good. Tie his feet too, and then let some of the wounded soldiers who can still wield a sword guard him. If he tries to escape or use sorcery, stab him in the legs!"

"With pleasure, sir," said the Corporal, grinning maliciously.

Samir had come out of the alley and was looking warily at Sekar, avoiding eye contact with his former buddy who'd turned traitor.

Jelal said, "Lieutenant Dima, thanks for escorting us this far, but if you don't mind, we'll go the rest of the way to the Tower by ourselves."

"So you're the martial arts kid, the barefoot boy who killed a powerful Sorcerer," the Lieutenant observed. "That showed real bravery, lad, and if you were in my unit, I'd recommend you for the Medal of Valor. You should join the Army when you grow up."

"I'll consider it, as *soon* as I grow up," Jelal promised, straight-faced.

"I've seen that you're capable of defending yourselves, so carry on, boys," Lieutenant Dima told Jelal, Pran, and Samir, then turned his attention to lining up the able-bodied soldiers in battle formation facing the bank.

While Jelal was putting his socks and shoes back on, Pran asked him, "Shouldn't we wait for the soldiers to escort us to the Tower?"

Jelal said, "Bank doors are reinforced with magic, so it'll take the soldiers a while to break in, and any minute now the Maraknese Army will come swarming over the bridges. Also, these soldiers are magnets for ambush! Do you think we would've been attacked like that if we'd been traveling on our own? Traveling with so many people in uniform makes us too big of a target."

Samir asked, "If we leave now, how'll we know if there's gold in the bank?"

“If they find any, they’ll report it to Colonel Kaldor back at the Tower,” Jelal said. “These are well disciplined troops—they’re not going to steal the gold for themselves! Now come on, let’s go. We’ll take the side streets, where we’ll be less likely to run into enemy troops who might’ve broken through our defenses.”



33: THE MESSENGER

On the way to the Tower, Pran and his companions had to pass through barricades hastily thrown up by Eldorean troops to impede the advance of enemy cavalry. These barriers barely slowed the boys down, as they had gaps for sentries, messengers, or pedestrians to weave their way through. The soldiers manning the barricades didn't give the boys any trouble, since they were on the lookout for Maraknese troops, not three youths wearing the silver pendants of magic students.

Upon reaching the Tower, the boys found it a hub of activity, with messengers in Army uniforms running in and out. Jelal whispered, "Pran, *you* talk to the guards. They'd expect you or Samir to be our leader now that Hakon's dead, since I look too young. Just don't mention my involvement in killing the Sorcerer, okay?"

Pran identified himself and his friends to the Sergeant of the Guard, who asked, "Where's your military escort?"

"Ambushed on the way here," Pran answered.

The Sergeant swore. "The Maraknese are inside the city already?"

"Only one of them that we know of. We were attacked by a Maraknese Sorcerer and some traitors working for the bank. Our troops suffered heavy casualties, but we managed to kill the Sorcerer," Pran said, catching himself looking at Jelal while saying the last part. "The surviving soldiers are attacking the bank now."

"Thanks for the news," the Sergeant said. "Go on in; they're waiting for you."

Once inside the Tower, Pran spotted Vitina standing near the communications desk. As their eyes met, her beautiful brown face lit up, and she rushed over to greet him, ignoring everyone else. "Pran, thank God you are safe! Word came from above that your escort was attacked, so I feared you had been killed." She gave him a warm and unexpected hug.

Pran's heart started beating so wildly that he was sure Vitina could feel it thumping through his shirt. The fragrance of her long, black hair was like a spring meadow, and he wished the embrace could last forever. Finally, Vitina released her arms and stepped back to look into his eyes.

Pran gently clasped both of her hands in his own, saying, "I'm sure glad *you're* safe, too, Vitina." As they looked into each other's eyes, and Pran held Vitina's soft, warm, brown hands for the very first time, it seemed to him that time stood still, and the world around them dimmed into nonexistence. The effect was as potent as any spell Pran had ever felt, but it was no spell—only what minstrels called the magic of first love.

He would've stood happily holding Vitina's hands for several more minutes if Loremaster Lokor hadn't cleared his throat loudly and said, "Sorry to interrupt your tender reunion, but you have a mission to go on—one which is getting more urgent by the moment."

Pran blushed and dropped Vitina's hands, the realization that they were standing in a room packed with people hitting him like a cold bucket of water in the face. Looking around, he saw a group of soldiers and Magicians—including his father, Loremaster Lokor, and Jelal—looking amused by the scene they'd just witnessed. Samir, however, grinned at him and flashed him a thumbs-up.

Pran's father said with a smile, "Son, I too am glad you made it here safely. What's Samir doing here? Don't tell me *he's* your final companion."

"As a matter of fact, yes. It turns out Samir's my cousin, so he's the relative I never knew I had! We just found out Uncle Javid's his real father."

"Javid has a son?" His father frowned. "When this is over, remind me to have a few words with my rascally, sea dog brother for running

off to sea in such a hurry he left a *baby* behind!” He looked at Samir appraisingly, then said, “Welcome to the family. I suppose this makes you my nephew, eh?”

“Yes, Master Gil—I mean Uncle Gilamond.”

“Humph—this’ll take some getting used to! You’d better keep calling me Master Gilamond in public, to avoid a scandal. Kids, Colonel Kaldor sends his apologies, as he’s up in the battle room directing the fighting outside. Without Telepathy spells to communicate with the troops below, he has every carrier pigeon in town on the wing! Doc Parador also wanted to be here to say goodbye, but he’s busy treating the wounded—as best he can without gold. Where’s Lieutenant Hakon?”

“Killed when his Archery company was ambushed,” Pran said. “He died fighting bravely.”

His father said respectfully, “Of course he would. He was an Eldorean Army officer, like your brother.”

The others nodded their heads somberly, even reverently. Fighting back tears, Pran finally understood how people could dislike someone during his life, yet miss him after he died.

“What’s *important*,” Loremaster Lokor declared, “is that you four children made it here safely. Much as we’ll miss him, Lieutenant Hakon wasn’t essential to the quest, as the prophecy didn’t mention him. Besides, he might have been too old to survive the journey.”

Samir looked at the elderly Loremaster and asked, “What do you mean, ‘too old’?”

Lokor chuckled. “You’re probably thinking who am I to call someone old, eh? Well, it’s said that only the mind of a child can handle the shock of long term exposure to Earth. Let’s go into the Magicians’ library now to discuss the portal you’ll be using. There’s someone else waiting in there to brief you. Colonel Kaldor said he’s a representative of the Crown, but all I know is his code name, Dragon.”

Jelal’s blue-gray eyes widened like saucers, and he exclaimed, “Wizards alive, Dragon is here?” He hastily tucked in his shirt, took off his hat, and ran a comb through his blond hair.

Pran decided to follow the little spy's example, guessing that Dragon must be a very important person to evoke such a reaction.

The four Bird Dogs, Pran's father, and Lokor walked around the inside of the Tower's base to the wing housing the Magicians' library. At the moment, its door was guarded by two armed sentries, who stood aside to let the six of them enter. A hallway led them past several closed bedroom doors, as the wing also served in time of siege as quarters for the city's high ranking civilian Magicians, including its Chief Magician, Loremaster, and Magical Doctors. At the end of the hall, Lokor directed everyone into the library, a simple, high-ceilinged, oval room lit by a Mage-Light, its whitewashed walls lined with well-used books. In the center, a rosewood table held enough chairs for all of them, as well as an empty seat that reminded Pran of the loss of Lieutenant Hakon.

Seated at the head of the table, where Pran had expected to find the important personage whose presence seemed to have flustered Jelal, was a small, bespectacled, unassuming man of about fifty. The man looked like he might be a librarian, clerk, or low level bureaucrat, but certainly not a Magician, noble, or anybody important. Next to him sat a teenage boy in the uniform of the Royal Messenger Corps, reading some papers. The boy hadn't bothered to remove his messenger's hat, perhaps overly proud of its "winged crown" device, and seemed so engrossed in the papers he held in front of his face reading that he barely looked up when the visitors entered. *Very disrespectful*. He whispered to Jelal, "Who's that man, one of your spy handlers?"

"No need to whisper, boys; you can speak freely here," the man said. "The Magician's library is both soundproof and immune to Eavesdropping spells."

Pran blurted out, "We were just wondering who you are."

Jelal appeared shocked at his ignorance or rudeness. He exclaimed sarcastically, "Who *is* he? *Only* Director of Magical Operations for the entire EIA, *that's* all!"

Dragon smiled as if amused by Jelal's outburst. "You can call me Dragon. Good to see you again, Agent Mouse, and pleased to meet you,

Pran and Vitina. I see you brought another boy with you, too.” Addressing Samir, he asked, “Are you the final companion, the relative Pran didn’t know he had?”

“Yes sir, um, Dragon, I’m his cousin Samir. I just found out we’re cousins, because Pran’s Uncle Javid is my real father. Who’s Agent Mouse?”

Jelal said, “Sorry, sir, I’m afraid we haven’t had time to brief Samir about my identity, or Vitina’s. We didn’t even know he was coming with us until after the gold disappeared. That’s when Samir guessed our mission and volunteered to come with us, then Pran confirmed he fit the prophecy. We told him our destination and the fact that I’m quest leader, but not much else.”

“Understood. You made the right decision, because you could’ve been captured on the way here, but now that you’re safely in the Tower you can reveal your identity. Before you step through the portal into more danger, Samir needs to know what qualifies you to lead this quest.”

While Jelal told how his accident with an Eternal Youth spell had made him become an adult in a child’s body, a Magician, and a spy for the Eldorean Intelligence Agency, Samir kept looking back and forth at the faces of Pran, Master Gilamond, Dragon, and Vitina, as if checking to see if they believed Jelal’s story. When the little spy had finished, Samir asked wide-eyed, “Is this true?”

“Every word of it,” Dragon said. “What do you think?”

Looking straight at Jelal, Samir said, “I think now I know who really spied on us at the circle of sorcery.”

Jelal said defensively, “I did it for our country.”

“I don’t hold it against you,” Samir clarified. “It turned out you were *right* to spy on Sekar! Anyway, it’s all water under the bridge now.” He drew back his teeth in a grimace. “Sorry, Pran, poor choice of words.”

Dragon observed, “It sounds like you boys have some issues to work out. Are you going to be able to get along together on the quest?”

“Don’t worry, we’re all friends now,” Jelal said. “The only person none of us could get along with was Lieutenant Hakon, and he’s gone.”

“Yes, I heard about Lieutenant Hakon’s death—most unfortunate. However, there’s no time to prepare another Army Magician for the trip to Earth, so I guess it will just be the four of you.”

Pran was about to ask how Dragon already knew about Hakon, but figured that a director of Eldor’s spy agency would have ways of finding out information.

Dragon said, “Now that Samir knows Jelal’s secret, perhaps Vitina should tell Samir why she’s also more than she appears to be.”

Vitina explained that she was an Enchantress, specialized in the Healing arts, and apprenticed to Doc Parador. She didn’t mention the fact that she’d been a Maraknese slave.

When she’d finished, Dragon said, “I have a few items to discuss with you before your Loremaster directs you to the portal. First of all, let me introduce my messenger. He came here with me incognito, but I think we can trust everyone in this room, considering the circumstances. Let’s see if any of you recognize him. If so, feel free to speak up.”

The boy lowered the papers he’d been hiding behind and removed his hat, revealing neatly trimmed caramel colored hair, sapphire blue eyes glowing with intelligence, and a serene face that made him look younger than his size would indicate. Before Pran could figure out who the boy reminded him of, Jelal said, “Your Highness, Prince Taryn, it’s great to see you again!”

With everyone else’s eyes widened at the identity of the visitor, the prince stood up and replied with a wide grin, “My old friend Jelal! It’s been two years since you’ve visited me in the palace, way too long.”

“Well, the EIA doesn’t bring me back to Eldorado often, ’cause I’m too valuable in the field.” The two boys approached each other smiling, and then to Pran astonishment, Prince Taryn reached out and gave Jelal a warm embrace. After hugging, the two boys stood back and sized each other up, Jelal observing, “You’ve grown a lot since we last met.” Indeed, the prince looked tall for his sixteen years.

“But you haven’t,” the prince pointed out. Seeing Jelal’s smile dim, Prince Taryn astonished Pran again by apologizing, something unheard of

among royalty. “Sorry, Jelal, it’s been so long, I forgot you’re self-conscious about your height.”

Jelal shrugged. “Ah, that’s okay, Taryn.” He quickly corrected himself, “I mean, Your Royal *Highness*,” looking around the room as if to see if anyone had taken offense. Nobody had, for they were still staring slack-jawed, in awe of his close relationship with the young prince.

When they’d recovered their composure, the others introduced themselves to Prince Taryn more formally than Jelal had. Pran’s father went last, saying with a deep bow, “Your Royal Highness, it’s an honor to meet you. I’m Gilamond the Magician, a magic school teacher here in this humble town. Apparently Mouse wasn’t just name-dropping when he told my son he’s a friend of yours!”

Prince Taryn explained, “Jelal and I’ve known each other since I was smaller than him. Growing up in the palace, third in line to the throne, I didn’t have the chance to make a lot of friends. I was privately tutored, so I didn’t go to school, and the only people my age who treated me like a normal kid were my cousins. But Jelal was a friend of my father’s, so he and I played together like equals. When I was ten, he shared his secret with me. You tell them the rest, Jelal; I can see you’re itching to!”

“Okay, but stop me if I say too much. I was based in Eldorado back then, and with the kingdom at peace, I got to see Taryn a lot,” Jelal said, in his excitement forgetting again to use the prince’s formal title. “My handlers never let me tell someone my age—I mean size—my true identity, so when the King gave me permission to tell Taryn, I was thrilled. When I told him, he didn’t act with disbelief like grownups always do. He thought it was so cool that someone his size was a spy, and was fascinated by the fact that I never aged! For me, it was great to have another boy to share my secrets with. Sometimes we played together like kids, other times we talked together as confidants, saying things we couldn’t tell anyone else. We were best friends for a couple years, until it looked like war was going to break out, and I got sent to Marakna to investigate. Since the war started, I’ve been stuck behind enemy lines most of the time, with no chance to visit my friend Tar—um, I mean His Royal Highness, Prince Taryn.”

Prince Taryn grinned and waved a hand dismissively, “Don’t worry about it this time, since everyone here’s been cleared to discuss a Top Secret mission, but you know you’re only supposed to call me Taryn when we’re alone.”

“Sorry, I’m just so excited to see you again! I was afraid that since you’ve grown, you might have forgotten me or no longer wanted to be friends. That’s what happened back when I was young myself. My friends all grew up, then acted like they didn’t want to know me! By the way, Your Highness, everyone’s supposed to call me by codename ‘Mouse’ in the Wizard Tower, so maybe I’m not the only one who slipped up, eh?” He chuckled with casual familiarity. “But don’t worry, everyone in this room already knew my given name. What brings you here to White River Junction, Your Highness, today of all days—come to see us off on our journey?”

“That’s *one* reason I’m here. If the prophecy came true, I was supposed to meet with you and offer you rewards. If the prophecy turned out to be a hoax, Dragon and I were supposed to investigate and punish those responsible for wasting the EIA and Army’s time.

“But my father had two other reasons for sending me here. He knew that if the gold disappeared, Marakna might seize the capital, so it’d no longer be safe for me in the palace. He has to stay there, because he’s the King, but he wanted to send at least one of his sons someplace safe. My older brothers are Army officers, so they’re always in harm’s way, but he said there was no point in putting me in danger too, so he sent me here.” He shrugged, “Obviously White River Junction’s not the safest place in the war, but it’s safer than Eldorado, especially for someone whose face is known throughout the capital.

“My father’s final reason for sending me here was because when you return from your quest, you’ll arrive back here. If the kingdom’s been conquered by the time you return with the gold, then it’ll be up to someone in the royal family to use that gold to liberate Eldor. I’m the only prince who knows magic, so I’m the obvious choice. As soon as my father found I had the talent, he had me tutored by top professors at the Royal Academy,

so I'm nearly a Magician already. When you return with the gold, I'll be ready to lead the Magicians in liberating Eldor.

"However, I know your quest could take weeks or months, or you might not return at all. I don't intend to just sit here in the Tower waiting on my royal buttocks that whole time! I owe it to my kingdom to do more than that."

Dragon said formally, "Let it go on the record that I advised His Royal Highness to wait safely in the Tower until they return from the quest, as the King intended."

"Your objections have been duly noted," Prince Taryn said, "and I take full responsibility for my actions." Lowering his voice, the sixteen-year-old prince said conspiratorially, with great excitement, "I'm planning to go undercover with the Resistance here in White River Junction! Dragon told me about a local Resistance cell called the Groundhogs, where I'll even be able to use my magic talents."

"That's my magic class!" Pran blurted out, then added, "Um, Your Highness."

Prince Taryn smiled, his blue eyes meeting Pran's. "Yes, I know. I'll be in disguise, so nobody in your class should recognize me. That's for their own protection as much as mine, as they'll all be safer not knowing my identity."

"I hope Your Highness uses a better disguise than you're wearing *now*," Dragon said dryly. "That royal messenger's uniform might be a suitable disguise in Eldorado, but it stands out like a sore thumb here. If you're recognized, it paints a target on this whole city."

Prince Taryn said, "Then you will *help* me with my new disguise, Dragon. Now, let's get back to the quest for gold, Operation Bird Dog. Dragon, proceed with your briefing."

"Thank you, Your Highness. Mouse, did you get the list I sent you?"

"Yes, sir," Jelal said. Pran thought it amusing that he addressed Dragon with more formality than he addressed the prince, but then again, one was his friend, the other his boss.

"What list?" asked Lokor suspiciously. When nobody answered, a look of realization dawned in the old Loremaster's blue eyes. "You gave

Mouse a list of items to bring back from Earth.” It was an accusation, not a question. “Sir, with all due respect, many Earth inventions would be disastrous to our world if introduced here. Earthlings have fouled up their own world badly enough—don’t introduce their abominations into *ours*. And it’s not just Loremasters like me and Truthseekers saying so—there’s a royal edict forbidding importation of anything from that barbaric world.”

Dragon said, “The King agreed to lift the ban to allow gold to be brought back, so if the Bird Dogs decide to bring back other objects too—items that would help Eldor win the war—there’s currently no law to stop them.”

The Loremaster threw up his gnarled hands in resignation, saying, “Fine, but don’t say I didn’t warn you, sir. I want it on record that I strongly oppose bringing anything back other than gold.” He hesitated. “Except perhaps some more of that miracle metal that Earthlings call *aluminum*, so I can study its properties,” he added, stroking his long, white beard thoughtfully.

“Your objections are noted,” said Dragon, “and you’ll be happy to hear that your aluminum was already on the list.”

This seemed to appease the Loremaster, but he cast his eyes down guiltily as if feeling complicit in importing illicit artifacts from Earth.

Pran asked, “Loremaster, do you really think Earth is barbaric?”

“Did you not read the fairy tales about Earth to prepare yourself, as I suggested? I hope you at least read the nursery rhymes, such as ‘Twinkle, Twinkle, Gunfire Afar,’ ‘Mary had a Little Gun,’ and ‘The Little Old Lady who Lived in a Homeless Shelter.’”

“Yes, but surely those are exaggerations, right?”

Lokor shook his head. “They’re all true, and proof that Earth is indeed an uncivilized world populated by violent barbarians. I’m sorry to have to send you youngsters there, but there is no other way.”



34: REWARD REQUESTS

Prince Taryn asked, “Have you Bird Dogs thought about what you’d like for rewards when you return with the gold?”

Remembering his father’s advice not to let anyone rush him into a decision, Pran said, “We haven’t had much time to think about it, Your Highness. We don’t have to choose today, do we?”

Taryn smiled. “No, but we thought it might motivate you to know you’ll be getting rewards, since you’ll have to give up any gold you bring back.”

Pran answered, “Your Highness, I’d like to transfer to the Royal Academy of Magic, and after graduation, pursue advanced studies there. With a full scholarship,” he added hopefully.

Taryn nodded. “I can arrange that. Do you know which field of magic you want to specialize in?”

“I’m thinking of the Healing arts,” Pran said, glancing at Vitina, who smiled back at him approvingly, making his heart flutter.

“Good choice,” Prince Taryn said. “I saw from your file that you’ve already shown promise in that area.”

Pran raised his eyebrows. “My *file*?”

Dragon said dismissively, “It’s nothing to be alarmed about. Because of your mission to Earth, the EIA has files on all of you—except for Samir,

since he's such a late addition to the quest. I've shown your files to His Highness, of course."

Prince Taryn said, "Is there anything else you'd like to ask for?"

Pran grew bolder. "Can you make my father a professor at the Royal Academy?"

His father said, "Your Highness, I want you to know I didn't put my son up to this! I apologize if his request is out of line."

Dragon put in, "I've read Master Gilamond's file too, Your Highness. He is qualified, and perhaps he deserves a reward for taking on the risk of being Mouse's EIA handler."

Prince Taryn asked, "Master Gilamond, are you saying you wouldn't accept a position at the Royal Academy if I offered you one?"

Pran's father bowed his head. "I'd be honored to teach there, Your Highness, and would be happy to move to the capital, too. I'd be able to see Pran daily at the Royal Academy. Eldorado's also close to Turtle Bay, home of my parents and my brother, Javid."

"That's my real father!" Samir exclaimed.

"Yes," Pran's father said dryly, "so you said a few minutes ago, and he's also Pran's uncle. My son's very fond of his Uncle Javid, although he's away at sea most of the time."

"That's right," Pran agreed. "He'll be getting command of his own ship soon."

Dragon smiled. "As a matter of fact, he's already been given his own ship, so perhaps you can call him 'Captain Uncle' now."

"That's fantastic," said Pran, "An Eldorean Navy warship, eh?"

Dragon hesitated, frowning slightly.

Pran asked, "What's wrong? Did the Navy make him Captain of a garbage scow?"

Dragon smiled. "On the contrary, she's a very fast, three-masted barque. However, she's not exactly a Navy ship. Your uncle's a privateer now."

Samir's eyes widened in disbelief. "Are you saying my father's a pirate, a criminal?!"

“No,” Dragon said with a laugh. “I realize some pirates call themselves ‘privateers,’ but there’s actually a difference. As a privateer, Captain Javid commands a privately owned ship crewed by civilians, but he’s commissioned by the King to fight and harass enemy ships. The Navy decided it takes too long to build new warships and train sailors, so the fastest way to expand their fleet is to hire private ships and crews, sort of a ‘Naval Auxiliary.’ It’s not only faster, but also cheaper, because privateers are allowed to keep booty they seize from the enemy in lieu of part of their pay.”

“Isn’t it dangerous?” Pran asked.

Dragon shrugged. “Probably less dangerous than being in the Navy. Ships flying the Eldorean Navy ensign are attacked on sight by the Maraknese, but privateers can fly a merchant ensign, neutral flag, pirate flag, or even the enemy’s flag, whichever best helps them sink enemy ships and avoid capture. Don’t worry about your uncle, Pran; he’ll be fine.”

Taryn asked Jelal, “How about you, my friend? What would you like as your reward?”

Jelal said wistfully, “Your Highness, you know what I want most is to become a *real* boy—a boy who grows one year older with each passing year. Then a safe and comfortable retirement from the EIA, with adoptive parents to raise me through a normal childhood until I grow up and choose my own career. But we all know my dream is impossible,” Jelal concluded sadly, his eyes misting over.

Lokor said, “If I may offer a suggestion, Your Highness—”

“Certainly.”

“Maybe it’s not impossible, Mouse,” the Loremaster said. “The portal strips away any spells we have active, so maybe it’d remove your Eternal Youth spell too!” Then he frowned. “Although then you might die of old age the minute you get to Earth. How old are you, again?”

“One hundred thirty-nine. But I already know the portal won’t affect my condition.”

“How can you be so sure?” asked Lokor.

“I tried it already. I once convinced a Loremaster to take me through a portal to find out.”

Lokor looked shocked. "He took you to *Earth*? But that's strictly forbidden!"

"I can be very persuasive," Jelal said, flashing a cute smile warm enough to melt permafrost. "Anyway, I only spent five minutes on Earth, not long enough to do any harm, but also not long enough to learn anything helpful for our mission, unfortunately."

Prince Taryn said, "Jelal, there might be another way to grant your wish. If your mission succeeds, we can capture an enemy Sorcerer who knows the Rapid Aging spell they've used on our troops, and make him use it on you to reverse your Eternal Youth. It'd be dangerous, but if you're willing to take the risk—"

"Thank you, Your Highness!" Jelal said, beaming.

The prince asked, "Now Samir, what would you like as your reward?"

"I want a full scholarship to the Royal Academy, like Pran," Samir said, "including postgraduate training in whatever magical specialty I choose."

"Granted," Taryn agreed readily. "Anything else?"

"When we come back from Earth, we'll be heroes, right? Well, I want everyone to *know* it, Your Highness, so when we return, I'd like a parade in our honor down the streets of the capital. In this parade, I want to ride a magnificent black stallion, with a jeweled saddle. And I want this horse to be mine to keep, a fast, powerful, stallion with good lineage. I want my new, black stallion to be one of the fastest horses in the land, as swift as a racehorse, so I can ride like the wind! And I want this horse bonded to me by a Beastmaster Magician, so from the very first time I ride him, my stallion and I will move together as if horse and rider are one."

"We'll throw a parade for all of you," Prince Taryn promised, "and your horse will be the finest in the parade—except for my Royal Family's, of course."

"Thank you, Your Highness," Samir said, bowing his head.

"Now, Vitina," Prince Taryn asked, turning to the beautiful, brown enchantress, "what would you like for compensation, when you return with the gold?"

Vitina answered in her accented Eldorean, "Your Royalness, I wish the same reward as Pran and Samir: a scholarship to your Magic Academy of Royalty."

Taryn looked flustered. “If you mean the Royal Academy of Magic, you must know that *you* can’t go there.”

“Your Royalness offered it to the others,” she pointed out.

“Vitina, obviously in your country women can do magic, but you’re in Eldor now. Never, in its long and distinguished history, has the Royal Academy had any female students or professors, so it would cause a scandal if you were to attend.”

“Your Royalness, do you fear that if I enroll, your Magic Academy will be flooded with applications from Eldorean girls who realize they, too, have magical talents?”

Taryn looked taken aback, and stammered, “No, that isn’t what—I mean Eldorean girls don’t have—well, it’s *unheard* of, eh?” He glanced at Dragon for guidance.

Vitina pressed on, her black eyes flashing, “I am tired of hiding my abilities just because I am a girl, Your Royalness! I want to study to become a Magical Doctor, like my master. I volunteered to go on this quest, but if you will not reward me like the others just because I am a girl, I will go back home to my family.”

Dragon said, “Your Highness, the prophecy said that for the quest to succeed, all four of them must go to Earth. I recommend you grant her request.”

Prince Taryn nodded. “Very well. Its board of directors may grumble, but I’ll grant you admission to the Royal Academy with a full scholarship, like the others. Is there anything else you want? And please don’t ask for admission to the Military Academy as well!”

Vitina smiled. “No, that is not necessary. But it reminds me, my brother, Ravi, made me promise to ask a favor for him. He tried to join your Eldorean Army, but he is not a citizen. He wants very much to fight the Maraknese.”

“Yes,” Dragon said, “I read in your file about what they did to your—”

“Please, do not *speak* of it!” Vitina’s hands clenched the arms of her chair tightly.

“Sorry, I should have realized it’s still painful to discuss.”

Prince Taryn said, "I will grant full citizenship to you, your brother, and your parents, but as for your brother's wish to join the Army, it may be too late. They can't train new recruits in the middle of battle, and when it's over, there may be no organized Army left."

Pran was aghast. "They're all going to die? But my *brother's* in the Army!"

Prince Taryn said grimly, "So are *my* brothers, in case you've forgotten."

An awkward silence followed, so quiet that Pran could hear the ticking of a pendulum clock. He cursed himself for a fool, then lowered his head and said, "Forgive me, Your Highness, for speaking without thinking."

Dragon cleared his throat. "His Highness said no *organized* Army left. There will be survivors. They have orders that in case of defeat, they are to doff their uniforms and start a Resistance movement among local civilians."

Prince Taryn added, "If your brother wants to fight, Vitina, he can join the Resistance. He's welcome to join the Groundhogs, the same Resistance cell I'll be joining. Judging from your file, although he doesn't know magic, he's a strong young man, so I'm sure we can use him."

"Can you tell my brother how to join this Groundhog cell, Your Royalness?" Vitina asked.

Taryn said, "We have your address and Ravi's description in your file, so we'll send a messenger to your brother."

Vitina bowed her head solemnly. "Thank you much, Your Royalness."

Dragon finally corrected her, "It's Highness, not 'Royalness,' Vitina. After you return, we can cast a Bilingual spell on you to improve your Eldorean. I can also cast a spell on you specially developed for EIA spies, the Accent Elimination spell, to remove your foreign accent."

"*What* accent?" Vitina snapped. The EIA director looked flustered, but apparently Vitina had only been feigning anger, for she laughed and said, "Thank you."

Prince Taryn grinned, evidently amused by the joke at Dragon's expense. "Well," he said, "I hope knowing your rewards will boost your morale during your quest. If there's anything further the Crown can do for

you, let me know. Dragon, you take it from here.”

“I’m happy to inform you that the EIA sent you some supplies. You’ll find them next to that bookshelf,” Dragon said, pointing out several nondescript burlap sacks and a wooden crate. “Each of you should take one bag of silver and a sack of diamonds. The diamonds are to trade for gold, while the silver is for minor spells and barter. I’m glad to see you’re all wearing extra silver today, as well.

“You boys can also open the crate and take one of the long daggers we call ‘EIA toothpicks.’ Mouse will show you how to strap its specially designed sheath to your back, under your shirt so it stays hidden.”

Vitina said, “I would like one too, Sir Dragon. If you did not bring one for me, I will take the knife meant for Lieutenant Hakon. But I hope you do not expect this little blond boy you call Mouse to strap it to my body,” she added with a silvery laugh.

“*I’ll* do it for you,” Pran offered, a little too eagerly. Vitina’s large obsidian eyes met his briefly, then looked down in embarrassment. Pran blushed, mentally kicking himself for having blurted out something so foolish.

Dragon seemed to pick up on the feelings between the two teens, or perhaps there was already something written about it in their files. He said tactfully, “I think it would be best, Vitina, if you let *Mouse* strap it to your back for you. He’s a professional.”

This time, she readily agreed.

After Jelal helped the other three strap on the daggers, they turned their attention to the sacks containing silver and diamonds. At Lokor’s suggestion, they split Lieutenant Hakon’s diamonds and silver coins among the four of them to carry in their pockets and Vitina’s purse, then put their own large, heavy bags of diamonds and coins into their rucksacks.

When Samir sorted through his bag of diamonds, he complained, “Most of these are only pea sized! I see a few diamonds the size of grapes, and a couple the size of walnuts, but only one as large as a hen’s egg, and none bigger.”

Dragon quipped, “Would you prefer handball-sized diamonds so you

can play catch with them, or diamonds the size of footballs that you can kick around? Samir, you forget that Earth is a land without Magicians to make diamond *doorknobs* for every room.”

Pran started to laugh, then his face turned somber as the words brought back unbidden memories. He said softly, “That sounds just like something Lieutenant Hakon would’ve said.”

There was a moment of silence as everyone remembered Hakon’s valiant death, until an urgent knock on the door announced the presence of a messenger.



35: THE PORTAL

When Jelal opened the door, Lieutenant Dima strode in, snapped to attention, and addressed Dragon. “Sir, I’d like to apologize for not escorting Pran and his companions all the way to the Tower. We got delayed at the bank, where a Maraknese Sorcerer and some traitors attacked our troops.”

“Yes, I’ve already been informed,” Dragon said. “Is that all, or do you have more to report?”

“Yes sir, I have some good news, too.”

“That’s a refreshing change.” Dragon leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. “Tell me.”

“After we captured the bank from the traitors, we found out Pran’s suspicions were right! Toxomin *was* hiding gold in his bank, protected from the spell his son used to turn ours into lead.”

Pran observed that the Lieutenant’s burned arm had been Healed, surprised he hadn’t noticed that earlier.

Dima reached into his pocket and produced a glittering gold coin. Grinning, he explained, “There wasn’t a lot of gold there, so perhaps he only protected his *own* gold, not his customers’, but now we know how he did it. The surviving gold was inside a chest made of solid lead!”

Foremaster Lokor asked eagerly, “Are you sure?”

Dima chuckled. “Our Magic Officers know lead when they see it! They used some of the gold to Heal those most seriously wounded in the battle.

Then, as acting Company Commander, I ordered my company to bring the rest of the gold to the Tower.”

“Excellent news!” exclaimed Dragon. “Did you inform Colonel Kaldor?”

“Yes, sir. He ordered half the gold to be sent to the bridges under attack, and now he’s organizing the distribution of the remaining gold to the Magicians in the battle room.”

Loremaster Lokor said, “I hope he allotted the Bird Dogs some gold to bring on their quest.”

“The Colonel saved most of the gold for the Magicians staying behind to defend the city. He only issued me four small coins, one for each surviving member of the quest.” Dima handed them to Pran, who passed them out to Vitina, Jelal, and Samir. “I must return to my company now, Dragon, but I wanted to give the news in person to you and the Bird Dogs.”

Prince Taryn whispered something in Dragon’s ear. The EIA director nodded. “Thank you, Lieutenant. Due to your success at the battle of the bank, and since you’re already acting Company Commander, I’ll recommend an immediate promotion to Captain.”

“Thank you, sir,” Lieutenant Dima said with a grin, then spun on his heel and left.

Prince Taryn said, “I would’ve liked to promote him myself, but I didn’t want to blow my cover.”

“A wise move, Your Highness,” Dragon agreed.

Lokor said, “I understand Colonel Kaldor’s reluctance to give you more gold, since he has to ensure you’ll have a city to return to, but this means you won’t have any to save for emergencies. As soon as you arrive on Earth, Jelal must use all four gold coins to cast Bilingual spells on your entire party. You’ll have to be able to communicate with Earthlings, especially the family prophesied to be your native guides.”

“Your Loremaster’s right,” Dragon agreed, “but I warn you not to share unnecessary information with Earthlings, about your mission *or* our world. You may tell a *portion* of the truth to natives whose help you need, but only on a need-to-know basis. Mouse is generally a good judge of that.”

Pran said, “Shouldn’t we leave now and head for the portal? If Maraknese troops enter the city, we could be cut off, and then we’ll never get there!”

Dragon looked amused. “Hasn’t Loremaster Lokor told you? The portal to Earth is right here in the Tower.”

Lokor clarified, “Actually, the portal *is* the Tower. Pran, Jelal, and Vitina, I trust the three of you still have your pendants made of Earth metal?”

They nodded, pulling out their aluminum hexagram pendants from beneath their shirts.

“That’s a relief, because I only have one spare to give to Samir!” Lokor reached into the inside pocket of his robe and handed it to him. Samir examined the pendant and chain curiously, weighing it in his palm in marvel of its light weight, before securing it around his neck.

“Now it’s time to tell you a Loremasters’ secret,” Lokor said. “The outer wall of every Wizard Tower on Rados is a portal, with each Tower leading to a different location on Earth. When someone from our world leaves Rados through a Wizard Tower, they arrive at a corresponding tower on Earth—not a *Wizard* Tower, since there are none on Earth, but a tower that resembles one, such as a lighthouse.”

Pran pointed out, “Wizard Towers last forever, but lighthouses sometimes fall into the sea. What happens to the Earth portals then?”

Lokor smiled. “The Wizards who built our Tower evidently anticipated that. Whenever a portal tower on Earth falls, the Wizard Tower on Rados automatically links to a different Earth tower.”

Samir asked, “Where does our portal lead to, Loremaster?”

Lokor replied, “To the richest and most powerful nation on Earth, so it should have plenty of gold. I used a different Wizard Tower when I went to Earth, but my predecessor said this Tower leads you to a park in a small, quiet town, so it should be fairly safe. However, don’t let your guard down, because change happens quickly on Earth, and areas that were safe in the past might be perilous today. Danger can also come from unexpected places there, so you must always be alert. I warn you again: stay off the roads, beware the horseless carriages!”

Vitina protested, "But Master of Lore, if we stay off the roads, we will have to walk through forests, cutting our way through undergrowth. That does not seem the best way to find gold."

Lokor smiled with amusement, saying, "When you get to Earth, you'll see that won't be necessary. Earthlings have cut down most of their forests, replacing them with pavement or grass. For reasons known only to themselves, after planting all this grass, Earthlings don't graze farm animals on it, but instead build machines to keep it cut short. In fact, most Earth towns don't even allow homeowners to keep chickens or goats in their backyards, so they're forced to buy noisy, smelly, expensive machines to cut their grass, instead of letting animals turn it into eggs or milk!"

The four Bird Dogs looked at each other in disbelief. Samir said, "No disrespect, Loremaster, but are you sure you're not exaggerating about Earth?"

Lokor shrugged. "You'll see for yourself soon enough."

The door banged open as a messenger ran into the library and reported breathlessly to Dragon, "Sir, I have bad news. Flat Rock Bridge has been taken by the enemy, and Maraknese troops are pouring into the city. Colonel Stele and his XO were killed, so Colonel Kaldor's now acting Battalion Commander. He's about to order the Tower guards to come inside and seal the Tower for a siege. He asks if you're almost finished in here, because he wants to call a meeting to discuss siege defenses."

"Understood, Sergeant," said Dragon. "We'll be done in a few minutes."

"Very well, sir. I'll inform the Colonel," the Sergeant said, then turned on his heel and left.

As soon as the door closed, Dragon sighed gravely and said, "Okay, you Bird Dogs are as ready as you'll ever be. Lokor, tell them how to cast the spell to get through the portal."

"That," said the elderly Loremaster, "is a surprisingly simple spell. The key is to be wearing the hexagram pendant made of the Earth metal, aluminum. I trust you all remember the Hexglow spell from your Novice year, the one that makes your silver hexagram glow from all six points? It's considered a minor spell, since it emits no more light than six fireflies,

but it burns for a long time without consuming much silver. Well, the very same spell, when cast using an *aluminum* hexagram, is a Portal spell that allows you to pass through the Tower walls and travel to Earth. To return from Earth, you'll need to cast the same spell again using the same aluminum pendant, so whatever you do, don't lose it.

"When you pass through the portal today, you'll arrive outside a corresponding portal tower on Earth. Coming back to Rados, we expect you'll have wagonloads of gold that won't fit through a doorway, so you'll have to pass through the Earth portal from outside that tower. Unfortunately, you'll return to the *outside* of this Wizard Tower, because just as one can't Teleport into a Wizard Tower, nobody can enter one using a portal.

"Oh, my research discovered a bit of good news for you. Although any spells you have on you now will be stripped off when you pass through the portal to Earth, that won't happen when you come back through the portal to Rados. The text I found on portal lore speculates that the reason it's hard to bring magic to Earth but easy to bring it back is because magic doesn't belong on Earth, but it's native to our world. We can't ask the Wizards who created the portals if that's correct, but it does make sense.

"So cast as many Shield spells on yourselves as you can before you return. You must be prepared to defend yourselves as soon you arrive, because you may find our Tower surrounded by enemy troops."

"If it isn't already," said Jelal dryly. "Dragon's right. We should leave as soon as possible."

"Very well," Lokor said. "Bird Dogs, button your jackets and shoulder your packs. The journey may be a bit rough, and if you drop something in the portal, it's lost forever. When you return with wagonloads of gold, make sure you strap the chests of gold down. Horses won't tolerate the trip, which is why we didn't offer you any, as they'd just buck you off and run away in panic. So for your journey back, I expect that you'll have to, um, 'borrow' some *horseless carriages*," he said with a shudder, "to pull the gold wagons." Pointing to the exterior wall of the library, its seamless, magically smooth stone painted white, he said, "Now if you'll approach the Tower wall—"

Pran's father said, "Wait! I never said goodbye to my son." He walked over and gave Pran a hug, saying softly, "I love you, son. Stay safe, Pran, and may all your spells cast true." He hesitated, then added, "May the Spirit of Truth be with you."

Surprised, Pran said, "I thought you didn't believe in religion."

His father shrugged. "There's a saying, 'There are no atheists on the ramparts, once the arrows start to fly.' And the Truthseeker prophecy did come true."

Prince Taryn said, "Return with as much gold as you can, as quickly as you can, and you'll be heroes of the realm. But try to come back alive, well, and sane," he added, his gaze lingering on his friend Jelal.

Dragon advised, "Don't let the wonders of Earth distract you from your mission, Bird Dogs, because the fate of the kingdom—of our entire world—rests on your shoulders."

"No pressure, eh?" quipped Samir.

"Now, Bird Dogs," Lokor instructed, "please approach the outer wall, single file. It's best to step through the portal quickly. If you pause with part of your body inside, it feels *most* uncomfortable, and if you try to pull back, you risk losing a limb between the two worlds."

Jelal said, "I've been through before, so I'll go first, to show how it's done." He promptly set his aluminum pendant glowing, stepped through the portal, and vanished. There was no sign of a hole in the wall where the little spy had disappeared, just whitewashed stone.

Lokor asked, "Pran, are you ready?"

Pran's hands were sweaty, and his mouth dry, but he croaked, "Yes, Loremaster." He checked the straps on his rucksack, then concentrated on making the aluminum pendant glow. The spell was simple, so it worked all too quickly for him.

"Okay, Pran, you can step through now," Lokor said.

For the second time that day, Pran found himself unable to move his feet. This time there was no spell stopping him, only his own fear and apprehension.

Samir asked helpfully, "Do you want me to give you a push?"

“No, I’ll be fine!” Pran snapped. “Just give me a minute to get up my nerve.”

“Then I’ll go next,” Samir offered. With a wave of his hand, he set his aluminum pendant aglow, strode through the wall, and vanished.

Pran still hesitated, fearing the unknown. Who knew what horrors lay on the other side of that wall, or even within the portal itself?

Vitina offered, “What if you and I walk through the portal together, Pran, hand in hand?”

Pran looked at the beautiful young Enchantress with gratitude and love, feeling his heartbeat quicken. All he could think of in reply was, “Yes, I’d like that,” but to his relief, nobody laughed. He reached out to Vitina and took one of her lovely, delicate, brown hands in his own for the second time that day. Hand in hand, they stepped through the Tower wall and into the portal together, heading toward the mythical world called Earth, the strange and perilous land full of fearsome machines.



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